

On Wisconsin Outdoors

With the Dick Ellis Experts

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Rich in Richland County

Angler's payoff comes on creeks, backwaters, farm ponds

By Dick Ellis

Only a few hundred yards into a single-day, three-in-one fishing extravaganza in west-central Wisconsin, we were already filthy rich in Richland County. Well, filthy for sure, anyway with nearly 700 pounds of uncoordinated human cargo ominously foretelling two unscheduled dumps into the muck of Wisconsin River backwater before our canoe had traveled 10 feet.

After twice emptying our tin ship and rubber boots, though, and casting accusing looks at our respective partners, better things lie just ahead. Stable again...kind of... the canoe quietly navigated another sharp turn to surprise two raccoons neck deep in mischief. At just 10 yards, the obviously young bandits halted their aquatic wrestling match and bailed out for higher ground, one performer returning to the curtain of cattails, sticking his face through like some "that's all folks" acknowledgement to his audience.

There's wildlife to be had here in Richland County, and fish and quiet, and beauty and isolation. Long time local hunter, angler and do-it-all outdoorsman Wayne Morgenthaler, a transplant from his boyhood in Hayward, was determined to show us first hand a wilderness and other outdoor treasures that long ago had made his family's move from the northern



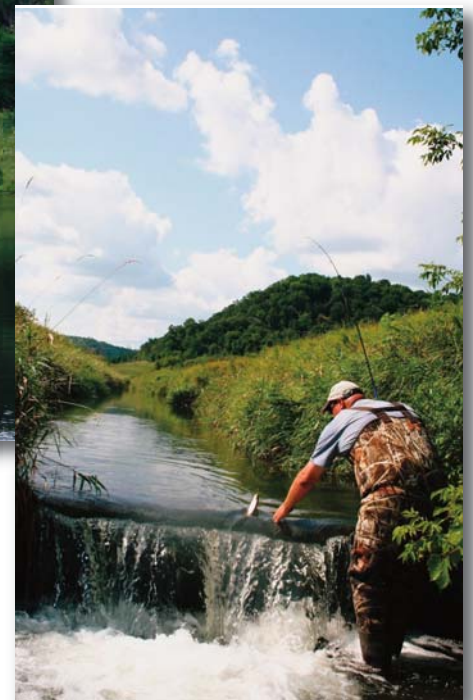
Wayne Morgenthaler of Richland Center positions Dave Sura for more largemouth bass action after a walk back in hill country to a Richland County farm pond

wilds of Wisconsin an even swap.

"Some of these smaller lakes that make up what I call the Lower Wisconsin from Spring Green to Boscobel are not used much by fishermen," said the instructor of summer school classes like "Hooked on Fishing" and "Electronics for Fishing" at UW-Richland Center. "It's not a true stream back here but spring-fed ponds with lot of cattails and swamp that flood with heavy rains. I've been fishing and hunting my entire life, for 43 years in Richland Center and before that in Hayward. I try to

help show whoever I teach how to enjoy the outdoors hiking, canoeing, hunting, bird watching or fishing."

Morgenthaler would show Dave Sura and me three distinct chapters from the book on Richland County Fishing. After an introduction to the Wisconsin River backwaters, a shower and change of clothes, we would hike to a back-40, five acre farm pond to target largemouth, and finally, chase browns and brookies on one of the



Dave Sura flips a spinner to Mill Creek water above rapids placed by Trout Unlimited and finds another willing native brookie in Richland County

trout-stream rich waters the county offers.

Although our precarious load left us unable to fish the backwater properly, we did enjoy the wildlife, in particular waterfowl, and stunning scenery. Morgenthaler's pho-



Wayne Morgenthaler stands in the brush next to Mill Creek in beautiful Richland County hill country and prepares his trout offering.



A canoe trip to Wisconsin River backwater near Richland Center can provide excellent crappie, largemouth and northern pike fishing, especially if the angler is familiar with the wild country like longtime resident Wayne Morgenthaler



tos backed up his words that the water is fertile for gamefish and pannies on hardwater or during warmer seasons, and the lack of pressure helps fish grow.

“There is a 27 inch minimum size limit on the river system so the pike get big,” he said. My largest largemouth is six pounds. The ice fishing can be tricky (dangerous) because of the spring ponds and the system changes with water levels so crappies and bluegills move from pond to pond. You have to find the ponds with the big gills in winter. People also like to come out in kayaks and move around quietly to bird watch.”

We moved to a farm where our host had gotten permission to fish a back-forty, five-acre pond for largemouth bass. A small row-boat waited for us and as Sura and Morgenthaler worked the water

with small lures and enjoyed non-stop action, I waded the shoreline with camera and rod.

“You can drive and find a pond in Richland Center every mile,” Morgenthaler said. “Which ponds hold fish... I don’t know. People don’t come here to fish ponds but it is a lot of fun and the landowners are receptive to a person asking permission. Visitors come here to trout fish.”

Little wonder. Richland County, according to Steve Nockerts of the Ocooch Chapter of Trout Unlimited during a lunch and interview at Jim & Marilyn’s Bar in Hub City, offers 227 miles of Class 1 or 2 trout streams with native or naturally producing trout. The Chapter serves Richland, Vernon and Crawford Counties and has drastically improved local trout streams like Elk creek with Extensive habitat work.

Despite the erratic weather this summer including rain and

cold temperatures Nockerts said that trout fishing has been excellent. With abundant water to choose from and low angling pressure, it’s the kind of fishing he expects.

“I’ve been out six or seven times since mid-June and caught six or seven trout every time out and never saw another fisherman,” he said. “It’s all on public land and you have the streams to yourself. In the past when I fished in the evening I would catch browns in the 18 or 19 inch class. If you like flyfishing, there are lots of meadow streams to work with a 6-1/2 foot or 7-1/2 foot rod. I wouldn’t advise anything larger. This is small stream fishing.”

Armed with spinning gear and flyrods, Morgenthaler led us to our own small stream with excellent fishing for both browns and brookies. Mill Creek showcased Trout Unlimited habitat work in the form of rip-rap, rapids

and resulting pools that held abundant numbers of fish. The creek was extremely narrow and ran right through beautiful agriculture lands bordered by scenic wooded hill country.

We walked away after virtually non-stop action and catching and releasing brook trout and browns to about 12 inches. Packed into a single day, we had found three excellent reasons to return to Richland County. The people here and the country itself makes it all the better.

“If you’re looking for a place with a lot of streams and trout, where you won’t see another fisherman, Richland County is the place for you,” said Steve Nockerts. “The further west you travel, the better the trout fishing. I hate to say it but I think we’re under-fished.” ^owo

www.hybridredneck.com

Thanks to the Richland County Economic Development Corporation (www.hybridredneck.com), we were introduced to local outdoor expert Wayne Morgenthaler as our host and stayed overnight at the beautiful Little Willow Springs (www.littlewillowsprings.com), a country retreat located in the Ocooch Mountain area known as the driftless region owned by Deborah and Bruce Wunnicke. In addition to offering one of the country’s finest clay tennis courts, the comfortable country home is available for rent and surrounded by 160 acres of meadows and woodlands, gorgeous springs and the Little Willow Creek. The surrounding forest offers hiking trails with ravines and rock outcroppings for exploration in all season.

According to Richland County Tourism Director Meegan Thompson in addition to fabulous fishing and other outdoor activities, upcoming events include the Ocooch Mountain Bike Tour, Center Color Fiesta, ATV Races, Hybrid Redneck Rally featuring Mud Bog Races and the North American Shed Hunters Club Antler Display. From the Empire Prairie to the Mississippi, Wisconsin’s 100-mile Scenic Byway 60 is worth the trip in itself. Connect with the Hybrid Redneck website above for more information or call 608-547-4310. Link to the Richland County Parks website for additional outdoor recreational activities at www.rclrs.net/parkcommission.