

On Wisconsin Outdoors

With the Dick Ellis Experts

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Blocking the Great Lakes Express

Root River set-up intercepts trout

By Dick Ellis



With one rod holder in the foreground doing the work with a spawn offering for brown trout and steelhead, Dave Sura of Racine jigs another hole with a Berkley Power Grub.” (Ellis)

Ten minutes into our roadblock carefully set to bring in and personally question any brown trout or Great Lakes rainbows that might be traveling on the Root River, Dave Sura’s rod doubled over in a kind of silent scream; the first battle of the morning was on. Early indications said that the heavyweight fight could go the distance.



Dave Sura claims victory on the Root River after a good fight with this 13-pound seeforellen brown trout that took a power grub jigged just off the bottom in six feet of water. (Ellis)

Over just six feet of water on ice in the heart of Racine, tributary angling expert Sura was able to catch a glimpse of the fish through his augured window. Something resembling a delighted man-scream with a dash of early-spring, Ueckereske style play-by-play spilled from the angler as black graphite bent and bounced.

“Oh man, that’s a real toad,” he said, in a patented voice reserved only for the elite Lake Michigan tributary slobs. “It’s a very big

brown trout.”

Big...small...or somewhere in-between, there wouldn’t be many fish moving downstream or upstream on the Root without passing close by Sura’s spawn sacs or rubbing his jigging presentation of Berkley power grubs.

“I like to set the tip-ups in a diagonal line or zigzag depending on how many people are fishing and how many lines we can legally set,” Sura said. “That way when the fish run up and down they hopefully will run into one bait or the next.”

Before he sets his arsenal tar-

geting Great Lakes fish, Sura decides between two distinct water types; harbors or rivers. Harbors in this neck of Wisconsin’s southeast most often mean Milwaukee, Kenosha or Racine. Any harbor on Lake Michigan or Lake Superior will be effective near structure like docks and rock jetties, which predator fish use to ambush prey.

“Don’t be afraid to fish next to piers,” Sura said. “I’ve seen fish caught off of them before the ice was thick enough to walk on.” Sura explained this by saying that he drills holes right next to the pier while standing on the pier.

“Bring a locator along if you own one and search for the deeper channels connecting the inner harbor to the main harbor. Fish will use these channels as runways through the harbor. The last area to set in a harbor is around aerators. Some harbors use these to keep the docks from freezing in solid. These areas generate current, which attracts fish.”

When fishing rivers through the ice, Sura looks for the same characteristics that would attract him to open-water areas for trout. Down-river sections of a river, he said, are the best for icing trout.

“More fish will over-winter here than in any other section of a river,” he said. “When searching downriver locations, look for key areas such as bends or marinas because these areas will likely have



A 13-pound brown trout is gaffed in the augured hole after a good fight with Racine angler Dave Sura on the Root River. Trout including steelhead and browns provide excellent Great Lake's action in the winter and spring months. (Ellis)

deeper water. I generally look for water five feet deep or deeper when searching for winter trout."

We arrived in the center of Racine and with Larry Calvi of New Berlin and local postal carrier Bob Merriman staked claim to a stretch of the Root with not another angler in sight. Most, Sura said, would be downstream fishing the harbor.

We set our tip-ups in a pattern to intercept moving trout. Sura likes to set tip ups light. Trout drop the meal at the first feel of tension. Sura set fresh spawn, and recommends varying the depth from right off the bottom to just below the ice., again to cover as much of the water column as possible.

"I do this by fishing the bait under a slip float on a jig rod or under a tip-up," Sura said. "They're easy to adjust and allow the angler to detect the slightest of hits. If you're not getting bit, change depths. When using spawn or minnows, set the line and wait. Check them periodically. Moving them can initiate strikes."

When jigging, Sura uses medium to medium-heavy action rods more than 32-inches in length.

Longer rods provide more power to hook and fight fish that can easily exceed 20 pounds. He uses a "quality reel" spooled with 8-pound fire line, and three foot, 8-pound monofilament leaders.

He recommends Berkley Power Tubes and Gulp Grubs, Swedish Pimples, Kastmasters, and Buck Shot Rattle Spoons. When jigging artificial baits, he varies the aggressiveness of the bait because fish will want different presentations at

different times.

"Change colors as well," he said. Use spoons in silver or gold and plastics in white, orange or pink. Have a variety of colors, size and styles with you, because fish can be selective feeders."

The first big brown didn't make us wait long. After we used a power augur with 10-inch drill to make about a dozen holes large enough to handle the largest of fish, Sura expected a 30 minute wait as any over-wintering fish re-established their residence after the commotion. But the fast-growing

On his portable scale a few minutes later, the brown weighed in at 13 pounds. I followed that performance with a four pound brown an hour later, and several fish on jigging rods and tip-ups were lost over our two hour stay .

You're targeting German Browns, Seeforellen Browns and steelhead. The average fish will be between four and seven pounds. But no fish, Sura reminds anglers, is worth endangering your life. Ice conditions change rapidly, especially on a river impacted by current, warm weather and run-off.

He recommends checking conditions with local bait shops or on websites like lake-link before venturing out. Particularly if you do not know a piece of water, use an ice spud and check conditions as you walk. Wear life jackets and carry ice picks in the event you do fall through. When you do approach the water with caution, the payoff can be great.

"Get out often," Sura said. "Weather changes don't affect these fish like they do inland lake fish. When the doldrums set in this winter, get out there and put some trout on ice. With this world-class fishery, you'd be crazy not to." *Wo*



ABOVE: Larry Calvi checks out the fish camera that allows him to watch activity below on the Root River in Racine while Bob Merriman jigs an augured hole in the background. (Ellis)

RIGHT: Bob Merriman of Racine jigs on the Root River in Racine for brown trout and Great Lake's rainbows. (Ellis)



seeforellen known for its tremendous fight whacked Sura's power grub in the first 10 minutes.