

On Wisconsin Outdoors

With the Dick Ellis Experts

www.onwisconsinoutdoors.com

August 4, 2008

Alternative With An Attitude

Smallmouth bass bring the fight

By Dick Ellis

There's a routine that's...routine...around the Ellis cabin each summer through fall, on our home-away- from-home waters of the Manitowish Chain in northern Wisconsin. We're row trollers; a family carrying on the traditions of a pioneering uncle who knew how to catch very large muskies and walleyes from deep water by rowing.

The routine means rising before the sun to row at first light when water is usually flat and boat traffic most often non-existent. Early high winds and rising whitecaps have been persistent this summer, cutting what is usually a three hour rowing circuit short or sometimes sending us back to bed without ever launching.

Fishing has been generally good for muskies and big suspended walleyes but it's a success that demands time on the water. Sometimes though, in particular when certain fish are in a "refuse to cooperate" pattern and fishing feels too much like work, routines need to be broken. Sometimes, sleeping in and finding other more willing targets with tactics that don't require flat water and relative isolation beckon. Sometimes, picking a fight with a smallmouth bass....or 12...using the simplest approach in mid afternoon, under a hot sun, is just the medicine to



Jim Ellis Shows a 17 inch smallmouth bass that hit a crankbait in mid afternoon on a steep shoreline drop-off. A few hours of fishing natural shoreline structure, piers and docked pontoon boats under a hot sun produced about a dozen fish up to 18 inches."

keep fishing fun.

Last week, Jim Ellis and I departed the pier in his 16 foot Lund well after noon, spent several hours working docked pontoon boats and natural shoreline structure pitching plastics and crankbaits to tangle regularly with smallmouth bass up to 17 inches. The day before my brother fishing solo caught and released several fish from 16 to 18 inches plus. No one can argue

that, pound for pound, a smallie will bring on the best fight. Few will argue that in Wisconsin, smallmouth bass fishing generally is pretty darn good.

According to my own interviews with Department of Natural Resources (DNR) fisheries experts, distinct factors have promoted that. Coarse, woody debris (CWD) provides male bass with the ideal environment essential to successful production during the

early summer spawning season. This natural or strategically placed wood and rock habitat has been a crucial element in protecting and improving bass populations statewide. As a tenacious protector of the nests, it is the male even more than the egg laden females that hold the key to that success.

Males, according to my file records, establish their territories and fan out a bed generally in five to six feet of water. Males don't like to see other males. The female cruises and spawns with other males on other beds. What biologists refer to as CWD, a good thing in the world of quality fisheries management, provides that visual barrier. Males stay on or around that bed for one to two weeks and actually lose body weight vending off predators like crayfish and juvenile panfish waiting for any opportunity to move in and eat the eggs and fry. The male is the key to protecting the resource.

That "reproductive strategy" of instinctively protecting their young is effective. Spawning success of many other fish species without that instinct is dependent on vast quantities of eggs dispersed over a wide-ranging area, ensuring survival of the species despite stacked odds against the individuals.



A smallmouth bass breaks water and fights like his reputation says it should during a mid afternoon bass hunt on the Manitowish Chain. Jim Ellis had fast action over several hours as the days ran out in July, catching and releasing numerous fish from shoreline ambush points.

Mother Nature's strategy to sustain the bass species received significant assistance from man in recent years. Increased minimum size limits adopted statewide and an early catch and release only season in the north has proven instrumental in increased numbers of smallmouth and largemouth and bigger fish.

Following years of no special regulations, in 1989 a 14 inch minimum size limit for bass was adopted in southern Wisconsin and a 12 inch minimum adopted in northern Wisconsin. The minimum was also raised to 14 inches in northern regions in 1998. Although smallmouth and largemouth in both southern and northern Wis-

consin have similar growth rates to each other, northern Wisconsin fish have slower growth rates than their southern cousins. Special catch and release regulations in the northland were adopted in 1992 in response to concerns that too many spawning bass, an easy target, were being harvested. The idea of catch and release went to the Conservation Congress and the DNR and public supported it.

In 2008, the catch and release season opened in the north May 3 with the regular gamefish opener and continued until June 20. Without special catch and release regulations, southern bass fishing also opened May 3. The change fostered by both catch and release and larger minimum size limits mean better bass fishing today. "No doubt across Wisconsin bass fishing is better," said DNR Fisheries Supervisor Randy Schumacher in a 2005 interview. "There are more

bass and bigger fish. In southern Wisconsin we used to see maybe two or three smallmouth bass in our electrofishing surveys. Since 1989, with some exceptions smallmouth are as abundant as largemouth. The average size is up and smallmouth bass fishing is better."

Jim and I found just that last week in the northland too. Simply by pitching plastics under rafts and moored pontoon boats or working small crankbaits on drastically dropping rocky shorelines, action was almost as routine as rising for a pre-light row trolling journey. Fishing was pure fun. The way it should be. *W*



Another nice smallmouth bass comes to net for Jim Ellis. A few hours and medium tackle can produce good action and good fights for the Wisconsin smallie angler in virtually all regions of the state.



On Wisconsin
Outdoors
With the Dick Ellis Experts

MAILED TO YOUR HOME

6 ISSUES

(1 YEAR)

\$23.95

PRINT CLEARLY

NAME

ADDRESS

CITY

STATE

ZIP

E-MAIL ADDRESS

PAYMENT OF \$23.95 ENCLOSED Payable to On Wisconsin Outdoors LLC
Mail to: 20240 W. Rustic Ridge Drive, New Berlin WI 53146
ALLOW 4-6 WEEKS TO PROCESS