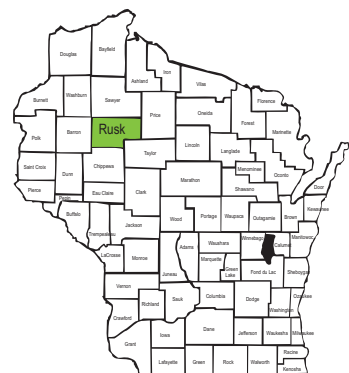


On Wisconsin Outdoors

With the Dick Ellis Experts



Rainy Days and Tuesdays

Nothing keeps this musky man down

By Dick Ellis

Joe Flater worked his 12-foot, battered aluminum rowboat around another bend in the Chippewa River and into the teeth of more high winds and driving rain. Whitecaps riled the water ...

After pounding our faces like a sandblaster's ammunition, as Flater put it, during our short runs with the 6-horse Evinrude to better musky holes, cold water worked like icy fingers to find any openings in our rain gear.

We each carried another 20 pounds of rain or so on our waterlogged coats, or so it felt. My finger tips were numb as we continued to work the undercuts of riverbanks for a waiting fish. "How far to the landing, Joe?" I asked, hoping the inquiry sounded like a simple search for geographical knowledge and not the sheer desire to get the heck off the river that it was. "About five miles," Flater replied, the focus in his eyes telling me without a doubt that he was still hoping for that special musky strike. "Five miles?" I thought. "Why don't you just say, 'Oh, right after your frozen face falls off on the boat seat'."

For more than 20 years, every week, I've been somewhere in Wisconsin covering

outdoor stories, sometimes with regular Joes who know their own terrain like the back of their hands and sometimes with the Joe Flaters, great Wisconsin Guides who earn a livelihood with their expertise outdoors. In those two decades, this float trip was among the most physically demanding. Because I was with Flater, though, a musky angling addict with a quick laugh and a quick story who knows how to put big fish in a small boat, it was also extremely entertaining. And without a doubt, although the weather was dead against us, a guest always stands a chance of seeing a monster fish when Flater is steering the "ship".

We had stood hours before in the bar of Flater's Resort, five cabins and a tavern owned by his father, Tubby, and grandfather, Harry before him where Joe had worked as a boy, at the confluence of the Flambeau and Chippewa Rivers. We watched the winds and rains stir the rivers and wondered if we should go at all. Forecasts said

things would get a lot worse before they stabilized, but Flater, despite being on the water almost daily with clients, was remembering a musky estimated at 52 inches that had come half

out of the water before throwing his bucktail two weeks before. The same fish had literally taken another angler for a ride in his tiny boat a week later before tossing that lure.



Joe Flater holds a 32 inch pike taken during a search for muskies on a 17 mile float and boat trip of Chippewa River in hard rains and high winds.



Joe Flater and client often work rapids for muskies on the Flambeau River in Rusk County. Ellis worked 17 miles of the Chippewa River with Flater in high winds and driving rain.

"I think we can go," Joe said. "It looks like it's getting a little better out there." "Yea, I think we should go to," I agreed. "It looks like it calmed down to just be a perfect storm."

In reality, I was looking forward to fishing the river after a five hour ride from Waukesha County. Flater had the musky photos and the fishing stories both distant and recent to make any Wisconsin musky angler simply want to spend the day in any conditions in the boat with him.

"On October 7 on the Flambeau we saw 12 muskies and boated six," Flater said. "The biggest fish was 43 inches. We lost that big fish. She might be as big as the biggest musky I ever caught, (a 52 inch fish taken in 2001). And we came right back on October 14 and boated a 45 incher, a 43 and a 42. We saw 12 fish that day too and caught six."

Although he says he is still learning, Flater began his lessons on the rivers under his

dad's tutelage and was occasionally guiding at age 12. More often than not with three baits, a Creek Chub Injured Minnow, Daredevil and Bass Bug in his tackle box, he outfished his clients. His real guiding began at age 13, and he's been at it ever since in addition to running the resort. "My dad (also a guide) threw me in a boat with clients for \$20.00 a day when I was just a kid," he said.

Among his many successful clients turned friends are former Milwaukee Brewer pitcher Paul Wagner and Chicago Cubs star Ferguson Jenkins. He has a longtime relationship filming on the rivers with acclaimed Wisconsin outdoor writer and producer Dave Carlson. And he helped Robert Tomes catch a world record on a flyrod and streamer, a 49 inch monster during a two day stint that also saw several fish caught and released in the 40 inch-plus class.

Flater's float trips include both the Flambeau and Chippewa Rivers for musky and bass. A typical trip, like ours,

will cover most of the day and 16 miles, with Flater using the small outboard to bypass water he's not confident in to float and work the holes he knows often hold fish. He likes summertime surface lures, and evolves to using bucktails and rubber tailed lures in late summer and fall.

The Flambeau is marked by rock and weeds he said, and includes lots of fishing through 50 to 100 yards of shallow rapids and fish the holes six to eight feet deep. The Chippewa means fishing sandbars and wood, with holes and undercut embankments again likely areas for holding fish.

We ended our assault on the Chippewa with Flater losing one 32 inch musky at the boat, and one 32 inch pike caught and released. When the weather stabilized again the first week of November, Flater and family again reaped the benefits of aggressive fish on the rivers feeding prior to winter.

"We had really active fish again the Sunday that the Packers beat up on the Cowboys and the Saturday before," he said. "With those warm, calmer days when the winds not blowing 60 miles per hour in that window from about 10:00 am to 3:00pm my wife Dawn caught a 43 inch and 42 inch fish, we had a 45 inch fish and my son Austin and his friend caught five fish with four over 40 inches," he said.

"People are releasing the fish now and it allows these muskies to grow big," he said. "Fishermen used to kill the fish. It's been 15 years since we killed a fish. These days, people get to take some very scenic float trips and, I think because I know every rock and hole in the rivers, a chance for a very nice musky."

For more information, contact Joe Flater at 715-312-0468 or 715-595-4771.

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Rusk County

Largely undeveloped and home to 250 lakes and four wild rivers, Rusk County gives outdoors enthusiasts lots of room to roam. Ladysmith and the other small communities of Rusk County offer shopping, dining and lodging. What makes Rusk County most attractive to visitors is its affordability. Lodging rates and other costs are among the lowest in Wisconsin. Rusk County is an outstanding vacation value.

Rusk County's Jump, Chippewa, Flambeau and Thornapple rivers are favorites with birdwatchers, anglers, paddlers and campers. The Jump River is a truly pristine waterway, with rocky banks, clear water and surprisingly large muskies. The Thornapple River is probably the least developed of the four, but offers paddlers, birdwatchers and anglers many miles of wilderness. The famous and much paddled Flambeau River is the classic northwoods river, equally famous for canoeing and kayaking as it is for its great musky, walleye and smallmouth fishing. And the Chippewa River, big and brawny, is popular with paddlers and anglers. There are some incredible lunkers lurking in the Chippewa's deep holes.

Rusk County also offers excellent trails. Mountain bikers, hikers and cross-country skiers should be sure to explore Sisters' Farm Trail and the 35-km Blue Hills Trail System. The trails of the Flambeau Reclaimed Mine Site offer hiking, bicycling and horseback riding. Geocaching—a treasure-hunting game played with a handheld GPS—is also popular in Rusk County. Whatever flavor of outdoor adventure you choose; Rusk County is the perfect place to "Unwind Your Mind."

For more information, contact Rusk County Tourism at www.ruskcountywi.com or 800. 535.7875 or visit the Explore Wisconsin page for Rusk County on our website at OnWisconsinOutdoors.com.