

# On Wisconsin Outdoors

With the Dick Ellis Experts

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## A Frigid Five

### Shore browns cooperate as temperatures plummet

By Dick Ellis

The digital message on the downtown Milwaukee high rise whispered “5:54 am” and “minus 4” early Saturday morning as Dave Sura, Jason Guarkee and I fumbled in the dark with golden shiners, camera batteries and frozen fingers for a planned assault on Lake Michigan tributary browns. Surely, any audio greeting that might have accompanied the thermometer reading would have been a bit less subtle; “Hey, you three idiots down there...are you nuts? It’s freezing...go home.”

A new day was promising an appearance soon in the east as Sura and Guarkee ignored the elements...sort of...and went about their business of setting minnows and spawn sacs on the convergence of the Milwaukee and Menomonee Rivers. Heavy steam rose from the Lake Michigan veins and wandered above the current as warm water discharge far upstream tumbled down to meld with the cold. A jagged ice shelf painting that journey of warm water stretched toward aged and battered ware-

house buildings across the Milwaukee that will soon become fashionable condominiums for the affluent few. Somewhere close beyond it all to the east sprawled the Big Lake. It was a surreal setting, and another reminder that Wisconsin’s good fishing isn’t always found in the lonely places.

Outdoor invitations for this story or that, from this place or that throughout Wisconsin earlier in the week had fallen with the temperatures. No one, it seemed, was ready to brave hurting cold and worse wind chill for the sake of a newspaper column. I needed an angler or two who bordered on the insane. I needed Guarkee and Sura.

“Oh, I’m going fishing Saturday morning for brown trout whether you come or not,” said Guarkee, of Appleton. “We can meet at the bait shop before sunrise and drive to downtown Milwaukee together. I think Sera’s is going to meet us too.”



With steam rising on the water, Jason Guarkee fights a brown trout in frigid temperatures on the ‘Two Rivers’ of downtown Milwaukee.

That meant a load of expertise in my corner and double trouble for the German Browns and the larger Seeforellen strain planted annually in Lake Michigan by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and readily accessible to shore anglers in particular from late fall through spring. Both are talented anglers found on the Wisconsin lakes and streams virtually every week of the

year regardless of conditions.

They know the “spots” north and south where Lake Michigan tends to be most generous throughout the year. And they know just how to push the odds in their favor to pull fish from the water.

“The main reason these browns are here is the water temperature and the food,” Guarkee said. “The warm water used to heat the Greater Downtown Milwaukee area is



Dave Sura of Racine shows a typical Lake Michigan tributary brown trout readily accessible to shore anglers each fall through spring. This fish was taken on the Menomonee River in downtown Milwaukee January 19.

discharged upstream maybe one-half mile on the Menomonee. The water temperature upstream is probably 70 degrees but I've seen it as high as 82 degrees. That draws in the gizzard shad but it's too warm to sustain browns."

The water cools as it flows downstream. The "absolute trick", Guarkee said, is to find and fish the water temperature tolerable to both the gizzard shad baitfish drawn to the warmer water and the pursuing predator browns drawn to the cold. This Menomonee-Milwaukee merger often referred to by the old timers as "Two Rivers" also often means the perfect temperatures for productive fishing.

"The last time my Dad and I fished here when it was this cold was a Super Bowl Sunday," Guarkee said. "We just killed the brown trout, including an 18 pounder."

Sura and Guarkee expected another

## To Target Winter Browns

These anglers use rods nine feet or longer that are easier to cast, set the hook and to control the speed of the bait drift. The long rod allows the fisherman to lift slack line from the water that can cause the float and bait to move slower or faster than the current. They recommend 8-pound monofilament line easier to keep ice-free, and a reel with a "quality" drag that can hold 150 yards of that line. "Match the reel to the rod," Sura said.

"Ideally (on a warmer morning) you want to keep the rod in your hand," Guarkee said. "Fish know the current speed. You don't want the float to be moving faster or slower than the current."

Occasionally in the past, Guarkee has used an umbrella net in these rivers to catch gizzard shad and precisely match the forage the browns are after. When that is the angler's choice, he stressed that the shad must by law be used in the same river it was caught from due to the risk of transferring aquatic disease.

tributary trick to play a role in the morning's success. Like other big rivers, the current on the Menomonee and Milwaukee occasionally reverses direction, initiating change similar to a wing-dam effect except that the entire river reverses. The change they said, often initiates strikes.

"Only bigger rivers do it," Sura said. "It's like a tide. But the Root River (Racine) does it every 20 minutes. Here it's about every 45 minutes."

Of the 10 strikes played out over four hours of fishing, and five browns landed between four and five pounds,

"Golden shiners work very well though," he said. "Dave ties his own spawn sacs and they work as good as the shiners. He is one of the best spawn tiers that I've ever seen. There's an art to it. And it's why he's so successful."

According to Sura, using good fresh spawn makes a big difference in effectiveness on the water. Although he said that choice of spawn is often "species specific" meaning that salmon prefer salmon eggs and trout prefer trout spawn, he believes trout spawn is comparatively superior bait over salmon. He should know.

Sura focuses on shore fishing Lake Michigan and its tributaries and is two-time winner of the annual Salmon-O-Rama (now Big Fish Bash) of Racine, "On-Shore" categories for rainbow and salmon. 4,000 to 5,000 anglers compete each year in the Bash. When he won the steelhead (rainbow) competition, he also placed 3rd and 5th, his friend using Sura home-tied spawn finished 2nd and his father finished 4th.

almost all came immediately with a reverse in current. It was the frigid five for the frigid few crazy enough to be out.

"I don't think those fish can help taking the bait when it stops right in front of them as the water reverses," Sura said, noting his opinion that perhaps 1,000 browns and tens of thousands of gizzard shad were packed into this water offering the perfect temperatures. "They just have to hit it."

It was the coldest of mornings on another Wisconsin fishery. And the action, was just hot enough. *OWO*