

On Wisconsin Outdoors

With the Dick Ellis Experts



Wisconsin Whitefish Wonder

Change in forage changes the game on Green Bay gamefish

By Dick Ellis



Guide Zack Burgess of Why Knot Guide Service out of Algoma shows a whitefish taken in 35 feet of water on the Bay of Green Bay January 17. The fish, averaging 15 to 20 inches, hit Swedish Pimples dressed with a minnow or wax worm. (Ellis)

Outside the two shacks far out on the hardwater of Green Bay, horizontal sheets of snow pushed by howling winds obscured the distant shanty town to the north. Inside, split oak and birch crackled in the wood-burning stoves and seven Wisconsin anglers with one Chicago escapee relaxed in sweatshirts, talked quietly

and watched intently for any subtle clue of another whitefish strike.

Subtle indeed. Each whitefish hunter had watched the Swedish Pimples dressed with a wax worm or minnow tumble down through the clear water before the line went slack on the sand shelf shrouded with zebra mussel far below the ice. The trick then, was to jig the bait ever so slightly and to decipher the gentlest of hits in answer from a whitefish 35 feet below.

The strikes came often, and these anglers new to whitefish angling celebrated with growing piles of fish averaging 15 to 20 inches. Roger Mayer of Chicago, who swore allegiance to the Packers before he

was allowed in the shack, Jeff Peterson and Steve Henske of Stevens Point, Bob Johnson of Mukwonago, John Ellis of Muskego, and Scott Heitman and me of New Berlin, also lost countless numbers of the light hitters; despite the regular calls from Zack Burgess of Why Knot Guide Service to set the hook on another slightly twitching rod.

When the hook was buried, each whitefish ascending through the hues of Green Bay to the augured hole proved a worthy battle. Rods doubled over and struggling whitefish were either lost on the ride up or surrendered to an eventual meeting with the skillet.

Once, within seconds, the evolving



Six Wisconsin anglers and one Chicago escapee caught 75 whitefish January 17 on the Bay of Green Bay under the tutelage of Why Knot Guide Service. They include Guide Zack Burgess of Algoma, Roger Mayer of Chicago, Bob Johnson of Mukwonago, Jeff Peterson of Stevens Point, Steve Henske of Stevens Point, Scott Heitman of New Berlin and John Ellis of Muskego. (Ellis)



With a pile of whitefish growing in the heated shack of Why Knot Guide Service, Roger Mayer of Chicago intently waits for another visitor 35 feet below. (Ellis)



Steve Henske of Stevens Point waits for another whitefish on the Bay of Green Bay January 17. Eight Wisconsin anglers caught 75 whitefish averaging 15 to 20 inches during six hours of fishing with Why Knot Guide Service

story of the whitefish here on the Bay was reflected symbolically when first a zebra mussel was brought up pierced by the treble hook of a Swedish pimple and soon after a whitefish was lifted from the water with the tail of a Round Goby still protruding from its mouth.

According to DNR Fisheries Technician Tim Kroeff of Sturgeon Bay, tremendous fishing for whitefish in recent years on the bay is less a resurgence of the population and more a change in the fish's forage base that has enabled man to target it. Historically, the major food source of whitefish was Diporeia, but the numbers of the exotic invertebrate dwindled when "affected" by the zebra mussel in the Great Lakes. In response,

Whitefish adapted to feed on the exotic Round Goby, a vertebrate.

"The goby is illegal to use as bait," Kroeff said. "Fishermen mimic the goby by using Swedish pimples or rapala jigs tipped with a waxie or a minnow, or tipped with just a minnow head or tail. Everyone has their own little method they have confidence in. You can pretty much fish for whitefish now throughout Green Bay but the eastern shore is better known to anglers."

According to Kroeff, whitefish can be caught in four to 60 feet of water and normally move in schools. He described angling action as very good, with fisherman allowed 10 whitefish per day. In addition to the whitefish change in diet creating a new

sportfish, he said population numbers are also on the rise due to improved water quality.

"There's less water pollution," he said. "Historically, whitefish had fall spawning runs on the Fox, Peshtigo and Menominee Rivers. Now we're seeing runs again like they used to in large numbers. We just tagged 2500 whitefish on the Menominee. They've adapted. They're survivors."

According to Guide Zack Burgess, 99 percent of the whitefish are taken on jigging rods. Open water fishing for whitefish is very difficult, for all practical purposes making the sport an ice bite.

Burgess is a third generation guide also running 34 and 25 foot salmon and walleye charters out of Algoma beginning in mid-May "And we can take care of as many people as you bring because we are part of a charter boat association", he said. At age 26, he has already fished these waters for 13 years beginning on his grandfather's charter boat, before going into

business as a captain five years ago. He credits his father, Robert, with teaching him how to catch fish.

"Now, so much has changed over the years that I teach him how to fish," he said.

Change for Zach Burgess includes learning the last several years how to target and catch whitefish that several years before that weren't even catchable. He learned his lessons well. The day before our ice party, a group of 18 anglers under his guidance took home a limit of 180 fish. During a hot January bite, a Burgess group had kept 29 perch averaging between eight and 11 inches, with a one obese fish measuring in at 14 inches.

"The last three years I fished four or five days a week learning how to catch whitefish," he said. "I figured I was ready to guide,"

Quite ready. When the day had ended after six hours on the ice, our Wisconsin group had caught 75 whitefish and thrown back many of the smaller fish. Burgess predicted diner's satisfaction whether we smoked, pickled, baked, or deep fried our catch.

"You've heard of the Door County fish boil? He asked. "This is the fish. And don't forget the salmon charters. Where else can you catch the quantity we catch out of Algoma with salmon in the 20 pound class?" he asked.

Okay ... we believe. Heaven in Wisconsin starts on the Green Bay hardwater. ^{OWO}

Connect with Zach Burgess and Why Knot Guide Service at WhyKnotGuideService.com or 920-559-7473. Fully guided icefishing for seven people with all equipment provided costs \$200.

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