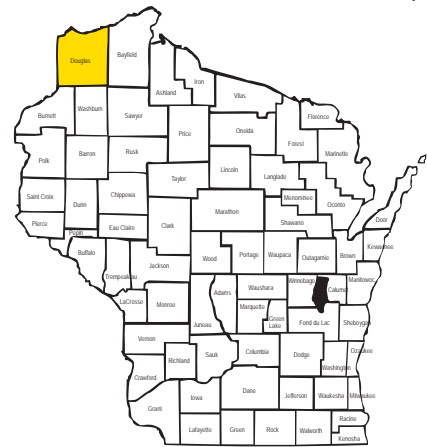


On Wisconsin Outdoors

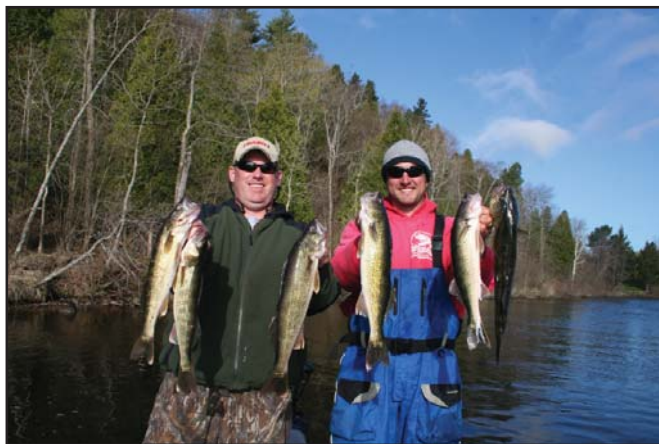
With the Dick Ellis Experts



Gold Rush

Walleye heaven opens with St. Louis refuge

by Dick Ellis



Northwest Wisconsin fishing experts Ted Sellers and Pete Brzezinski show off a 10-minute limit of walleyes on the St. Louis River. Wisconsin anglers who have not experienced this fishing gem near Superior should put it on the future docket. (Ellis)

Nirvana, to a Wisconsin walleye fisherman, must mean the St. Louis River upstream from Superior beginning in mid May. This year, heaven's gates opened in Douglas County above Highway 23 May 19th, when refuge restrictions annually set to protect spawning fish were lifted.

Even the early morning cold and steep wilderness walls rising up from the St. Louis couldn't cast a shadow on the optimism in Guide Pete Brzezinski's boat or take away the warm fuzzy feeling every time another walleye smacked a crankbait. That was, in fact,

a repetitive experience. Call it a "10-minute limit" of six fish for this three man craft, and add in scores more of walleyes released over another two hours and catch an accurate picture of what happened here in a Canadian-like setting just two miles from the urban center of Superior-Duluth. Call it a gold rush, an adrenalin rush, and file to memory as an extended natural high.

A reporter's biggest problem of the early morning, speaking of accurate pictures, was whether to keep the standard camera lens on the Canon to capture the walleye surren-

dering to the angler 10 yards away or switch to the telephoto zoom to shoot the boat 100 yards upstream netting the five pounder. No matter, back and forth, one to the other, the lenses would change and the rods would bend near and far. Everywhere. Definitely, walleye heaven winds and turns under the name of St. Louis.

Ted Sellers put it simplistically best and spoke for anglers in boats spread over the St. Louis beginning to be splashed in sunshine when another 20-inch walleye found Brzezinski's net. "Now that's a glorious site," he said.

On this trip though, it was also an expected site. Fish from 19 to 23 inches, all males, already adorned the live well. Sellers, a fishing addict in northwest Wisconsin and a darn talented one, had introduced me to the fabulous walleye and smallmouth fishing on the St. Louis in 2003 with this question; why would anglers journey to Canada or Minnesota from Wisconsin and Illinois when their travels north on the Richard Bong bridge splitting Duluth and Superior carried them over one of the best walleye fisheries anywhere. After he introduced me to the great fishing, I returned several times to fish open water on the river and hardwater on the bay

where it dumps its load in the Great Lake at Superior.

It had been five years before 2011 called me back to the river. This time, Sellers introduced me to his good friend, Great Lakes Captain and professional guide Pete Brzezinski. Catching walleyes, lots of walleyes, actually allows Brzezinski to burn away the rest of the candle on the offseason before the musky season opens on the St. Louis River with the Wisconsin North Country opener north of Highway 10 on Memorial Day weekend. It's his passion. In 2010, Brzezinski clients caught and released 140 muskies with 11 fish over 50 inches, and a big fish of 54-1/4 inches exceeding 40 pounds.

"We do 90 percent of our musky fishing on the St. Louis River," Brzezinski said. "99 percent of the fish are caught casting or sucker fishing. By mid-July, the top-water bite is tremendous and one guy caught nine fish in one day sucker fishing in the fall. It's a favorite technique. But I'll also walleye fish if guys want walleye trips."

The Superior walleyes are here. The walleye opener on the St. Louis, Brzezinski said, begins with the Minnesota walleye opener annually the second Saturday in May. Each year, though, the walleye refuge opener above Highway

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Wisconsin Fishing guide and Great Lakes Captain Pete Brzezinski fights another walleye on the St. Louis River near Superior. Last year Brzezinski caught 140 muskies on the river, with 11 fish over 50 inches. His clients' opening day musky catch in 2011 included fish at 44, 44, 43 and 40 inches and a 31 inch bonus walleye. (Ellis)

23 on the river is dependent on spawning conditions in order to best protect the fishery. This year, that meant May 19th. We launched upstream from the city of Superior shortly after daybreak and motored slowly up the St. Louis until we crossed under the Highway 23 bridge and entered heaven. Twenty to 30 boats were already scattered over the river, some anchored but most moving as they motor trolled slowly short-lining crankbaits. Other anglers in waders eased into the river to cast. Most offered bright colored lures like white, blue, or fire-tiger in an attempt to match the forage base of spawning shiners that had also entered the river from Lake Superior.

"It's a refuge for the spawning walleyes that enter the river from Lake Superior," Brzezinski

said. "Shiners come in to spawn too. Most of these guys will be short-lining crankbaits less than 40 feet from the boat for easier maneuverability."

What had been a refuge to allow the walleyes to spawn just hours before was now an open season frenzy. Female walleyes had spawned first and had migrated downstream again in the endless nomadic search for Mother Superior. Males averaging 19 inches would follow later but on this morning, those fish pounded crankbaits everywhere on the river and anglers worked bent rods or moved to net a partner's fish. With the new sun, the beauty and rustic personality of this river bathed in light made any angler forget that Superior just a few miles away was raised as an industrial harbor town. The isolation, great

tasting walleyes off of the largest Great Lake and steep, tree-lined banks also make recent history on the St. Louis seem the distant past.

"The river was polluted in the 1970s," said Sellers. "No one fished it and the fish were huge in here by the 1980s. Now the water is clean and the fish are great-eating. This great walleye fishing will last through June, but the walleye fishing will remain good with resident fish, and the smallmouth and musky fishing is excellent. You can continue to catch big walleyes trolling on Lake Superior like you do on Green Bay. They fish the flats on the south shore of Lake Superior. If you're good at catching walleyes on Green Bay you'll be good at catching them here."

For most of the three hours we fished the river, we had experienced almost unending walleye action, had the 10-minute limit tucked away, and our sights focused on breakfast and Douglas County inland lake smallmouth bass fishing. We would take with us memories of the St. Louis both as a fishery and as a beautiful place to relax and fish. But, Sellers said, inland lakes provide fishing for giant smallmouth and muskies. In 2009, Sellers caught and released 30 pound hybrid fishing with Brzezinski and Seller's sister, Lynn caught a 30 pound hybrid fishing from Seller's boat inland.

"The smallmouth bass, walleye and northern pike fishing all summer long is great," Brzezinski said. "On the St. Louis, right now we need weeds

to start growing downstream," "The shiners will use the warm water weeds and the gamefish follow. This is a migration of walleyes and shiners. The fish are so nomadic; they're used to being on the big lake."

"You can catch these walleyes anyway you want right now," he said. "Shore fishing, boat fishing, trolling, jigging casting. There's a two-fish limit with a 15-inch minimum. We wish they'd put a slot restriction on to protect the fishery even more. They're going to catch fish out here, and a lot bigger on average than in other places. "

"It's common to catch fish from 24 inches to 26 inches and you can have 50-fish days. It's in the top three walleye fisheries in Wisconsin for trophy fish, but if you want to look at catching number of fish and big walleyes, hands down it's second to none."

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Contact Pete Brzezinski and Northland Muskie Adventures Guide Service at 715-574-1813 or nbkguideservice@yahoo.com or connect at www.northlandmuskieadventures.com.

For inland multi-species fishing, contact Ted Sellers and Ted's Northwoods Guide Service at 218-590-1104. For more information on superior fishing and hunting and good times for the entire family (and a FREE travel guide) call the Superior Douglas County Convention and Visitors Bureau at 1-800-942-5313 or visit www.superiorchamber.org.

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