

Ciscoe Kid

Musky action takes sting from deer camp

By Dick Ellis

News from deer camp in the far north the week prior to the Wisconsin gun deer opener was darker than reports off the water here in the Boulder Junction/Manitowish Waters area. Dark storm clouds in fact, or rather Superior country "lake-effect" weather slowly but steadily blanketed the far northern counties of Wisconsin in six to eight inches of snow over two days.

Visibility diminished considerably November 15 -17 for those bowhunters looking for a rutting buck from our cabin in Boulder Junction. High optimism initiated during a snow-less first day in which five deer were seen from this reporter's stand along with good sign dropped with virtually all deer activity during the next several snow days, despite spending seven hours daily on proven stands. Pre-gun season deer reports at least in our pocket of the north were also pessimistic.

Another several inches of snow here fell November 21 on the eve of the gun season opener. Don't get me wrong. Deer are here, and opportunities will present themselves especially for the patient hunter.

Things were brighter for my brother-in-law, working lakes a few miles to the southwest of us in Manitowish Waters. Row troller John Kubiak of New Berlin



John Kubiak of New Berlin worked spawning ciscoe on the Manitowish Chain in Vilas County to catch and release this 42-inch musky November 14



Pines and ground are covered with new snow that dumped up to eight inches over Wisconsin's northern counties this week during the peak of the whitetail rut coveted by bow hunters. John Ellis leaves his stand after a three hour vigil with no deer movement.

plans one of his several northern Wisconsin trips targeting muskies each year to correspond with the ciscoe spawn of late November. The opportunistic musky feeds heavily throughout the year on the large, schooling baitfish found in numerous lakes throughout the state, but the spawning season allows anglers to better pinpoint where the predator fish will lie in ambush.

"I plan a trip every year in late November to coincide with the ciscoe spawn," Kubiak said. "When it happens you know the muskies will be close by. As the fall progresses into November and the water temperatures drop toward 39 degrees, ciscoe move to the shallows to spawn at night under a full moon. I usually miss that prime time. I'll be too early and the water temperature might be at 44 degrees, or I'm too late and the ciscoe are already done spawning."

Because different lakes throughout the state holding ciscoes will have widely varying water temperatures, and spawning dates, due to their geographic location, lake size and depth, Kubiak said local bait shops can help anglers keep tabs on ciscoe spawning activity. Townline Sports in Manitowish Waters would help Kubiak target Vilas County muskies on the Manitowish Chain based on that baitfish activity. And, he said as



Lake Superior "lake effect" weather dumped up to eight inches of snow on Wisconsin's northern counties this week and made bow hunting difficult. John Ellis of Muskego hunkers down on a Vilas County treestand and waits for deer despite poor visibility.



John Ellis of Muskego walks back to the truck after a three hour archery hunt with no deer movement through a snow-shrouded aspen stand left in the wake of a decade-old logging operation

examples, one lake he fished had water temperatures at 39 degrees while another was still at 44 degrees.

Although he had not previously hit the ciscoe spawn correctly, ciscoe have played a vital role in his most successful summer row trolling trip. In 2007, Kubiak landed eight fish from 41 inches to 48 inches in four days of midnight row trolling after watching the baitfish ripple the surface as they rose quickly from the depths to feed before retreating again to deep water. Kubiak trolled his lures among the activity and found the predator fish waiting to ambush the ciscoe rising and falling again to the depths.

"During the summer months ciscoe hang down deep below the thermocline where muskies can't go because of the lack of oxygen," he said. "Ciscoes will come to the surface to feed. They shoot straight up and straight back down because the surface water is too warm for them. I could see that happening as I rowed. The muskies want to pick the ciscoes off and that's when you can pick the muskies off."

In 2008, Kubiak planned his trip in mid-

November on a full-moon hoping to hit the spawn. As November progresses, he said, and water temperatures near the low 40-degree mark, ciscoes stage in deep water adjacent to the spawning grounds. Anglers can target those staging areas near deep-breaking rocky shorelines.

Unlike summer, he would not troll at night for safety reasons. He always wears an inflatable life vest, but the combination of the cold water and high winds of November and fishing from a 16-foot narrow trolling boat made the decision to row only during daylight hours easier.

"The first lake I fished was at 42 degrees and it just wasn't happening," Kubiak said. "I changed the game plan to fish dark water lakes without ciscoe but Dan Connaughty at Townline Sports talked me out of it. He told me the lakes where the ciscoes were spawning like crazy."

Kubiak visually located the spawning baitfish by the thousands in one to two feet of water between two lakes. When he stopped row trolling to cast for muskies, five to six ciscoes would follow. He also knew that a

10-pound walleye had been taken by a wade-fisherman casting at night in the same spawning territory. Muskies are not the only predator fish ready to accept an easy meal offered by nature.

Kubiak calculated that muskies would be lying in wait off a deep edge waiting to intercept ciscoes entering and leaving the shallows to spawn. He began to row troll that adjacent water, bouncing a Depth Raider in eight to 12 foot depths in water temperatures at 41 degrees. Very soon, a 42-inch musky was in the skiff, waiting for Kubiak's self-portrait against the shore before the fish was safely released to forage on more ciscoe.

"I was glad to have success," Kubiak said. "A 42-inch musky isn't a small fish. I'm always hoping for a 50-inch fish at this time of year, but the plan around the spawning ciscoes definitely came together."

For hunting and fishing information in the Manitowish Waters area, contact Townline Sports at 1-715-543-2371. *Wo*