

## Cheaper By The Dozen

### *Rizzo Tails bring big fish tales on shallow river*

By Dick Ellis

Give Jeff Waters a small can of lures masquerading as a tackle box in a borrowed and battered canoe, a northern Wisconsin River, and a mission to put a first legal musky on the end of his girlfriend's line. When the stars align, like last week, the not-so-stereotypical big-fish approach meant five muskies caught and released with six more lost on the same lure in one morning on the water. The matriarch fish measured in at a whopping 54-inches. The story itself though, is the real "keeper".

"I should never have caught that big fish," Waters, a Wisconsin River musky veteran from Necedah said. "Every possible thing that could have gone wrong did go wrong. But things worked out in the end and it was a heck of a day. In 10 years of fishing that (Vilas County) river I had never caught a musky over 40 inches. We caught a 43 inch fish, the 54 inch fish and in addition to the five muskies I caught, I lost three fish, Rene



Jeff Waters prepares to release the matriarch of five muskies caught and released while fishing a shallow Vilas County river from a canoe July 9th. The 54-inch fish and each musky caught hit a Rizzo Tail. (Photo by Rene Dachel)

***"A Rizzo Tail was so beat up by the end of the morning from meeting the teeth of active fish that it was rendered useless by the time the biggest and last fish of the day hit as the noon hour approached."***

(Dachel) lost three fish and we had a bunch of follows."

Waters, our cabin neighbor on Island Lake near Boulder Junction, had borrowed a family canoe for yet another July river assault on muskies. While my family hunted perch on the Manitowish Chain with girls from age three to 15, Waters and Dachel worked shallow, weedy rivers with the sole purpose of finding that elusive first musky for Rene. Waters already had nine muskies on the board for 2009, spent "quality time" in a boat with his father, Rich Waters, and had guided Rene's son Jared 10, to his first musky earlier on Wildcat Lake.

River fishing for muskies remains a priority. He fishes the Wisconsin and its dammed flowages at Petenwell and Castle Rock diligently near home in central Wisconsin; but turns his attention to rivers in northern counties that are often extremely shallow and isolated, the veins painted with lily pads, heavy vegeta-

tion and timber.

“The rivers offer a pristine, out-of-city atmosphere,” he said. “This river is pretty weedy with a maximum depth of five feet. We were on the water at 8:30 in the morning. Because we were in a canoe without a lot of room, I picked out maybe five lures to use, all bucktails, and threw them in a can.”

Only one lure though, tripped the trigger and enticed the strikes from each of the muskies.

“The only bait in the arsenal working was the Rizzo Tail,” Waters said. “It caught every fish that day. It was so beat up as the morning went on that I tried to use it just as an inline spinner. After the big fish hit it was totally destroyed. I couldn’t make it run true and we were done.”

Musky action with both follows and strikes had virtually been non-stop all morning. Rene was having a good number of opportunities to boat her first fish, but landing a musky wasn’t in the cards. Waters was catching fish, seeing fish, and losing fish, including one musky caught and released at 43 inches that had been the only fish in a decade of river work breaking the 40-inch mark.

After Waters launched the Rizzo Tail down wind an estimated 40 yards to settle in next to the edge of a pod of lily pads, he watched the fish hit. “The water is crystal clear,” he said. “I saw her hit. But I didn’t realize she was

that big until it was about 20 feet from the canoe. Then I was really torn. Rene had a musky on too. I had never caught a 50-inch fish and I thought that this had a good chance of being bigger than that. But the whole reason we were out fishing was to get Rene that first fish. She set her reel on free spool, set the rod down and grabbed the net.”

What they caught first was pure chaos. The net was tangled in equipment and Rene was a novice at netting a musky. The big fish went under the canoe, tangled with Rene’s line, which still had the second fish on, and jumped. Rene managed to free the net, Jeff managed to

gain control of an out-of-control situation, and the fish surrendered to a woman fast gaining on-the-job training in the netting department.

“I knew we had a 50-inch fish but we didn’t have a tape,” Waters said. “We placed the paddle perpendicular across the canoe, laid the fish on the paddle, Rene held its head still and I pinched the tail. It was at least two inches longer than the paddle, but we didn’t know how big the paddle was. The first thing I did back at the cabin was measure the paddle. It was 52-1/2 inches.”

The fish was released after an improvised girth measurement estimate of 23 inches. A northern Wisconsin

taxidermist used the weight and girth measurements to estimate the weight of the fish at 30 pounds. By late fall, the musky feeding in preparation of winter will probably carry 40 pounds. Waters is having a replica of the fish created at Lax Taxidermy in Conover. He hasn’t forgotten that he still has a mission to accomplish with Rene and a first musky, and he certainly hasn’t forgotten how to best get that done.

“I already went to Rollie & Helen’s (bait shop in Minocqua) and bought 10 Rizzo Tails,” he said. “They were \$4.95 each. I have 150 musky baits. It’s the cheapest bait in my box. And it’s the hottest bait on the river.” <sup>OWO</sup>



Jared Dachel prepares to release his first musky caught on Wildcat Lake with Jeff Waters during a memorable July of musky fishing in northern Wisconsin. (Photo by Jeff Waters)