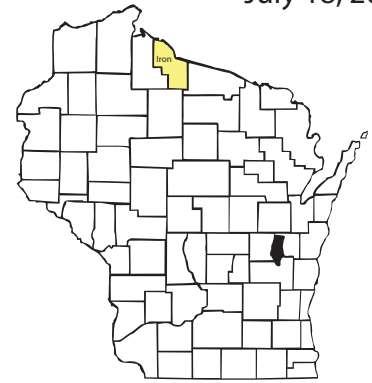


On Wisconsin Outdoors

With the Dick Ellis Experts



Turtle Flambeau Flowage

A tankful of gas away, no passport required

by Dick Ellis

When this reporter and a fishing partner embarked on a self-guided tour five years ago of the massive Turtle Flambeau Flowage in Iron County near Mercer, we were hopelessly lost in two hours. Our lower unit had played bump the stump seemingly with every piece of timber in this Iron County paradise but kept on humming. There was a beautiful trade-off to “losing ourselves” as beautiful as the flowage itself; although we obviously didn’t “know” the Turtle Flambeau, big bluegills and hungry walleyes and small-mouth had cooperated from the minute we had glided with no rhyme or reason into the first bay painted with drift wood and guarded by tall pines.

We were lost, yes, and with a little bit of luck we would never be found. Slip bobbers sliding under the surface and predator fish rising to sting crankbaits will instill a wonderful, “who-cares” kind of mentality in an angler who probably should have remembered the map and compass. Alas... we stumbled out of the flowage under a billion stars vowing to get lost on the Turtle Flambeau again as soon as possible. First, though, we had to find the right boat landing and our truck.

God, and some creative engineers, made the Turtle



Tina Brunell, Professional Guide Jerry Hartigan and Iron County visitor Phil Schweik enjoy one 66 remote island campsites on the Turtle Flambeau Flowage available on a first-come, first-serve basis. The flowage offers incredible fishing and isolation and includes 195 islands on more than 19,000 acres near Mercer.

Flambeau flowage for anglers, campers and paddlers who like the whole idea of being overwhelmed by some of the best of Wisconsin. God created professional guides like Jerry Hartigan for anglers who want a guarantee that they’ll actually get out again, almost certainly with a stringer full of fish and a file full of memories. And He created people like Tina Brunell because someone organized and friendly has to point everyone else to the best places in Mercer’s beautiful backyard to lodge, dine, and play.

Recently, Phil Schweik of Mosinee Wisconsin and I

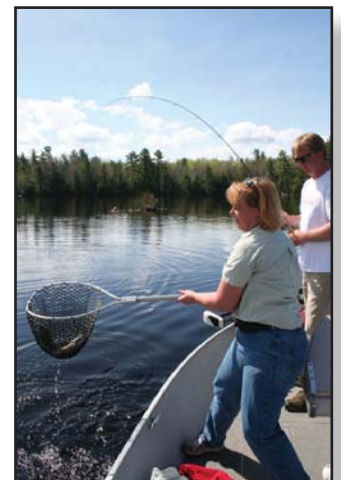
returned to fish the Turtle Flambeau upon invitation from the Mercer Area Chamber of Commerce. Mercer business people and Chamber Board members simply asking to cast a spotlight on the home of the Turtle Flambeau Flowage and Loon Capital of the World made the experience exceptional.

According to Chamber Administrator Brunell, the 19,000-plus acre Flowage was created in 1926 through the construction of a dam to harness the hydroelectric power of the Turtle and Flambeau Rivers. The creation of the flowage from 16 natural lakes, three rivers and several

creeks also created 212 miles of winding shoreline, 95 percent of which is publicly owned, and 195 islands.

The Turtle Flambeau Scenic Water Area, she said, offers 66 remote campsites accessible by water only. Sixty of these sites are available year round on a first-come, first-serve basis with no registration or fee. Six group sites are available by reservation only.

In addition to the massive flowage, Brunell said, there’s plenty of other water and land to boat and play on. 240 lakes are found within a 30 mile radius of Mercer, with Iron County boast-



Tina Brunell, Mercer Area Chamber of Commerce Administrator, invites another smallmouth bass in the net for Iron County visitor Phil Schweik on the Turtle Flambeau Flowage near Mercer.

ANGLING FOR A TURTLE FLAMBEAU EXPERIENCE?



Professional Guide and lifelong Turtle Flambeau Flowage angler Jerry Hartigan shows off a nice smallmouth just prior to release.

The Turtle Flambeau Flowage provides the best of northwoods fishing experiences, according to DNR literature. Although the flowage supports strong fish populations from musky, northern pike, smallmouth and largemouth bass and various panfish, it is best known for its superb walleye fishery. Walleyes are by far the most abundant game fish and provide the majority of action. Natural reproduction is outstanding, helping to maintain the annual population of good sized fish.

Black crappies provide exceptional panfishing during the early summer months and through the ice. Like all crappie populations, numbers are cyclical. When numbers are up, fishing is tremendous. Muskies provide outstanding trophy angling, according to Hartigan, with the flowages noted for the relative number of fish exceeding 40 inches very high. Fish over 50 pounds have been caught on the flowages. Smallmouth bass fishing, he said, is also outstanding.

"It's really known for its big muskies," he said. "It's one of Wisconsin's best musky fisheries especially for fish over 40 inches. I'm not guiding a lot for muskies right now because of the demand for walleyes and smallmouth bass. But they're mostly hitting on surface lures and as the water temperature continues to rise the fish are going to become very aggressive. The

flowage is a phenomenal walleye fishery. The reproduction of walleyes is among the highest in the state. There are just tons of walleyes. And the smallmouth bass fishery has exponentially grown to be among the finest in the state. It's not uncommon to catch 18 and 19 inch smallies. My own nine-year old twins have caught many smallmouth 20 inches and over." ^{WO}

ing more public land than any other county in the state. She spends significant time referring outdoor enthusiasts like anglers, bikers and canoeists to hot spots to pursue their personal passion or simply refers visitors to the local experts who can point the way.

"Ninety percent of the land north of Hurley is state and county owned," she said. That's pretty much all public and why it's so popular in the winter too. People like to go off-trail boon docking with their snowmobiles on the logging roads."

Our summer trip focused solely on flowage fishing. Under Hartigan's professional guidance, Schweik, a friend from Mosinee and a first time visitor to the Turtle Flambeau, Brunell and I could not have been in better hands. Hartigan began visiting northern Wisconsin and the Mercer area on family vacations in the early 60s from Illinois, learning to fish the flowage from scratch with his brother. Even as young boys prior to the family building a cabin in 1969, their growing expertise at catching fish was noted by the surrounding resort owners whose very existence in part depended on their own clients' ability to catch fish too.

"Those resorts had people

who couldn't catch fish," said Hartigan, a soft-spoken and friendly man who took great care of us in the boat. "The resort owners would tell the people to watch us and fish where we fished. We'd have boats following us around so we'd do circles to lose them. We started to guide when we were real young for tips. I've been fishing the Turtle Flambeau for over 40 years and guiding full-time for 15 years. I love it. On my days off, I go fishing"

One...or two journeys onto the flowage would never scratch the surface of all there is to see and experience here. Wildlife is abundant, and the fishing excellent. Hartigan is a multi-species guide and our catch included pike, walleye, perch and big smallmouth. The Turtle Flambeau is most known for its outstanding walleye and smallmouth fishing, and for big muskies exceeding 40-inches.

After a long, cool spring and early summer, Hartigan said, water temperatures on the Turtle Flambeau in July have climbed five to seven degrees into the low to mid 70s. The warming water has pushed walleyes and smallmouth bass into their summer patterns, which on the flowage means mid-lake humps and structure. That fact, he said,

means that too often anglers miss the boat in where they fish.

"On the flowage, people fishing in the summer often fish deep," he said. "It's the number one mistake they can make. It's sunny and hot and they figure the walleyes are deep. They're not. On area lakes right now the fish are in the deepest weeds you can find. But on the flowage especially the bigger walleyes are up shallow on the humps from five to 10 feet chasing perch minnows and crayfish. You can catch the smallmouth everywhere."

According to Hartigan, due to a fabulous perch hatch four or five years ago that produced an abundance of young of year, a flowage bonus in 2011 is jumbo perch in the 12-inch class chasing that same forage base and mixing in with walleyes and smallies. When Hartigan cleaned walleyes for clients this week, he said a dozen of those big perch were a part of the mix.

In addition to the very real chance to catch any number of fish species on the flowage, visitors also have the realistic opportunity to see or photograph a great variety of wildlife, including bear, deer, wolves, bobcat, loons, eagle, osprey and many species of waterfowl. "You do have a real chance to see any-

thing," Hartigan said. "What you won't see are a lot of boats. You just don't see many people."

Get lost in Iron County. Tina Brunell and the Mercer Area Chamber of Commerce are waiting to show you exactly where.

"We like to say we're less than a tankful of gas away," she said. "With no passport required." ^{WO}

Connect with the Mercer Area Chamber of Commerce, home of the Turtle Flambeau Flowage and Loon Capital of the World, at 715-476-2389, www.MercerCC.com or info@mercerc.com. Connect with Guide Jerry Hartigan and Flambeau Flowage Sports at 715-476-2526, www.flambeauflowagesports.com or flambeauflowagesports@yahoo.com. Our hosts also included Chamber President Vic Ouimette, Christa Reinert of Flambeau Flowage Sports, Tom and Denise Thompson from Tom's Country Café, Ted and Lisa Heberling from Subway of Mercer, and Chamber Vice-President Wayne and Melissa Riebe of Gateway Lodge (715-476-7878 or www.TheGatewayLodge.com.) For more information about Iron County, contact Iron County Development at www.ironcountywi.com or call 715.561.2922.

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