

On Wisconsin *Outdoors*

With the Dick Ellis Experts

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Bayfield Bonus

Trout fishing follows extraordinary bear hunt

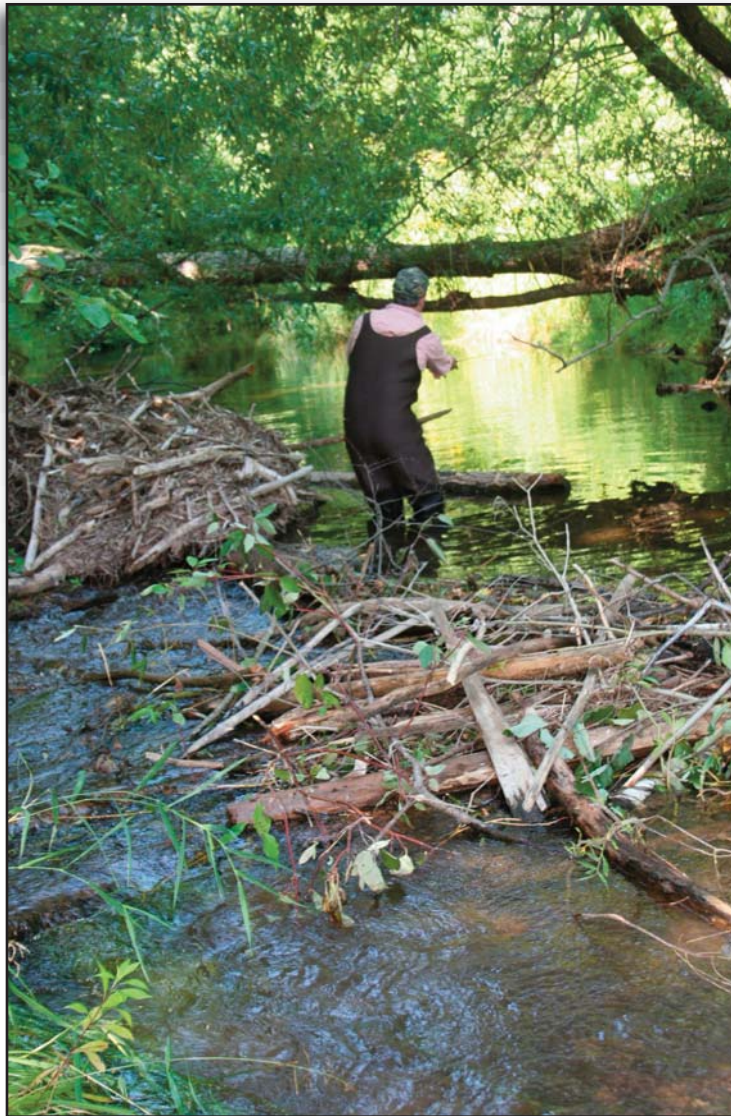
By Dick Ellis

Calling opening day of the Wisconsin bear hunt successful in one camp just outside of Washburn September 3 would also be called a classic understatement. 14 hunters from throughout Wisconsin and two from Illinois had traveled to Lake Superior country to hunt black bear with Northern Wisconsin Outfitters after an average wait of eight years for a coveted harvest tag. Seven had filled those tags on Wednesday.

Bears had been taken with bow and arrow, special permit cross-bow, and rifle. Two bears had tipped the scale at well over a head-turning 400 pounds. Best of all, each kill had been quick and the recovery uneventful. Each arrow or rifle round had struck vitals. No animal had traveled more than 50 yards from the bait pile.

The full bear story will be told in this column next week after camp breaks. With interviews and photos concluded in the field Wednesday and Thursday, I watched as the remaining seven hunters with unfilled tags headed to their stands spread over 30 miles of backcountry on trucks and ATVs and turned my attention to another piece of Lake Superior paradise.

September means excellent trout fishing in tributaries meandering to the greatest lake from



A beaver dam holding deeper water and an abundance of trout on Pikes Creek in Bayfield County explains very little water for an extended length of the walk upstream. John Ellis works the pool with an ultralight.

several counties in far northern Wisconsin. Although water conditions that help trigger migrations of trout off the big lake were relatively low, I was joined by my brother John Ellis Thursday and we traveled to Bayfield near the Apostle Islands to target Pikes Creek, a vein we had never before fished.

We began by visiting the DNR Fish Hatchery at the mouth of Pikes Creek which offers compelling displays and information on Lake Superior successes and concerns specific to the fishery. Enormous aquariums holding great lakes fish species and taxidermy work including a large laker with lamprey attached are highlights. We then worked upstream on Pikes Creek and despite the shallow water found excellent fishing in deeper holes. The statement "A bad day of Fishing is better than a good day at work" could be altered here to read, "A bad day of fishing is still great in Bayfield County."

According to my file information from interviews with DNR fisheries biologists, Lake Superior tributaries hold both resident fish that remain in the streams and migrating trout and salmon that travel from the big lake to the streams and back again on spring and fall spawning journeys. Special seasons and regulations protect those natu-



Many attractions at the DNR fish hatchery in Bayfield including this mount of a lake trout with attached sea lamprey details success and concerns of the fishery.



Visitors to the Lake Superior fish hatchery in Bayfield can learn about the fishery before trying a tributary or the big lake with rod and reel.



Lake Superior tributary trout are as beautiful as the country itself.

rally reproducing fish and the tributaries that serve as their precious natural hatcheries.

Those streams need more restrictive regulations. Fish are not stocked like the trout and salmon stocked in the tributaries of Lake Michigan. Special regulations cover the tributaries from Lake Superior to the first impassible barrier, which prevents the migration of Superior fish further inland.

Protected tributaries with spawning runs center on the Bayfield Peninsula from the Brule River in the west to North Fish Creek at the end of Chequamegon Bay in the east. The common spawning feature is that the veins, also including the Onion, White, Pine Creek, Whittlesey Creek and the Sioux River, dump into the Bayfield sand plains commonly referred to as the Barrons.

Brown trout might travel into the rivers from the big lake in July but not spawn until mid-October or later; cohos will often move upstream during the latter part of September and spawn in late Octo-

ber or November, and 80 percent of the steelhead population will run upstream on the famous Bois Brule in Fall, over-winter in the river and spawn in spring.

Even though Lake Superior tributary resident and migrating fish “may be brother and sister”, according to a 2004 DNR file interview with Senior Fisheries Biologist Dennis Pratt, lake fish grow faster and larger. Brook trout, he said as example, are considerably smaller in the streams than in the big lake. Superior steelhead too, are significantly larger than their stream cousins, or rainbows. Fall fishing on the tributaries then, offers the greater chance for a migrating fish of exceptional size.

“The tributaries are our hatcheries and in the summer months serve as fish nurseries where many of the smaller fish stay instead of moving onto the big water,” Pratt said. “The difference with inland streams is that you’re going to find the young fish as well as the whole adult population.”

We worked Pikes Creek for several hours. John used an ultralight rod with small spinners while I followed behind

with a camera or caught the action from above and far ahead on the bank. Frequently, brown trout to 12 inches were enticed from a hole or the cover of a submerged log, caught, and gently released. On three occasions though we saw those big browns as large as eight pounds or more scoot from the cover of overhanging bank vegetation or the deepest, darkest holes that periodically would rise to almost the tops of chest waders.

Had we seen or caught nothing, the September trip would have still been extraordinary. This is Superior Country. Your experience will be superior. Count on it. It’s the medicine for whatever ails you. Connect with the Ashland Area Chamber of Commerce at info@visitashland.com. www.visitashland.com. P.O. Box 746, Ashland, WI 54806. 715-682-2500 or 800-284-9484. Connect with the Washburn Chamber of Commerce at www.washburnchamber.com. 126 West Bayfield Street, Washburn, WI 54891. 715-373-5017. 