

On Wisconsin Outdoors

With the Dick Ellis Experts

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Reliably Unreliable

Spring hunting and fishing always uncertain

By Dick Ellis

One of the most predictable characteristics of March Madness, a looming April and the first signs of spring is just how unpredictable it can be. Don't plan on much. Things change on a dime. Fish bite...unless they don't. The snows are gone forever...until the next whiteout. Wisconsin and Marquette are Sweet 16-bound most certainly...next year.

Personally in 2009, March Madness included looking forward to a search for shed antlers on the near horizon despite still significant snows in southeast Wisconsin and then watching a very big buck with full headgear run right by my home office window in suburban Wisconsin. I was able to run through the house while snapping the telephoto lens on and clicked off two shots of the big boy for your editor. "Hey," I yelled. "It's March! You know the rules...you're supposed to drop those antlers for me!"

No answer.

March Madness, 2009 meant having my spies call me to report the steelhead were already running in southeast Wisconsin streams. Seven rainbows were taken March 18 in the shallow rapids of the Root River where just weeks ago we did a story on Seeforellen Brown Trout fishing through the ice. But by Saturday, no fish would show their face for the camera.

Call it the reporter's curse, and add southeast Wisconsin shore fishing expert Dave Sura to the list of people who will stop inviting me.

Wisconsin Guide and wildlife artist Jim Tostrud called two weeks ago to let me know, "If you're interested" that the crappie fishing was really hot on Lake Geneva. A handful of photos came over the computer, which your editor also now has, as proof that Jim was into very, big, cooperative crappies, and lots of them.

Was I interested? Was I interested? "What time do you want me there, Jimmy, boy?" I say over the pounding keyboard as I hugged Jim via the computer. "Oh, we can't go now," he responds." All that rain we had over these last few days took the ice away. Now it's half open and half ice."

That's not Madness. That's cruel.

Despite her...excuse me...its erratic behavior, spring is here or coming fast. And that means you can at least prepare for those activities that reinforce the whole wonderful idea that Old Man Winter is dead. Thanks for visiting sir, we like you...but you've overstayed your welcome.

In most geographic regions of Wisconsin, late March and April is prime time for finding antlers. Although recent years have taken a toll on the state deer herd, an aver-

age recently of 150,000 to 200,000 animals in Wisconsin's statewide post-hunting season herd of whitetail deer have been antlered bucks, according to my file notes. 300,000 to 400,000 antlers then are discarded in the New Year and become potential targets of shed hunters.

In a spring hunt, all racks are trophies. Cover a lot of ground and train yourself not to look for the whole antler, but, for example, just a tine sticking out of the ground. Binoculars let you check things out from a distance without wasting time.



Spring weather means hardwater one day and open water soon after. Jim Tostrud caught these crappies in March before several days of heavy rains opened Lake Geneva. Spawning crappies will soon be waiting for Wisconsin anglers north and south. (Tostrud)

In the southern Wisconsin especially, tall grasses of conservation reserve program (CRP) acreage offer high odds for finding antlers. If you can locate these



Preparing to shed hunt, Ellis shot this photo from his back door the final days of February and saw the buck again in March with its antlers still on in suburban southeast Wisconsin. Note the house in the background. (Ellis)



Competition can be fierce but the payoff big for trophy walleyes on the Fox and other Wisconsin Rivers during the spring spawning runs. (Ellis)

crops, spend ample time on south facing slopes of CRP above food sources. Big bucks, according to the experts that I have joined over years of antler hunting, like to sun themselves in that grassy cover with good visibility close to food.

In far northern Wisconsin, by early April at least southern facing ridges are often without snow so start there. If the previous fall's acorn crop was good, spend time hunting sheds on the oak ridges where the deer in high numbers were last autumn. In a post-year of poor acorn mast crop production, look where the deer might have yarded up like cedar swamps. Don't forget young aspen thickets.

Steelheaders can target either the famous Brule River and tributaries for naturally reproducing rainbows off of Lake Superior or choose one of scores of rivers feeding Lake Michigan. Those fish need a boost in reproducing from state fisheries biologists and hatcheries that take the place of Mother Nature. The 2009 Bois Brule opener is Saturday, March

28. For information on fishing opportunities and daily conditions contact Northwest Outlet in Superior at 1-715-392-9838. Steelheading is open on the Lake Michigan tributaries as soon as the fish cooperate. For updates, contact DNR stations from Green Bay to Kenosha, nearest the tributary you plan to target.

Anglers can begin to think about targeting panfish returning again with ice-out to stage in the shallows for spawn. Because timing is everything, remember some of the basics when targeting crappies and bluegills. As the temperatures of lakes and rivers warm to 50 degrees or more, that staging begins.

Crappies arrive first usually in late March or early April in southern Wisconsin followed closely by gills. Because water temperature is the trigger, this can be late as opening day in the far north. As temperatures begin to warm toward 60, panfish begin making nests until water temperature reach the upper 60s and they

begin to spawn. Fish should remain in the shallows for several weeks and good fishing right with it.

River angling for spawning walleyes is already underway. Contact regional baitshops and DNR stations for information on the Mississippi, Rock, Fox, Wolf, Wisconsin and other streams and rivers for specific information. Again, conditions fluctuate widely based on Wisconsin geography and weather conditions. Some walleye addicts follow the spawn north. But, now is the time for landing trophy fish on waterways like the Fox at Depere. Don't miss it.

Turkeys are getting frisky as the spring mating season and six split Wisconsin hunting seasons are set to begin in mid April. 2009 marks the third year when Wisconsin youths age 12-15 will be able to participate in the Youth Turkey Hunt April 11 and 12. The youth hunt is held the weekend prior to opening of the regular spring turkey season and before

other hunters are in the field, reducing competition for a young hunter and an experienced mentor.

For more information, contact the DNR and Scott Hull at 608-267-7861 or Sharon Fandel at 608-261-8458.

Learn to Hunt Turkey Programs for hunters with less than two years experience are also available through the DNR and local conservation clubs throughout Wisconsin. Hunters are given classroom instruction on technique, safety and equipment prior to being paired one-on-one with a qualified Hunter Education Instructor of hunting mentor for an actual hunt.

For more information, contact Ben Mott at 608-444-1244 or Todd Schaller at 608-267-2774.

So those are a few activities you can look forward to in the coming weeks. Take it to the bank. Or were you looking for something a bit more reliable?

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