

On Wisconsin Outdoors

With the Dick Ellis Experts

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Paradise Ice

Lake trout, scenery, weather unsurpassed off Apostle Islands

Dick Ellis

With the town of Bayfield and Basswood Island left far behind in a wake of snow dust, the long line of ATVs and snowmobiles turned north off of Madeline Island and honed in on one small piece of Lake Superior paradise ice still four miles ahead. Armed with GPS, experience, and the common sense necessary to survive and thrive as a guide in Superior country, Craig Putschat of Outdoor Allure moved on, in-tune with the threat of a long finger of open water slicing off the Great Lake to invade the Apostle Islands somewhere ahead.

“There are two sleds on the bottom on Superior right now,” Putschat said. “They drove in that open lead a few days ago. The fishermen are very lucky they’re not dead. One guy was in the water for 30 minutes. We stress safety. You need to know where you are out here and you need to be with someone who knows where the ice is good. If it was foggy or rainy you could run right into that finger. It changes every year and sometimes daily. Last year, the ice was good and guys were fishing 30-miles out around Outer Island.”

The motorcade headed on toward the orange ball hanging on the horizon,



Reliable Suzuki ATVs take Washburn bear guide Mike Foss across 20 square miles of rugged Lake Superior country Wilderness to maintain bait stations throughout the spring and summer and far out among the Apostle Islands to work for lakers in 200 feet of water during the winter. (Ellis)

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is long-lived and slow growing, noting that a
40-pound fish can be 50 or 60 years old.”*



Gary Krueger is a lonely figure as he works for lake trout on Lake Superior in 200 feet of water with two of the Apostle Islands in the background. (Ellis)



Washburn guide Craig Putschat helps John Marksman land another lake trout in 200 feet of Lake Superior water as Rich Nemitz of Hartland watches the show off the Apostle Islands during the first 40-degree day in March. (Ellis)

the promise of Wisconsin's first March 40 degree day hanging out there with it. Our target was lake trout in 195 feet of water on solid ice 14-inches thick eight miles from our departure point in Bayfield with Basswood, Madeline, Hermit and Stockton Islands all looming as varying shades of gray in the distance as



Washburn Guide Craig Putschat, owner of Outdoor Allure, shows a beetle jig and butterflied smelt ready to entice lake trout 200 feet below the Lake Superior ice. (Ellis)

we set camp. Putschat, Mike Foss of Washburn, Rich Nemitz of Hartland, John Marksman and Alex Blaine of Ashland, Gary Krueger of White Lake augured holes and readied the short, stout rods necessary to wrestle trout that could be 30-pounds from the bottom of Superior through almost 200 feet of water. Captain Putschat sliced smelt and dressed the locally developed beetle-jigs that would carry the bait down through the cold Superior waters to work trout on the bottom.

"The Beetle-jig flies up and flutters away from the bottom where you jigged it up from," Putschat said. "The smelt just gives the trout some smell and something to hang on to. This is big game fishing. It can take 20-minutes to bring a fish up. Then they'll bulldog you all the way down again. Then three-quarters of the way up, then all the way down. Out further, there is less fishing pressure, fewer commercial nets and bigger fish. But we can't get out there this year."

Putschat said that the Lake Superior lake trout is long-lived and slow growing, noting that a 40- pound fish can be 50 or 60 years old. He pointed as evidence to a 40-pound monster caught

five years ago that was shocked and fin-flipped in 1952. He said also that a team of four can expect a three fish limit for their time on the ice, but cautioned like any other fishing that there also are days without a bite and days when it takes six or seven strikes to land one fish.

"Lake trout have hard, bony fish so sharp hooks are important," he said. "We use 36-inch rods, 40-pound power pro no-stretch line and 20-pound fluorocarbon leaders. If you feel anything at all down there, set the hooks hard several times. Current out here can change direction or become weaker or stronger. It's called a seiche; it's like a tide but different because it's caused by high or low pressure and not by the moon."

We made up our own tiny community dwarfed by God's Country. At mid-morning, the howling of wolves fell over the ice from Hermit Island. Anglers spread over 100 yards of ice sat on ATVs and snowmobiles and tended their port-holes and electronic screens. Occasionally, the voice of one fisherman or another would announce the play-by-play of fish approaching the lure on the

vexilar. Occasionally, a rod bent in half told the story of a fish on and sent giddy grown men running to watch the fight. Those first several fights ended in lost fish, a disappointed curse or two, and a shuffling back to respective holes.

Mike Foss, professional bear guide from Bayfield County, said he was simply burning time on the ice, enjoying the sunshine and daydreaming about the day when he could chase big north country bruins again. Gary Krueger felt differently about the chance to ice fish. Just laid off from his job as a logger, he'll be on the hardwater and then the open water now three to four days a week until the call to work comes again. Krueger, in fact, came to Lakeland College in Ashland from his home near Antigo, and was forever under the spell of the far north country. He stayed.

John Marksman found the hot hole. The professional ice fishing guide, rod and tackle designer from Washburn learned to fish the Apostle Island waters with his dad as a boy. After one lost laker on this warm day, a series of several nice trout to 19-inches lost battle with the veteran and were invited on the ice for photos.

"It can be a very overwhelming piece of water if you look at it as one big lake," he said. "But we take it piece by piece when we're learning how to fish it and it makes things much easier."

For the past five years, Rich Nemitz, of Hartland in far southern Wisconsin has spent time almost every-other week fishing Superior Country from his vacation home in Iron River. He credits Guides Putschat and Jim Hudson with teaching him everything he knows about targeting lakere and called deep water jigging for lake trout a tactic reminiscent of his first experience probing the depths for perch on Madison's Lake Mendota.

"Double the size of the equipment, quadruple the size of the fish but the tactic in 70 or 80 feet of water on Mendota is very similar," he said. "This is like an upscale deep-water perch tactic. I like to watch the vexilar and visualize



John Marksman of Ashland and Rich Nemitz of Hartland show the Lake Superior treasure; four lake trout taken while jigging in 200 feet of Lake Superior water off the Apostle Islands. (Ellis)

what's going down there so far below us."

Nemitz said that the laker is a salmonid that seeks prey by vibration via a "lateral line" and by sight hunting. Varying the presentation of the lure is imperative to success.

"You have to change it up and give them what they want on any given day," Nemitz said. "Some days they're picky and some days they're so aggressive it doesn't matter what you send down there. You're going to catch them."

Nemitz vividly tells the story of the 16 pound lake trout that nearly snapped the rod out of his hand with a vicious strike as he was jigging last season. Twenty-five minutes later, the fish finally surrendered, leaving a life-long memory for the angler and a need to return as often as possible.

"That's what I like about it; they fight you every inch of the way," he said. "They run out of steam and then the

fight starts all over again. Any fish that hits might be 15 to 30pounds. Half the allure is the scenery. To me what's unique is that the lake trout is a great fighting fish and great table fare. But picture fishing out near Wilderness Island with its beautiful ice formations. How cool is that? Where you are is as much a part of all of this as what you're doing."

For more information on tremendous fishing opportunities throughout spring and summer on the Apostle Islands and Chequamegon Bay, contact Craig Putschat and Outdoor Allure at www.outdoorallure.com or 715-373-0551. Contact the Ashland Chamber of Commerce at www.ashchamb@century-tel.net or 715-682-2500.

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