

Catching It All

Chequamegon Bay, Apostle Islands

By Dick Ellis

Still a bit early to pursue a deep water search for lake trout near the Apostle Islands, Guide Aron Kastern had left the target of choice to me; take the sure bet—bite and chase Chequamegon Bay's trophy-class smallmouth bass, or vertical jig for lakers in water that can reach depths of hundreds of feet with no guarantee that we would find fish.

"I also have a great bite on right now casting for walleyes," the multi-species guide said on a bluebird, mid-June morning. "We caught lots of nice fish the last several days on crankbaits in shallow water. We will catch walleyes if we go for it. But that can wait until late afternoon. Or we can do it all."

Kastern does it all. Born and raised on a 400 acre dairy farm in this hunting and fishing paradise of Lake Superior Country, he had learned to fish from his father and never pondered the idea of leaving the wild north. This is where his home and heart stay.

"It's a trade-off," the certified Great Lakes captain said. "You can probably make more money by heading to southern Wisconsin. But, you'd be leaving all of this. For me the choice to stay was easy."

I pondered Kastern's offer. Superior was quiet and the forecast called for the big lake to stay flat with gentle winds. Although Kastern knows better lake trout fishing is on the horizon as the calendar pages burn away into July and August, if we did find fish we might tangle with a ferocious fighter weighing in at 10 pounds, 20...or who knows how big. Most appealing to a writer who had only fished for lakers on the Superior hardwater, Kastern loves to vertical jig the deep. Most other anglers prefer to motor troll.

Even a bad day of fishing is still fishing, I thought, considering the possibility of photographing the dreaded skunk for this column. We would still be on big, beautiful water working the big, beautiful Apostle Islands. There is no such thing as a bad day if fishing when one launches on Chequamegon Bay.

Kastern's 115 Mercury was soon carrying us over the Bay in the Tuffy Osprey with visions of nasty, cooperative lake trout. We moved around Long Island and settled in to work water more than 80 feet deep. Several boats trolled in the general area trying to pick the same fight we were looking for.



Ashland-based Guide Aron Kastern vertical jigs off of Long Island for lake trout in the deep water of Lake Superior near Chequamegon Bay.



Smallmouth were the main catch of the day on Chequamegon Bay, with fish caught and released to four pounds and two bigger fish lost near boatside.

The skipper handed me a custom made, four foot rod specifically designed for lake trout armed with a home-made Kastern-special crafted during the winter months. Line ripped off the reel as the jig tipped with a large smelt carried, down, down, down to dance on the bottom with the lake trout. I listened as Kastern explained the jigging tactic and told me what to expect. Basically he said, expect anything.

“When you vertical jig for lake trout you might feel a light tap, tap, tap from one fish and the next fish might hit so hard it almost rips the rod right out of your hand,” he said, visually demonstrating how to bump the jig several times in succession on the bottom before occasionally sweeping the rod up high to trigger a hit from interested but inactive lakers. “If you feel anything different at all, and I mean anything, set the hook. That’s a lake trout.”

“When you hook them up, back off on the drag and let it do

whatever it wants. If it’s a really a big one you will literally not be able to budge it off the bottom. These big fish can tear up your gear and crush your lures.”

With one eye on his electronics to announce the blips representing fish, Kastern controlled the boat on calm seas to ensure that our lines would remain vertical to best feel any fish. Upon request, I had been set up with the guide I had never before met through the Ashland Area Chamber of Commerce (www.visitashland.com 1-800-284-9984). The Chamber’s website offers profiles of numerous fishing and hunting guides, lodging and dining information and profiles of activities to be found in the area.

Kastern told me that in addition to smallmouth bass and walleye, he targets trophy pike and musky but targeting lake trout through the ice off of the Apostle Islands is a favorite and an unsurpassed angling thrill. For the novice Superior angler who has never before tangled with the size or power of a laker, it’s often the

fish doing the hooking.

“The old timers say that if you start fishing lake trout and you get a good one, you’re done, you’re hooked,” Kastern said. “Guys will go 20 miles on the ice to find better fishing. Sometimes the fishing is great but the ice isn’t as good out there and they lose machines (snowmobiles, ATVs). Winter fishing for lake trout is better and really getting popular, but summer can be very good.”

We lost two fish immediately when they rapped our jig off of Madeline Island before Superior riled unexpectedly. Already hooked myself with Kastern’s stories and good company and maybe a little too stubborn with visions of huge lakers dancing in my head, I chose to take a long ride to Basswood Island to escape the winds and work water at well over one hundred feet hoping for one good picture fish. Walleye fishing would wait for another day. With the fish uncooperative and more than half-day gone, we turned back to our sure bet.

Chequamegon Bay, old faithful, did not disappoint us with her superb smallmouth fishing and occasional walleye. The

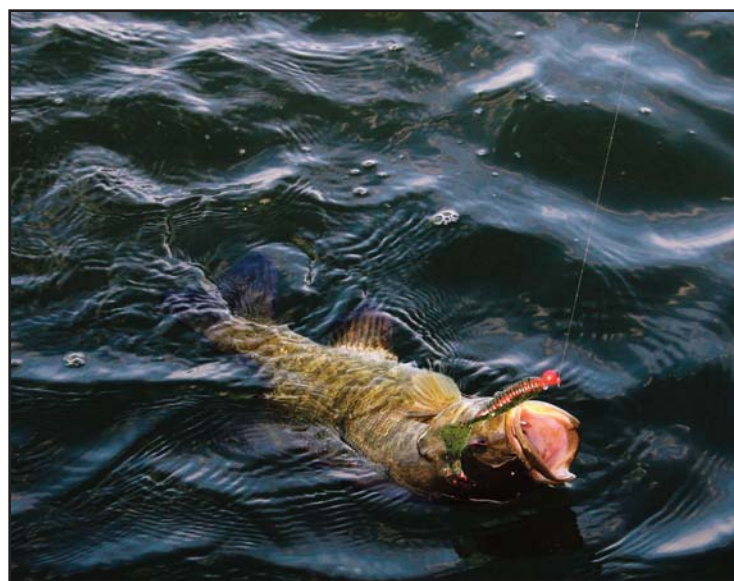
scenery on the big water around the islands is extraordinary. But an angler cannot beat the aesthetics of Chequamegon, and the fishing that comes with working the weed and timber-strewn bottoms and shorelines of the bay.

As the big water of Superior continued to stir and the skies darkened, we would occasionally have to work for more fish. At other times, the smallies were so active that for 20 minute stretches every other cast brought another battle. Several picture fish to four pounds came on board temporarily for photos, and two excellent smallmouth bass in the five pound class released us before they found our net.

We got off the Bay just in front of thunderstorms. It had been a fabulous day on Chequamegon Bay and the Greatest of the Great Lakes. This is Ashland, Washburn country. And really, there is no such thing as a bad day on the water.

Connect with Aron Kastern and Unlimited Trophy Outfitters at 715-765-4210, 715-413-0336 www.unlimitedtrophyoutfitters.com.

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A nice smallmouth bass is brought to net and released after taking guide Aron Kastern’s jig and rubber worm near a tangle of submerged timber.