

On Wisconsin Outdoors

With the Dick Ellis Experts

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Spring Ahead

Bluegill action eases late winter blues

By Dick Ellis

There's more than just the promise of fish that pull these ice anglers in to the North Flowage of the Fort McCoy Military Installation in Monroe County. Oh, the gills are here, in size and abundance, although Sparta locals Tony Polkoski and JP Schaller seemed far less ecstatic with the average gill waist-line than was this visiting reporter.

Getting back in to the North Flowage where we would eventually fish was an approximate 40 mile round trip, with the twists and turns over and around bluffs offering sheer beauty and many opportunities to view wildlife. Once on the ice, despite the quiet, the beauty of the timber-riddled hardwater, and good good fishing dead ahead, a total of one other angler silhouetted in the distance comprised all of the competition. We had found it all in western Wisconsin; beauty, isolation....and hungry gills.

I had driven to Fort McCoy in Monroe County and met long time friend, Schaller of Sparta, his seven year old daughter, Madeline, and JP's "longer-time" buddy and fishing partner, Tony Polkoski. As always, JP doesn't need an excuse to spend time with the kids. When Madeline wanted to fish, she didn't have to ask twice.



A lone ice angler, the only competition on the North Flowage, continues to work for bluegills as the sun sets over Fort McCoy. (Ellis)

"Maddy" promised to teach us to catch bluegills, but Polkoski brought all the equipment anyway, just in case, including a vexilar that would serve the anglers well in tripping the trigger on finicky fish. My friends had already purchased \$11.00 season passes to fish Fort McCoy. Although a daily fishing license cost a reasonable \$6.00, and the installation sells 2,600 licenses annually, I would be restricted to camera duty.

According to Army Fisheries Biologist John Noble, Fort McCoy is unique and diverse. It is a military installation that provides high quality

military training for our troops, but it's also a great opportunity to purchase a fishing license for \$11.00 or less and step into a real pioneering experience which includes an abundance of wildlife. In my return trip to the Fort after a 2007 summer introduction to fish a 45-acre pothole in 2007, we encountered a number of deer and turkeys. Among many other unique animals, birds and reptiles, the installation is home to several endangered species.

Twelve lakes or impoundments can be found on Fort McCoy, Noble said, 13 if the West Silver Wetland is



After watching daughter Madeline pull up a few cooperative bluegills on the North Flowage on Fort McCoy, J.P. Schaller finds a nice one for himself. (Ellis)

included. The installation lies in the midst of three major river basins; Lacrosse, Bad Axe/Black River and the Wisconsin, geographically referred to as the "Driftless Area" left untouched or disturbed by the most recent glacier.

The lakes, ranging in depth and size from six feet to 21 feet and from 3.1 acres to 211 acres, offer bluegill, largemouth bass, yellow perch, black crappie, channel cats, walleye and bullhead. Rainbow and brook trout are also stocked in some of the impoundments do not reproduce, he said, but are the target of choice for many visitors. Naturally reproducing trout in Class 1 streams on the installation offer a wonderful fishing option that is grossly under utilized. Like thousands of other anglers



Tony Polkoski of Sparta likes the North Flowage on Fort McCoy as an action lake. He takes his grand kids because catching a lot of fish is close to guaranteed. (Ellis)

across Wisconsin on a late winter weekend afternoon, our target on Fort McCoy was simply bluegills. Not only is the gill unsurpassed in the frying pan, when the fish cooperate the action can entertain children of all ages for hours. I tried ripping the rod out of Madeline's hands during one flurry but to no avail.

"I enjoy taking my own grandkids out here in the summer or winter," said Polkoski. "We catch a lot of fish and the size has really improved. That might be due to special regulations on bass. There are no motors allowed so we pretend the motor went dead; I just sit back and watch the grandkids row. What's different with the North Flowage than most of the other lakes is that we can use live bait. It's a heck of fishery in the spring for crappies and when the summer bluegill are on their bed it's another really good time." Although the North Flowage has a 12 foot maximum, we set up over seven feet of water. Polkoski often finds bigger gills in deeper water and uses the vexilar to find them.

All three anglers were set up with 2 pound test line and a Flirtie Girtie ice fishing jig tipped with a wax worm.

JP taught his daughter that the real trick was to slowly drop the jig and then to let the fish rise to the meal. Maddy was on it in a hurry and the fish were in trouble. After 30 minutes of an occasional scrawny gill, some moving and experimenting, the bigger fish in the eight inch range started to show themselves with consistency. By the time our two hours on the ice was gone and the sun slipping behind the pines in the west told us it was Fort McCoy's mandatory time to pack up, two fishermen and a little lady had caught

more than their share of fish.

"Early in the year there is some pressure out here, maybe a dozen people at the most but it's a big area and there is no crowding," Polkoski said. "And the people are friendly. It's quiet and beautiful and it's a nice place to be with the kids or alone to kick back and relax." "Well, what did you think of that?" JP asked Maddy as they pulled the sled toward an orange sky and a waiting truck. "We kept 11 big fish," she replied. "That's an average of three each with a remainder of two."

Actually, I've seen JP Schaller eat. When that fish fry was complete, there wasn't going to be a remainder of anything. Except another great memory or two. *Wo*

Fort McCoy fishing licenses are now available through the state of Wisconsin wherever resident fishing licenses are sold.

The Fort Fisheries Program

Fishing and hunting approvals require recreational users to have a valid Wisconsin hunting or fishing license and required stamps. Fishing permit revenue is used to purchase rainbow trout stocked in cooperation with the US Fish & Wildlife Service. 15,000 rainbows averaging 10 inches in length are stocked in six lakes, generating about \$27,000 in revenue annually.

In addition to fish stocking, Noble said funds are used to enhance lake and stream habitats. The Fort Fisheries Program is involved with surface water quality monitoring as well as stream bio-monitoring to assure the army's stewardship to the natural resource. Proactive management of high quality resources to support military training undoubtedly results in high quality recreational angling opportunities. In addition to weaponry training, troops conduct a variety of water training like water purification or bridging, rafting or even 'swimming' APC (personnel carriers).

A unique feature of Fort McCoy, he said, is that the 60,000 acre military installation is located between two "ecotones", the northern coniferous forest and the southern deciduous forest, and area known as the Curtis Tension Zone. This uniquely provides a highly diverse flora and fauna complex managed as a (oak/jackpine) savanna or barrens plant community well noted for wild lupine.

Wild lupine, he said, is the host plant for the endangered Karner Blue butterfly found on McCoy. The northern pinery was heavily harvested with the streams becoming home to sawmills and gristmills long before acquisition as a military property. Today, those waterways are utilized both in military training and by the Wisconsin angler.

"For the most part, we do follow Wisconsin regulations except where we have noted in our own regulations," Noble said. "Some are specific to avoid conflict with military training like the Black Out Drive restrictions or training area closures. During the summer it's usually specific to water to respect military training and/or safety."

For more information on hunting, fishing, camping and other recreational opportunities on Fort McCoy contact www.mccoy.army.mil. Seek out Recreational Opportunities, Hunting and Fishing. Or call 608-388-3337.



Madeline Schaller shows the big boys how it's done on the North Flowage of Fort McCoy. (Ellis)