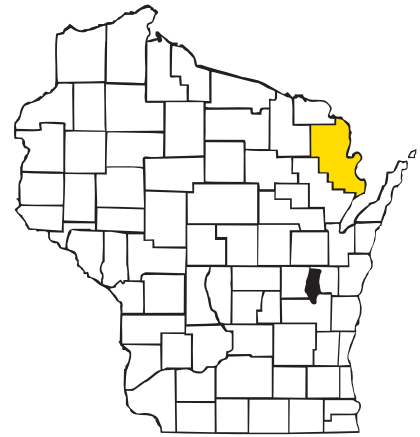


On Wisconsin Outdoors

With the Dick Ellis Experts



Marinette Madness

Fall-in' in to fine fall fishin'

By Dick Ellis

Like the first hint of fall color that splashed Marinette County's Menominee River shoreline September 20 with the promise of the masterpiece soon to come, changes on the water come too. What may seem a good autumn bet might not work at all, like a redbtail chub offered with an irresistibly slow presentation to the monster smallmouth looking for an easy meal. A fast retrieve with plastics or the chub proves the better bet, at least on this day, to tangle with one of these smallies that can stretch the tape to 20 inches or more.

That's just fine for professional guide Mike Mladenik. He'll take the challenge, and he'll change with the changes. He's fished the Menominee River and lived near Crivitz for 30 years. Figuring out the game on a daily basis is part of his calling. In fact, by his own admission, he's even fished this river when he wasn't supposed to be fishing this river.

"I couldn't hold a job because I was taking off to go fishing too much," Mladenik said, unhooking the morning's third smallmouth at 17 inches as Gordy Pagel of Appleton worked shoreline rocks and



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weeds from the stern. "So I figured out a way to make money doing the thing I really loved to do the most."

Although he's a fulltime guide from opening day into November, Mladenik doesn't only fish to earn his keep. His expertise in particular on the Menominee River and lakes of Marinette County have brought the guide enough of a reputation that he has

often been a featured seminar speaker at spring breakouts including the Chicago Sport show in Rosemont, The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Sport Show, Indiana Sports Show and the Northeast Wisconsin Sportfishing Show. He's authored fishing books both as a humor writer and as a serious journalist with "How-to-Catch" books focusing on walleyes and bass.

"The humor book is all about things that happened in my boat," he said. "When you're a fishing guide you don't have to make this stuff up."

Like, as but one example, the two teenage brothers fishing in the boat on a slow morning when the 14-year old decided to take a nap. He was gently awakened by his 15-year old brother with a stiff kick to the head, initiating a free-for-all. The father said nothing, at least for a while. "Then he said, 'well you can't really blame the boys,' Mladenik related. "The fish weren't biting. If I would have had that happen early in my career I would have quit guiding."

Overwhelmingly though, Mladenik loves his chosen profession and the anglers he meets, speaking of long-time clients with a certain appreciation. "I've been doing this for so long with so many people and their kids that now they're grown up too," he said. "It's kind of neat. More than half of the clients are retired. They like the river. It's beautiful, especially at this time of year with the color changes. They're not fighting the weather (often a part of fishing big water). They've had enough of that

kind of fishing in their lives. Marinette County is not that developed...even where it is developed.

According to Marinette County Tourism Executive Director Jamie Darge, autumn in the “real north”, Marinette County, can “only be described as amazing.” Numerous fall festivals, she said, waterfalls, ATV trails, county parks, hiking and biking trails, antique shops and countless other opportunities combine with spectacular fall colors to provide something for everyone. “No matter your pleasure,” she said Friday, “we have what you crave in Marinette County. With Marinette County’s large tracts of public forest, clear rushing rivers and ample lakes, that includes the fisherman and hunter.”

On the Menominee River we found Darge’s words cast toward the angler to be correct. The river offers good walleye, northern pike and some largemouth bass angling. As we fished the hook and line sturgeon fishing was also open. Mladenik spends 80 percent of his time targeting smallmouth bass.

“The smallmouth bass fishing is exceptional,” he said. “I have clients that come from all over North America who fish smallmouth. They want to come here. It’s not so much the numbers of smallmouth. It’s the quality of the fish. Most people want action, but they’re really happy with the quality and the potential of the river. 21-inch smallmouth bass are fairly common.”

We began our search on the river above one of the dams working rocks in six to eight feet water and slightly deeper holes along the Michigan shoreline. Water clarity was better than Mladenik had ever experienced. Although river access is excellent with boat landings available throughout

the county, individual townships, and usually on property owned by power companies, we would see only two other boats over several hours of fishing.

“I want my clients to catch fish,” Mladenik said. “It’s the reason they’re here. In July, August and early September the top-water, surface lure fishing was really good. The later part of July or August is when it’s the best. We’re going to start with redbait chubs today because it offers an easy meal, especially for those real big fish. But I use a lot of plastics like wacky worms through the middle of October.”

The redbait didn’t trip the trigger on the big fish, at least at first. After 30 minutes working deeper water without a strike, two smallies in the 12-inch range were caught and released. It was the crystal clear water though, and our ability to see a very big smallmouth react aggressively when Mladenik for the first time aggressively pulled the chub to the boat that initiated a change. The fish missed, but we continued the transition to shallower water and our tactics changed like the fall colors. Pagel continued with the redbait but with an aggressive retrieve, while Mladenik moved to a sinking four-inch plastic minnow that he also worked aggressively. In short order, three smallmouth in the 18-inch class were posing for photos and set free.

“I saw that good fish chasing the chub and we changed,” Mladenik said. “So often you catch fish with something you didn’t expect. I’m looking all the time for things on the water that will give you a clue of what to try, like the ripples of shiners and chubs that make up the main forage base. Some days the water is alive with baitfish.”

When the morning had ended, target water had



After another good fight, angler Gordy Pagel of Appleton lifts a nice smallmouth from the Menominee River just before releasing the fish to fight again in Marinette County.

transitioned from deep holes and rocks to shallower weeds and some wood. We had evolved from live bait and a slow presentation to a fast retrieve that included plastics. We had changed.

“Every day is interesting. Every day is different,” Mladenik said. “Don’t get me wrong. I don’t like it when fishing is tough. But sometimes when it’s easy it takes some of the fun out of it. When you have to work, when it’s a challenge, that’s what I really like. When it is tough all you remember anyway are those moments when you were catching fish.”

Connect with Mike Mladenik and Big Smallmouth Guide Service or order his books at www.bigsmallmouthbass.com or 715-854-2055. Watch for information on Mladenik’s annual smallmouth bass fishing tournament on the Menominee held in mid-July. For fall recreational activities including hunting, fishing, parks, antique shop locations, hiking, camping, fall color update or other autumn visitor opportunities, connect with Executive Director Jamie Darge and Marinette County Tourism at www.therealnorth.com or 800-236-6681.

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