

On Wisconsin Outdoors

With the Dick Ellis Experts

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Silver is Gold

By Dick Ellis

Kristine James let the jig and waxworm tumble down through the gin-clear water of Waushara County's Big Silver Lake to call out the gills and crappies hiding somewhere in the jungle below. The shack was warm and dark and the augured hole had for hours provided this fifty-something woman with a passion for the outdoors an illuminated window into a whole new world. The comfort of the shack perhaps was just a good place to relive again the comfort of old memories.

"I just love this," she said to a reporter who had intruded on her solitude in the shanty. "The day school was out in



Superb wildlife cook Kristine James returns to her childhood roots on Big Silver Lake in Waushara County near Wautoma for a day of bluegill and crappie fishing. Kristine thought this baby pannie deserved a return to the water

Mequon, Kurt and I and Mom would be up the next day to our cabin. We wouldn't go back again until the day before school started. Dad would join us on Friday nights and usually leave for home early Monday. We'd come back up again on weekends throughout the year. My closest friends were from Wautoma."

Just outside the shack, an abstract figure seen through the moisture of melting snow on the wall window hunkered over a tip-up. Kristine is not the only one who likes to come "home" again. Kurt Haenisch, her younger brother who now resides on North Lake in Delafield west of Milwaukee, is playing a cat and mouse game with a finicky northern pike apparently with an acquired "talent" for stealing the minnow but leaving the hook.

"I grew up here, since I was knee high to a grasshopper," Haenisch said, rearming the tip-up for round three with the thief. "I'd fish off the pier every day and go out with Grandpa in the boat at 6:30 and be back in by 9:00 with 40 or 50 good hand-size bluegills. We used little black tear-drop jigs. When we'd get in, grandma and Kristine and mom would help us clean the fish. I did grow up here. I'd be in the Waushara Argus at least twice a year with a big bass I'd caught. We'd use an old aqua-not that would pump air into a facemask so you could swim underwater like scuba diving for up to 20 feet or so. It's all memories. I like to come back. Last summer I pulled my boat back and fished with friends."

Inside again, a few pannies had fallen



John Duffus of Red Granite takes a nice largemouth bass while jigging on Big Silver Lake in Waushara County with his sister, Jessica and friend Wayne Dutkiewicz. (Ellis)

to the jigging motion of Kristine James; gourmet wildlife cook and Wautoma-based realtor with First Webber, but action has grinded to a halt. James then whispers with a sense of urgency that her guest must also use the twin porthole in the ice, and smiles as a large pike glides through the weeds directly below.

"Well no wonder I'm not getting any," she says with a smile. "We've got a



Fishing: it's a family and friend thing. Robert Helbing of Wautoma, with 8-year olds Miles Helbing and friend Ethan Richards find reason to smile just after losing a northern pike on Big Silver Lake. Five-year old Julian Helbing found reason for a nap in the truck just before the action. (Ellis)



Bob Sittig takes another nice crappie while jigging Big Silver Lake with his wife, Lu. (Ellis)

predator fish right here.”

“Here, there’s so much more too. Big Silver is a 350 acre lake offering good crappie and largemouth fishing. As morning grows older and afternoon looms, the party grows larger. Dogs run, footballs are thrown, tip-up flags spring, hopeful anglers run, jig-men take their bucket seats, grills are started and the mouth-watering smells of surf and turf drifts over the hardwater. There are 15,000 such lakes across Wisconsin with this same party. And each of these lakes are claimed as their very own by real people with real stories, going home again to relive memories on another Saturday.

Bob Sittig lets a previous day’s catch of crappies and gills sizzle in a shanty-sheltered frying pan as a lunch hor des hourves for all to share. He relates that he has been enjoying Silver since his days in diapers. His grandparents owned a lake home here, and then his parents. Most recently, Sittig and his wife Luann, a Montello native working her own augured hole with a jigging rod, have taken over. He recently retired as an employer of Twin Disc in Racine, where Lu and Bob also raised five children. Their lake home is now beautifully remodeled and rented on a weekly basis in the spring through fall

months when the Sittigs move northwest to work at Lake Chippewa Campground near Hayward.

“Silver is gin clear, very weedy, 10 feet deep here in the bay and up to 54 feet deep on the main lake,” he said. “It’s a good largemouth and spring crappie lake and there are lots of northern pike but the problem is lots of them are small. Hopefully it’s just a good year class and sometime down the line the size is going to be better again.”

Over here on Silver, John Duffus of Red Granite pulls in a beautiful 18-inch largemouth bass jigging under the watchful eye of his sister, Jessica, of Wautoma. Over there, Wayne Dutkiewicz, or “Dutch”, pulls up another crappie before starting his own shore lunch. And over there, Robert Helbing insures an encounter with Murphy’s Law when he leaves the ice so that five year old daughter, Julian, can use the Sittig bathroom. The moment he’s gone, the flag flies and a pike is lost, despite a valiant effort by 8-year old friends Miles Helbing and Ethan Richards to wrestle the fish to the surface, giving up a fine football game on the ice to answer the ageless call of a sprung flag.

The day concludes with an extraordinary lunch created by Kristine

James and served in the Sittig’s kitchen. Hot chili with venison chunks in smoky tomato sauce, onions, mushrooms, hot bread and Grandma’s old fashion apple bread pudding with vanilla ice cream sends the reporter home from Big Silver Lake an estimated 10 pounds heavier than arrival. It’s a dirty job but it needs to be done.

In reality, places like Wisconsin’s Silver Lake, or 15,000 others just like it, are often “experienced” by the user, and passed on from generation to generation. Robert Helbing, whose son Miles caught his first ice walleye, a Long Lake brute at age four without assistance, summarizes any day on the Waushara County water. “Miles had stepped in an augured hole and was drying off in the truck when the fish hit,” Robert said. “It was 28 inches and Miles did it all. From that time on he’s been mesmerized with fishing. Waushara County has over 100 lakes and 1500 miles of streams. We’re just spoiled.”

For more information on weekly vacation rental opportunities at Bob and Luann Sittig’s Sportsman’s Sunset call 262-498-7048 or 262-498-7991.

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