

On Wisconsin Outdoors

With the Dick Ellis Experts

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Descending to Heaven

Fishing paradise, isolation found on Mississippi sloughs

By Dick Ellis



Early morning fog over Mississippi Pool 9 still hangs low as Guide Dick Neeffe looks for walleyes August 9.

Arriving on the Mississippi River south of Lacrosse Wednesday morning from Wisconsin bluff country, we descended on paradise. Far below us, Pool 9 and a 32 mile stretch of heaven lay enveloped in cloud; the pure white of it contrasting with the grey fog that had hung low over the valleys as Dave Sura and I traveled west in the pre-dawn twilight. Down we came with the winding county road, cutting into the veil in search of the man who knows the river like the old friend it is.

With a lifetime of fishing and 11 years of guiding exclusively on Pool 9, Dick Neeffe was waiting in Blackhawk Park. Soon, his Honda 150 purred and carried us at a crawl from a quiet inlet to the main channel, the precipitation so thick in morning moisture that it felt like

invisible rain on our faces. Already though, streaks of sunlight slashed at the morning fog and promised another flawless morning.

Total burn-off would come soon enough; in about the same amount of time it would take Neeffe to put us on walleyes. When the Captain stepped to the bow with a good fish to accommodate a photo request an hour later, we were in no hurry to bid goodbye to the last fingers of mist still clinging to the bluff-

tops behind him. An angler catches more than good fishing when traveling to the big river. Some of it hangs on the stringer. Most of it hangs on the memory.

As a very young boy, Neeffe began to learn the secrets of successfully fishing Pool 9 from his father. Now 82 and retired, Les Neeffe and Dick's mother Sis, 81, traveled by us in the distance on their pontoon boat, still enjoying the river. Year after year, Neeffe would continue to fish and come to intimately know the main river channel and intricate maze of extraordinarily beautiful backwater. After selling a business in Bear Valley he had owned with his wife, Sue for more than a decade, he began to pursue his dream of guiding on Pool 9. Our one-half day trip with Neeffe played out almost precisely like he planned it would.

Neeffe had been on an extended bite for walleye for days before our arrival. The day before, a 26 inch walleye and 18 inch smallmouth had topped a day of consistent fishing on the main channel, with perch up to a whopping 14 inches active on the isolated and wild backwater sloughs. Neeffe intended to show us it all, with the game plan laid out to show us steady fishing,



Guide Dick Neeffe holds a nice walleye on Pool 9 with a fog still hanging on the beautiful bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River south of Lacrosse



Guide Dick Neefe changed to a 'bigger walleye' spot and one cast later Dave Sura brought in this 23 inch fish on a jig and leech.

spots for big walleyes, and those head-turning perch in no-man's land.

"We're catching lots of short fish, (less than 15 inches)" said Neefe, who has caught a large spring walleye on Pool 9 at 31 inches and 11.4 pounds. "We caught 18 walleyes yesterday. Only four were legal in the 15 to 18 inch class but one was 26 inches. I don't like to keep anything over 20 inches."

We began off of Battle island, tossing jigs and leeches to shallow rocks shrouded in fog that hopefully still held walleyes. The plan was quickly altered when consistent surface commotion by smallmouth bass on an early morning feed demanded our attention. Sura worked a popper until Neefe's hair jig won the affection of the large smallie that threw the lure in front of us with one protesting vault from the water.

Downriver we moved to toss jigs and leeches near current breaks off a series of wingdams. The man-made structures, designed to push current into the

main river and prevent silt build-up, are also holding areas for feeding gamefish. Off of the first wingdam; an 80 yard long finger of rock and a second shorter structure upstream, walleyes and smallmouth in three to seven feet of water began to cooperate.

Neefe turned his attention to his bigger fish spots. We had no sooner camped on the first, when Sura's first pitch with a leech was taken by a fat, 23 inch walleye. Other fish followed. Mission accomplished, we moved on to the backwater perch hunt. Tales of 14 inch perch remain only stories until a photo proves it to the reader.

Off the main river, we wound and turned with a narrow channel into some of the most gorgeous backwaters an angler could wish to experience. Passing just two boats anchored near the main river, we would not encounter another human over the next three hours. Far back in five to seven feet of water, we began to vertical jig one-eighth once jig heads with a piece of

crawler, targeting both the middle of the channel and the channel edge near large pockets of lily pads.

"We need at least four feet of water to hold perch," Neefe said. "Bluegills will be in water as shallow as two feet. Normally we can find gills on the rocks by the wingdams in the current. With the cold weather they're back here. When I do catch them they still have eggs. They didn't spawn and will absorb the eggs. We also catch some real good crappies back here by throwing tube jigs at the holes around the lily pads."

Regardless of fish activity, the Mississippi backwaters should be on a Wisconsin angler's must-visit list. But the backwaters did cooperate. Despite recent torrential rains that can change where fish are holding, Neefe was not going to tolerate perch in the 10-inch class as an acceptable photo substitute for the jumbos he knew were here. We moved several times before Sura took a perch that stretched the tape to a legitimate 13 inches.

"Make sure you bend your arm so that the reader can see we're not holding the fish out to the camera," I requested. "Now that's a perch."

We left heaven with enough fish for a great meal, memories of God's Country, and total confidence in a very good Wisconsin guide.

"To be a guide, you need a good truck, a good boat, and a good wife with good insurance," Neefe said with a smile. That he has. Now, like the shirt on his back says, Dick Neefe "keeps it basic"... and catches fish.

"This," he said, turning the boat into the maze of backwater for the ride out, "is quite a place."

Connect with Dick Neefe's Guide Service at www.lake-link.com, dneefe@mwt.net, 608-648-3828 or 608-583-4004. For more information on fishing, accommodations and family activities, contact Director of Tourism Michelle Hoch and the Lacrosse Area Convention & Visitors Bureau at 800-658-9424, hoch@explorelacrosse.com, or www.explorelacrosse.com. ^ow_o



When Dick Neefe led the reporter to a perch spot on the beautiful Mississippi backwaters holding 'fish to 14 inches', the guide wasn't accused of short-changing when perch like this 13 inch fish cooperated and not another boat was seen over two hours.