

On Wisconsin Outdoors

With the Dick Ellis Experts



A Guiding Light

Boat-side customer service brings anglers back

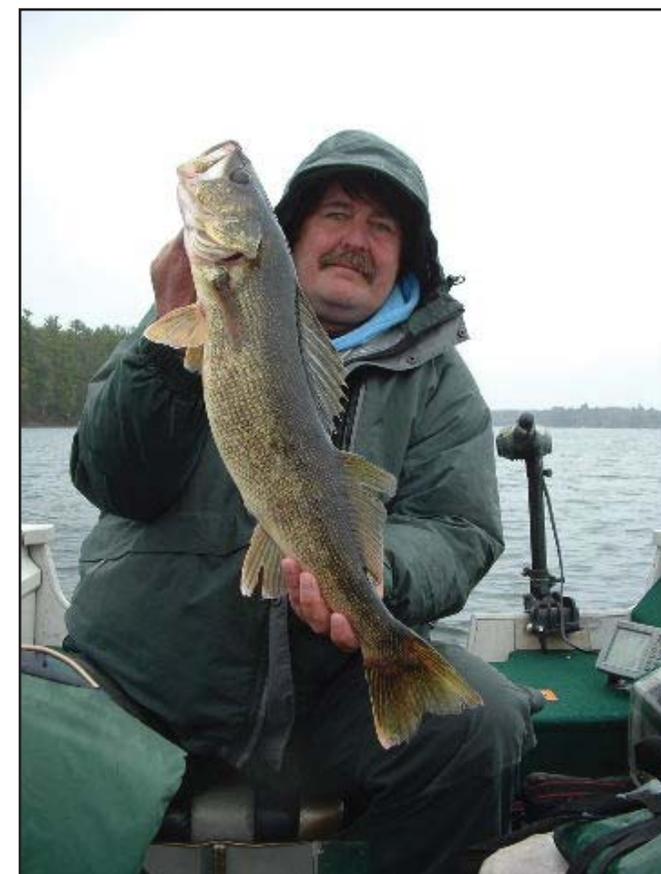
Jeff Winters, veteran of 31 Wisconsin fishing seasons as a professional guide, quietly announces another walleye knocking, sets the hook and enjoys the few second tussle that make 1.4 million people Wisconsin anglers each and every year. This mid-May walleye, one of probably 2000 that will be invited on board Winter's boat over the course of any season that runs from opening day to November 1st, is slipped into the box, destined for the skillet and a fish fry for his parents. Several more will be released. From Winters' perspective, and it's a view that could take him professionally to more than 150 lakes in Oneida, Vilas and Iron

Counties, fishing in the north country is still very good.

"I know 100 lakes very well," he said. "And I know another 50 good enough to guide on. May is the month for big fish. There generally not that big, but there nice; 22 or 23 inches and we do see 10 pounders every year. But there is a real good supply of 15 to 18 inch walleyes out here. Whatever the DNR is doing is working real well on some of these lakes. We've caught 100 walleyes so far this year, and only five have been under 15 inches."

I had never before met Winters. I asked for the name of a good guide in a Mercer bait and tackle shop in Iron County simply to gain new perspectives on regional Wisconsin fishing. Store owner Nancy Lundquist of Turtle River Trading had recommended Winters. In the boat days later, I didn't even pick up a rod. Scribbling notes, taking pictures and watching Winters catch walleyes off the first shoreline we hit was entertaining enough as he talked of making people happy enough on the water catching fish that they'd pay him to come back and fish again.

"The whole point of this is to make the people happy so that they will come back again," he said. "It's a customer service based area. The businesses that



Jeff Winters still finds big walleyes in northern Wisconsin. Large fish are released to fight again. (Jeff Winter's Guide Service)

do it best, the people will remember and come back. I grew up in Cedarburg. Linda (wife) and I saved money to buy a house. I wanted to guide. My life was built around hunting and fishing. My Dad was going to Mercer since 1920. The resorts are here. If people call me also looking for a resort, I try

to match them with a resort on a lake holding the fish they like to fish for. Wilderness camping here can match canoe trips to Quatico. We have wilderness experiences to offer and we're a whole lot closer. And our fishing stacks up against anyone."

For starters in that arena, Winters points to simple geog-



Guide Jeff Winters fights a walleye near Minocqua. Depending on the fish his clients want to target and weather conditions, Winters fishes 150 lakes in Oneida, Vilas and Iron Counties. (Ellis)



Professional guide Jeff Winters is an advocate for managing a select few lakes in each area of Wisconsin for trophy pike. His largest northern Wisconsin pike is 42 inches, with this 40 incher caught and released on the Willow flowage May 25, 2011. On the left is Brenn Stapleton from Hartland and right is Jake Schlicht from Pewaukee. (Jeff Winter's Guide Service)

raphy. Oneida, Vilas, and eastern Iron County, he said, has 3600 bodies of water; the largest concentration of individual lakes in the United States.

"No one has that many lakes in such a small area and it's beautiful water," he said. "We can go from wilderness lakes to populace lakes. There are plenty of lakes for someone who wants to be alone and lakes for families with kids looking for a lake with something for them to fish for. We can meet anyone's needs."

He calls the walleye fishery, his number one target, "solid". To naysayers who dislike the two-fish limit on many lakes, he points to the fact that anglers can legally catch a five fish limit by dropping the caught fish in a cooler and moving to other lakes to fish. As examples of the simplicity of that, he used waters that he regularly fishes; the 10-lake Manitowish Chain and North and South Turtle and the connected Rock Lake.

"On North Turtle the limit is two with only one fish over 14 inches," he said. "You're still allowed five fish per day. You just have to travel to another

lake. So, you catch two on North Turtle, drop those fish at the truck...of course carry a cooler...travel to South Turtle, get two more, drop them off and go to Rock Lake. If you fish Rock all day instead you don't have to travel at all; the limit is five. On the whole Manitowish Chain of 10 lakes, it's easy to get five fish a day in the same way."

Walleyes though, are not his only target, nor are they the only species that offer the guide head-turning numbers. He knows how and where to target large muskies, and calls largemouth and smallmouth bass in the 20-inch class very attainable in northern Wisconsin. His clients landed and released a 23-inch largemouth in May of 2011, and on May 25th caught and released a 40-inch northern on the Willow Flowage that didn't even match the largest pike he's ever taken in the region. That honor goes to a 42-inch fish taken and released several years ago. Those fish though, do reflect his belief that Wisconsin should not only be managing lakes for trophy musky.

"90 percent of the lakes are

"The whole point of this is to make the people happy so that they will come back again ..."

Class A musky lakes," he said. "The Canadian lakes in Saskatchewan and Manitoba that offer trophy pike fishing are booked two years in advance. I think one lake in each area of Wisconsin should be managed for big northern. The Willow Flowage where we caught the 40-inch pike this week is a class-B musky water. If you're managing for pike on lakes like that, you're not hurting the muskies."

In the end, he said, regardless of the species, his business is built around "keeping the rod bent." He has "a lake in his back pocket" no matter the weather conditions or current fishing patterns, where he can "hide and catch fish on." He believes that hard work has placed him among Wisconsin's top guides, and placed him too on the water with clients from the first Saturday in May into November.

"Every lake has its time and place," he said. "What's good now might be bad in July. I have good fall pattern lakes. Lots of times I do target walleyes, and we don't take a back seat to anyone there, but the way I fish my clients could catch anything. I pride myself in it. I instruct and teach people and it makes them better anglers. People want to catch fish and bring home a few fish fries. To be a guide you have to be an entertainer. The time I spend with clients is significant. Most of my clients know my wife, and even my mom and dad. Clients become my friends. I encourage bringing along kids in my boat. Some of them started when they were five or six years old and now they're married. I become people's Christmas or birthday

presents. I'm proud of where I am. I started at the bottom. I do feel like I'm one of the top guides in Wisconsin. But I worked real hard to get there."

Jeff Winters works seven days a week through November 1st and can accommodate any size group due to his association with other quality guides. "You'd be surprised how many groups of just women I take out whose husbands come up to golf," he said. "I even take out a few hard core nuns. Women don't have to be afraid to schedule a trip." 

Connect with Winters at www.jeffguideservice.com or call 715-385-9313 or email jwinters@centurytel.net.

Minocqua, a regular fishing area for Winters, was recently named one of the best fishing towns in America by Field & Stream magazine and one of the 25 coolest midwest-lake-vacation spots by Midwest Living. "In Wisconsin they might as well staple fishing licenses to birth certificates," wrote Field & Stream. "It seems everyone here was born to fish. Minocqua is a quaint little cabin community, the kind of place where you fish all day and sit on the porch at night to watch the sun set over the lake. Fishing-wise there is much to keep you busy; trout in the creeks, and just about every species you can think of in the 70-odd vicinity lakes. The under-rated smallmouth bass fishery should probably be among the top five in the country." Find out much more at www.minocqua.org.

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