

The Hunt for Winnebago Walleye

Search, tactics change produce good fishing

By Dick Ellis

The air over Lake Winnebago was stifling with temperatures touching the mid-90s, but the fishing over the first two hours of our late June walleye hunt wasn't nearly as red-hot as 18-year old captain Justin Heider had hoped it would be. Two hits on an arsenal of rapalas, shad raps, reef runners and wally divers being trolled under planer boards had given us a small walleye and a beautiful 16-inch sauger; more evidence that spawning habitat work and protective regulations designed to bring back the sauger from crisis status just a few years ago are working.

At 137,708 acres packed into a 10 mile wide by 30 mile long pond, Wisconsin's largest inland lake could be an intimidating piece of water for a new skipper with a reporter looking over his shoulder. Winnebago is a remnant of Glacial Lake Oshkosh formed approximately 12,000 years ago. Ice blocked water from entering Lake Michigan at Green Bay, and with no outlet the glacial lake "ponded". The lake has 88 miles of shoreline, an average depth of 15.5 feet and a depth maximum of 21 feet.

Heider though, is up to the challenge of what could be described as a dessert of water with

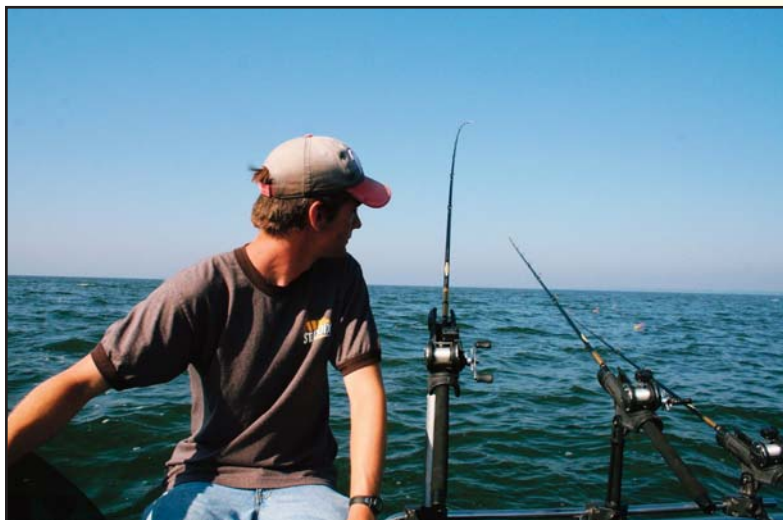


Eighteen year old Captain Justin Heider found hot walleye action on crawler harnesses after trial and error on different presentations over different areas of Lake Winnebago in mid-90 degree temperatures in late June

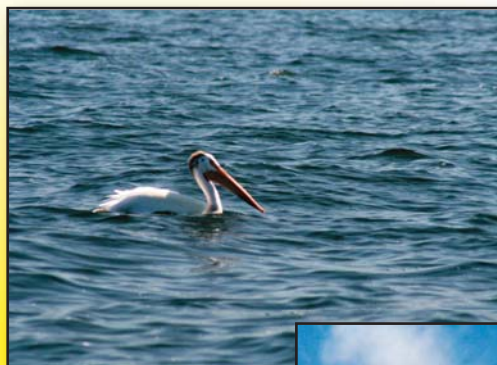
comparatively little structural changes to clue where to search for an oasis of fish. Tens of thousands of acres on Winnebago known as the mud flats never sees a depth change of more than two feet. After launch at Neenah, we crawled on in his 19-foot Ranger, the hum of the kicker motor helping us prowl the flats for fish while the Merc 175 remained on hold in the event we would need to rocket over this huge water to search new areas, or try new tactics.

"If we catch one walleye, and don't catch another within minutes I'll turn around and will almost guarantee you that we will find more fish at the same way point (on the GPS coordinates)," Heider said. "Over time, there are subtle patterns that tend to hold fish. It can be something minute holding them, like a small change in the bottom." Heider had been on fish the whole previous week near Oshkosh with walleyes averaging 18 inches and four fish over the 24 mark. The day before our mid-day trip, though, southern Winnebago went dry and Heider traveled to northern water to put clients on 20 fish with a large walleye of 26 inches.

As we search the flats off of Neenah in the heat, we talk quietly



Captain Justin Heider checks the planer boards over his shoulder offering crankbaits to Lake Winnebago walleyes. After sporadic action on walleye and sauger, a switch to crawler harnesses on the big lake produced excellent action.



The American White Pelican today is a common sight for anglers and other recreational boating enthusiasts on lake Winnebago. As adults they can have a wing span of up to 10 feet.



Chase Eberly found a flurry of good walleye action on the River off of Lake Winnebago with seven fish to 20 inches taken in mid-90 degree temperatures. When the walleye bite turned off, small smallmouth bass like this one turned on.

and I learn more about the youngest guide I have ever been with. Invitations most often come to this column from seasoned Wisconsin guides sometimes with decades of experience. Heider is just graduated from Hortonville High School and a newly certified Great Lakes captain. He had no real fishing mentor among family or close friends to teach him; just an inborn love for fishing, a de-

sire to learn more, and parents willing to eventually fund up front the boat and equipment necessary to properly host clients.

"I took boater safety when I was 12 and fished a lot of the tiny local lakes," he said. "I cashed my first fishing check at 16 for winning a local tournament. But learning has been a lot of trial and error on Winnebago. No one in the family really fished seriously. I did a lot of reading and talking to the local fishermen. At 17, I decided I wanted to be a guide but it took a year to get set up. My dad bought the boat for me and I've been paying him back."

Setting modest goals in his first year of business, Heider is ahead of the plan. He hoped for a minimum of six client bookings in 2009. He has 15 on the books with 10 more scheduled. With time, his rookie nerves have been tempered by consistent success.

"I was pretty nervous the first couple of times," he said. "Most of the time, when we find the fish we find schools of fish. Most of the time, we'll catch a limit or close to it. My worst day out we still caught four walleyes."

We work the crankbaits and

the mudflats with modest success. If one color or style of bait or a certain depth under his boards proves consistently effective, the guide will change presentations to offer more of the same. The week before, fish were most active in 10 foot depths. Consistently, the bigger walleyes have fallen to the biggest bait, Reef Runners.

Heider's plan is to work the way points where he found a consistent bite on the flats the day before. If that fails, he will first turn his attention north, knowing that a consistent wind straight out of the south over several days has likely pushed baitfish and following predators north. His plan to also change to crawler harnesses is put on temporary hold when we move to join 17 year old friend Chase Eberly, who has found a surprisingly good summer walleye bite on jigs and minnows in the Fox River.

With the Wolf, the Fox is one of two major Lake Winnebago tributaries. We pick up the equally personable Eberly, but the bite has slowed with the exception of hungry smallmouth. The guide turns his attention back to Winnebago and a crawler harness presenta-

tion, and finds what he hopes for. Three walleyes between 16 and 20 inches are caught in 20 minutes. Another four fish are lost. The book closes on another story. The chapters, though, are just beginning for a young Wisconsin guide from Hortonville.

"I'm going to go to technical college, get a regular job and hopefully go fulltime as a guide within 10 years," Heider said. "If you're personal with the clients, treat them right and catch a few fish they're happy. Almost all of my spare time is spent on the water trying stuff I normally wouldn't try with clients. I try to get out there and set way points so I can get them on fish. It can be tough sometimes to find the right lure and the right depth."

"But I never did a lot of hanging out or partying. I don't have time for that stuff. Even all through high school, it's been all fishing."

To contact Justin Heider and Walleye Hunter Guide Service, call 1-920-359-1158 or connect with www.thewalleyehunter.com or wolfangler@hotmail.com. *OWO*