

Rising Up in Marinette County *No topping bluegill surface action*

By Dick Ellis



The heavy green flyline looped back before carrying Scott Heitman's home-tied cargo imitating the Lost Lake hatch forward again to lie gently on the water. A few seconds later, another bluegill rose among its band of brothers rising here and there to the tiny dark flies scattered over the surface and met a sharp reminder that even panfish best watch what they choose for dinner. Heitman wrestled the gill in, returned the fish to grow up a bit, and reaffirmed

what we had already discussed on the three hour ride from the Milwaukee burbs to Marinette County.

"We're early," Heitman said. "When the gills spawn on these lakes up here it's a riot. The fish are big and they're really aggressive. In a couple weeks it's going to be a lot of fun, especially catching them on a flyrod."

The early bird may get the worm. But, you can't hurry warming water temperature as the single most important factor when targeting

spawning bluegills. No doubt about it, north and south in Wisconsin these 15,000 lakes are Mother Nature's kitchens. We have to wait until she warms the water to 'just right' to make those big, hard fighting, great tasting gills vulnerable.

It's worth the wait. When Heitman and I headed northeast Wednesday to his cabin near Crivitz in Marinette County, we knew we were early for gills. Especially

when five inches of heavy, wet snow blanketed the area May 10th, delaying Mother's plans. You've heard the old saying; April showers bring May...blizzards. But with flyrods packed, we also knew that we would catch gills and maybe a bonus bass or two and that this story would serve as a reminder to you, the reader, that now is the time to plan for your own trip, basically anywhere in Wisconsin. With fast action a



Although targeting bluegills with tiny flies matching the current hatch, Scott Heitman finds a willing largemouth bass on Lost Lake in Marinette County. Spawning bluegill action in the weeks ahead will provide fast action with flyrods or light gear, and great eating.

promise when water does heat up, don't forget the kids. Spawning, cooperative gills and warm weather are the two most important ingredients to get kids hooked on fishing for life.

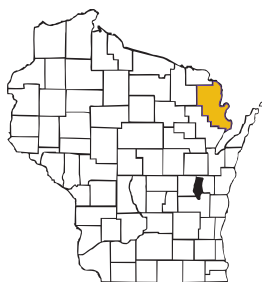
Gills also make some of us, like Heitman and me, kids all over again. Or, like Jamie Darge, the Director of Tourism for Marinette County who paid us a visit as we worked tiny, spring-fed Lost Lake with surface poppers and various flies until we finally matched the hatch that were making the feisty gills rise frequently to ripple the surface and fill their bellies.

"I think the spawn is late this year because of the cold weather and five inches of snow we got up here last Friday," Darge said. "My husband (Dave) and I are usually catching gills along the shoreline on these lakes the second or third week of May. Usually, we're using ice fishing jigs; small black and white or dull-colored jigs that look like fly larvae or bugs. We'll cut open the stomach of a fish or two, see what they're eating and try to match the hatch."

We could relate. High winds riled little Lost Lake as I walked the shoreline in waders to find calm waters on the up-wind side, and Heitman cut to the chase in his canoe. When we met, calm surface water protected by the tall, majestic pines of the northland was being pocketed by feeding fish. Closer observation verified that they were indeed gills, but our mini-arsenal of poppers and flies didn't initially trip the trigger. Even closer observation found that tiny, dark-colored winged flies scattered the surface. We too, tried to match the meal.

Heitman is a self-taught flyfishing enthusiast, right down to avidly reading to learn what trout hit where in Wisconsin and how to tie what to catch them. We benefitted this week because Scott had enough flies of various size and

color in his box already tied in his basement



that would enable us to closely mimic what we were watching on the water. "I'll bet you," I said before the dark fly in the palm of his hand ever hit the water, "that you will catch a gill within one minute."

I was wrong. He caught a nice largemouth bass that put up quite a fight on a light flyrod. The gills would soon follow. But the big gills, those protective bulls guarding nests crafted carefully to rear a new year class, will be coming a bit further down the line. "There are some great lakes for big bluegills up here," Heitman said. "And it is going to be worth it when they begin to spawn to make the trip again."

According to several internet sites found by googling "Spawning Bluegills", the feisty gill will begin to spawn in the spring and early summer as water temperatures approach about 70 degrees, with peak spawning activity in May and June. "In areas that are free from overcrowding, some fish will spawn again during the latter part of the season," according to one site. "Because of this long spawning season and multi-spawn ability, bluegills have outstanding reproductive potential. In fact, they often spawn too successfully, which tends to produce overpopulation and stunted growth."

Males create nests in gravel or hard bottoms found in water one to three feet deep. Although northern Wisconsin lakes will be behind on the calendar with gills spawning later, some southern lakes, like Geneva, will also see late spawning gills in much deeper water, due to the vastness and depth of the lake and colder temperatures. Like so many angling activities in Wisconsin, it all depends...on geography, temperature, and individual characteristics.

Gills often create spawning colonies with 50 or more nests. Heitman and I, in fact, were working a shallow bedding areas clearly made last year and unattended. Males make the initial spawning



Although mainly feeding on tiny insects on the surface, occasionally bluegills like this one fell to much larger poppers. Using flyrods can provide unsurpassed action and fun in the weeks ahead as gills move to spawning beds

action, creating the nests and later protecting the hatch from predators after the females have moved in and dropped up to 40,000 or more eggs.

It's those vulnerable big bulls quick to hit an intruding lure or fly that will be well worth your time on the water. They're also unbeatable in the frying pan. It's another nice thing about Wisconsin. If you live here, you're close...really close...to good gill water. Get there.

"Marinette County has 444 inland lakes consisting of 12,371 acres of water," Jamie Darge said. "We have 304 rivers and streams for trout, and the Bay of Green Bay for those anglers that like the really big fish."

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For more information, connect with Marinette County Tourism at www.therealnorth.com or 800.236.6681.