

On Wisconsin Outdoors

With the Dick Ellis Experts

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Pike's Peek

A guide offers look at Wisconsin's big northern waters

By Dick Ellis

With Tyler Kinzinger's power auger quiet again and the polar ice and beaver dam tip-ups set over the hardwater of Moose Lake, we settled in to drink coffee, shoot the anglers' bull, and wait for our first pike strike. Scott Heitman, his son Ty, and I didn't know we were just 48 hours away from Packer heartbreak. We also didn't know we were just seconds away from that coveted first flag.

"Flag up! Ty, you've got a flag on the end." Heitman's words sent Tyler running and white powder flying. At the finish line, Ty let us know that the reel was turning and the fish was still taking line. Seconds later, a northern in the low-20 inch class lay iced. Tyler took his shiner back and slipped the pike back into the frigid water of Waukesha County's Moose.

A cold north wind cut into us over the 81 acre lake and wind chills dipped into the single digits. After 10 inches of snow the night before, partial blue skies and sunshine arriving with a new cold front brought at least some temporary reprieve from the cold. What really warmed us though, was consistent "Flag-up" action from the moment we arrived. Most of the fish were "hammer handles", although the knowledge that Ty and friends had caught and released

a 39 inch pike on a previous trip kept our hopes up.

"You can't always score big," I said. "But just one picture fish makes the story."

Consistent action is always fabulous. But it is the big fish that brings the adrenalin. For this column, guide Jim Tostrud of Kenosha shared some of his big pike waters statewide, and how he goes about finding them. Tostrud targets trophy northern through the ice each year with great success. His biggest pike caught and released is a 48-1/2 inch Lake Geneva "gator" taken in 2004.

You can't catch big pike, Tostrud said, without first knowing where there at. Ice anglers looking for big fish should start, like he does, looking at the fishing regulations for lakes that have high size limits, lower bag limits and slot regulations.

"Lakes with a 32 inch minimum and one fish limit have the potential for producing big pike," Tostrud said. "Look at the regs for size, bags and slots. I always do whenever I want to fish for big pike."

"Wisconsin has great pike fishing from Superior country to the south but a lot of the lakes you'll just catch hammer handles or Jacks; smaller fish. When Wisconsin lakes have slot limits or larger minimums you know they are

trying hard to manage for big pike. It's why Delavan is coming on in the south as a big pike lake with a 32 inch minimum, the same as Geneva. It's why we're seeing more and more big pike."

Tostrud's definition for "big pike",



Scott Heitman continues a long fight with a fat northern pike on Moose Lake in southern Wisconsin before successfully icing the fish. Wisconsin's 15,000 lakes offer both quantity and quality for winter pike fishing. (Ellis)

he said, means fish 36 inches to 48 inches that require use of a 10-inch augured hole to land the fish. "We have thousands of lakes with pike," he said. "But we're talking gators."

Tostrud stressed that big pike waters are not restricted to lakes. His favorite water includes the Mississippi River in particular from the Lacrosse area south to Genoa and the Black River north to Alma. He mentioned Goose Island river backwaters for a real chance to catch a 20 pound fish in three feet of water, French Island backwater bordered by the Mississippi River to the west and the Black to the east, Lake Onalaska and the bay at Dresbach Dam on the Minnesota side of the Mississippi River.

"That's boundary water" he said. "You can fish it with a Wisconsin fishing license."

Tostrud also guides and targets the shipping channels on Lake Michigan at Sturgeon Bay, Madeline and a number of "sleeper lakes" near Woodruff, Big Green, Beulah and the Madison Chain. But, just knowing the names and locations of the lakes isn't good enough. You also have to know the lakes, period.

"You have to know where those big fish winter," he said. "If you really want

to target big fish, you have to spend time getting to know the fishery."

Often, knowing where the big fish are in winter means Tostrud will be setting up on a weedbed with deep water close by. Prior to DNR restrictions to prevent the spread of VHS (Viral Hemorrhagic Septicemia) disease, Tostrud traveled to Michigan to purchase a season's worth of frozen dead smelt for use as bait. Dead smelt remain legal, he said, but more problematic for the Wisconsin angler due to state restrictions.

"We used to go to Michigan, hand-pick the smelt, thaw the bait in the morning on the day of a trip, and out fished a heck of a lot of people using shiners," Tostrud said. "Now we use a large roach; a broad bodied shiner minnow. We also really like jigging for big pike with a spoon with a lot of flash dressed with the pieces of fathead or sucker for smell or a jigging rapala."

Tostrud also stressed that late season ice, meaning February and sometimes early March depending on season closure, is his favorite time to fish for trophy pike. That means, he said, paying special attention to safety concerns because of the potential for deteriorating ice.

"Really big fish can be active in at late ice especially with changing weather conditions," he said. "Most big fish are caught right before the end of the gamefish season. That means it's a very unsafe time to be on the ice. The ice can be honey-combing. I highly recommend being prepared with safety gear. I bring picks, life jackets and ropes."

We didn't have that concern on Moose Lake Friday. We stood comfort-



Wisconsin guide and wildlife artist Jim Tostrud fishes for trophy pike throughout the state and offers readers a few tips on what to look for. Tostrud caught and released this 48 inch pike through the February ice of Lake Geneva six years ago. (Jim Tostrud Guide Service)


ably on 12 inches of ice. That is, if you call temperatures that stole the "hot" from a cup of coffee in about 30 seconds, "comfortable". One last flag for the day left us feeling warm all over.

After an extremely long run and an extremely long fight, Heitman got his first glimpse of the pike through his augured window. "Oh yea...that's a very nice fish," he said. "Ty...help me get this one on the ice."

Two minutes later, a very fat fish estimated at 34 inches was posing for photos with Scott and Ty. And I was one happy reporter.

"Now, I said....we have a story."

Connect with Jim Tostrud's guide service at www.wildlifevisions.net.

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Tyler Kinzinger and Scott Heitman with a fat Moose Lake pike caught and released in the bitter cold of January 8 on a shiner set near the bottom in eight feet of water. (Ellis)