

On Wisconsin Outdoors

With the Dick Ellis Experts

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Peshtigo, Please

Fish, scenery, isolation mark river trip

By Dick Ellis



Jason Gaurkee of Appleton admires a 19-inch smallmouth bass taken on the Peshtigo River just prior to releasing the fish to fight again.

“...I still might run in silence, tears of joy might stain my face, and the summer sun might burn me till I’m blind. But not to where I cannot see you walkin on the backroads, by the rivers flowing gentle on my mind...”

No wonder at all that Glen Campbell found that love and the right river could inspire similar emotion. There’s something maybe too deep in there touching on “for better or for worse” to try to grasp, but this much is real: A fisherman could drift an 11-mile piece of the Peshtigo, never catch a thing, and

never want for anything. Isn’t that love?

From the moment Jason Gaurkee of Appleton and DuWayne Pagel of Bryant slipped a beat-up Lund quietly from the gravel landing and into the current that would take us where it would take us, even before the fish came, the Peshtigo River laid gentle on our minds. Somewhere far down stream at another wilderness landing, with seven hours tucked behind us and a full moon rising over Marinette County, an old truck would be waiting where we parked it.

In between the “now” and the “then”, we would be asking for fish from the shallow, beautiful, sand and gravel, boulder and timber-laden tributary of Green Bay. Along the way, when Gaurkee would call out a deep hole or a convergence of a feeder creek and the main river, we would anchor and ask too specifically for wall-eye and channel cats. And, if the Pestigo felt like sending us a smallmouth or a northern pike from the shade of this fallen tree

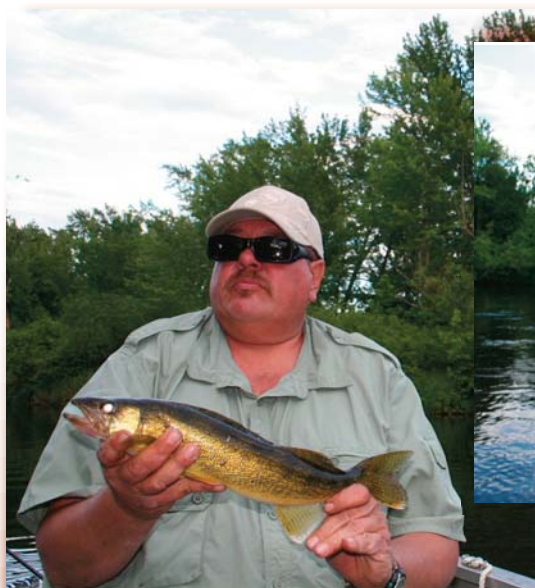
or from the cavern of a bank worn deep by eternal cut of current, we’d take that too.

We were in theory picking on muskies, but Pagel set the tone early when his boat painted with dings and dents marking the times he had visited the river before said, “We have the potential of catching anything, any species, any time along this river.”

“The rivers are a spring thing to most anglers,” Gaurkee said. “It’s the only game in town when



A northern Pike surrenders to a tandem spinner bait during a float trip targeting multi-species on the Peshtigo River last week in Marinette County. The pike was released.



DuWayne Pagel takes a walleye from a Peshtigo River hole in Marinette County.



Wisconsin Fishing Guide Jason Gaurkee hefts a beautiful walleye caught from a Peshtigo River hole. He caught several walleyes and several channel cats before turning his attention again to the drift trip for muskies.



A Peshtigo River walleye receives a rude awakening for taking a jig and a crawler; an introduction to the boys in the boat.

the lakes are still frozen and in the spring these tributaries of Green Bay are just awesome. But it's a great game now too. The Peshtigo is like rivers everywhere. The Cumberland in Tennessee, the Brule, the Mississippi, the Menominee. If we were on the Wisconsin I'd be fishing it the same way because they have the same tendencies; runs and rapids and eddies that lead to deeper holes and pools and it starts all over again. Structure is anything that provides the fish sanctuary; boulders, down trees, timber, that's what's going to be giving us fish. You don't need a fish finder. You just learn to read the water."

We let the boat go with a bit of help from the trolling motor, working water mostly three to five feet deep but with the occasional hole that demanded we stop and probe. Surface baits and "forgiving" safety pin style spinner baits allowed us to work the clutter with just a tolerable number of snags.

As summer progresses the Peshtigo water level lowers and becomes more treacherous to navigation with anything but jet boats, Jon boats or canoes. Low water conditions do mean restrictive navigation, Pagel said, but it also allows him to learn the river even better. When high water comes again, he knows where and what hidden structure is likely holding fish.

"We should see muskies today in ridicu-

lously shallow water," Gaurkee added just a bend or two into the trip. We'll probably see fish in less than three feet of water, if not in less than two feet. You get spoiled out here. I've only taken 10 casts and I'm already wondering what's going on because nothing's hit."

The Peshtigo was a bit stubborn initially, but she gave in with the day. A 19-inch smallmouth would fall and a nice northern pike. Gaurkee quietly predicted that a certain tree should likely hold a musky if history meant anything, but his spinner bait returned untouched. Pagel's follow-up surface lure was attacked though, before the lure's bubble trail home had cleared the overhanging shoreline canopy. The fish left us with just a swirl and a question mark; how big was it?

"Small rivers like this; the Oconto, the upper Wisconsin just seem to excel with surface lures," Gaurkee said. "And every one of these fallen trees could hold a musky. That can be the problem. My guess is that there's a fish that we would like to catch just about on every tree. Maybe not a musky, but a walleye or a pike."

Eventually, we would see five muskies. The three fish we actually watched following our lures were in the 30-inch class. The two muskies that hit were never hooked and we had no clear indication of their size. Halfway through our journey, an oxbow holding shal-

low backwater on a turn in the Peshtigo also marked the deepest hole in the river. The 22 foot deep treasure chest was too intriguing for the guides to pass by, and they anchored at the head of the hole and sent jigs and crawlers to see if anyone was home.

Three walleyes to 23 inches and three channel cats in the five or six pound class were the reward for 30 minutes of work. "I'll give you one good reason why I'm not running up to Canada," Gaurkee said. "You're on it."

With the full moon due in and the lunar charts predicting active muskies, we continued on. The tension of expecting a strike rose in the boat with the falling darkness and the "blup" "blup" "blup" of surface baits melding with a chorus from the awakening night life.

In the end, the lunar charts lied. But in the end, and the beginning, and the middle, there was nothing not to like about an 11 mile drift trip on the Peshtigo. Actually, there was nothing not to love about it.

And that, will lie gentle on a Wisconsin boy's mind.

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