

Dakota

C O U N T R Y

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ICE FISHING TIPS

Family Fishing Time in the heart of

Minnesota

A chance for the gang to expand their horizons, do some bonding and enjoy some great fishing amidst beautiful surroundings and good people.

by Bill Mitzel



It was a long time ago that **Dan Nelson** and his family introduced me and my family to the lakes of Minnesota, resort style. That was nearly 30 years back and we instantly fell in love with the week-long, summer ritual. For a while there, until kids grew older, we joined families on this trip every summer, along the way introducing other friends to the marvelous vacation.

Early on, I asked, "With all the great fishing we have in North Dakota, why would I want to go to Minnesota?" The question changed after only one trip to, "Why would we *not* want to go to Minnesota

each summer?"

It was great fishing, yes, but so much more. Bonding with the family, watching the kids enjoy the time of their lives, good food, good social time and freedom to do what strikes you.

In those days, we hung out at Lake Belle Taine, 10 miles west of Park Rapids, for the week. Most recently, we enjoyed our second trip to Big Timber Lodge on the famous Crow Wing chain of lakes, of which there are 13. Big Timber Lodge, owned and operated by **Preston and Penny Turner**, sits beautifully on the center of the eastern shore of the 3rd Crow

Wing lake. The lake is in the same neighborhood as before, 10 miles east of Park Rapids and south of Nevis.

We found the lodge a few years ago just thumbing

through some brochures. **Jon** had been there previously with some friends, enjoyed great largemouth bass fishing, and came home proclaiming his success. We looked it up, then booked it for a week in the summer of 2004. Last summer, during the last week in June, ten of us, ranging in age from 6 months to, well, let's just say several decades, spent the week in a large cabin, and despite some concerns as to how all of would get along for a full week in one building, we pulled it off in great fashion. Heck, there were even a couple of times the bathroom was open.

I admit to being interested, first and foremost, in the fishing. And I wasn't alone. Some of the female members of the group liked the thought of some antique shops nearby, the open spaces, the sandy beach, and also the fishing. And everyone got the chance to enjoy it.



Opposite page, Devon Butz enjoyed fishing almost 24/7, whether in the boat or on the dock of the resort. Inset, Devon casts for bass along the weedy shoreline in the resort paddleboat, while mom, Jodi, reads a book.

Left, nothing beats the beauty of the pumpkinseed, with its multi-colored body.

Top left, Damon Lacey of Minneapolis accompanied the family and enjoyed some time on the water.

Above, Jon, Devon and Bobbi Mitzel found great bass and panfishing in the creek channel between 3rd and 4th Crow Wing lakes.

With meal planning for the week, along with enough clothes and other essentials needed, we arrived on the third Saturday last June, pitched in to unload the vehicles, and it wasn't long before the fishing was tested.

Hey, it's a Tradition

Minnesota's lake country is steeped in tradition. It's beautiful terrain, as quiet and peaceful as any place on earth. Despite the influx of the Twin Cities community on weekends to some areas, they must have made 3rd Crow Wing an exception, because most of the cabin owners on the lake seemed to live there year around. Pristine water surrounded by pine trees thrives much as it did decades ago. Granted, there are cabins (homes) on this and most other Minnesota lakes, but there was plenty of room to fish, and plenty of fish to enjoy. We were never crowded.

Coming from walleye country, you might think that's the first creature we asked about. Not so. The 3rd Crow Wing is known for its great largemouth bass fishing, and there are anglers from the region who travel there specifically for bass. Six pound fish aren't rare, and 4 pounders are rather common.

Personally, I was looking forward to some good panfishing, especially on the fly rod. Since that first



There was rarely a time when someone wasn't fishing.

trip to Minnesota 30 years ago, I've always had a special fondness for pumpkinseed sunfish, mostly because they are just gorgeous fish and we don't have them in abundance in the Dakotas. But to find them in such size and quantity as we did on the 3rd Crow Wing was a real surprise. I didn't expect it.

That, along with the other variety of panfish, including crappie, bluegill and rock bass, kept us busy for hours every day. While there was an ample supply of silver-dollar sized panfish, there was also several very large fish, crappies over a pound, and several prized pumpkinseed close to or at the pound mark. I was amazed at the beauty and abundance of these gorgeous fish.

The days began with a quick trip on the lake by whomever wished to go. This was a "before breakfast" ritual that seemed to involve someone different each day. Jon was usually the guide, although caring for his and **KyLee's** son **Gavin** required some extra time in the cabin. But though he was only six months old, Gavin was introduced to the beach, open water and, of course, fishing.

The Freedom of Time

One of the great things about a week-long gathering like this is that everyone has the time and freedom to do pretty much what they want. KyLee was strapped considerably with young Gavin's needs, but with aunts, uncles, grandpas and grandmas there also, he never lacked for attention. And even though his brief life so far doesn't include

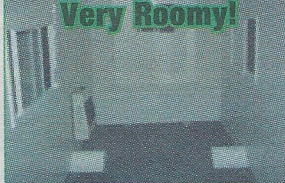
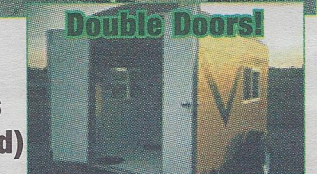
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a lot of memory, I believe this left an impression on him.

The nice thing about a situation like this is that the boat rests in the water all week, and anytime you feel a need to use it, you just jump in. No travel time, no launching or loading, no favorites. Days are long and the rig was open to everyone. It didn't sit in one place very long.

You could fish for an hour or two, slide back to the cabin to either change passengers or go on to something else.

That's not to say fishing wasn't good off the docks, either. Grandson **Devon**, then 13, enjoyed some great fishing off the docks, especially in the evening twilight when fish moved into the shallow water along the shoreline of the resort. In fact, he and mom, **Jodi**, established a custom of sliding into the paddleboat and moving along the reed-thick shoreline, Devon casting for bass, his mom reading, coaching and sharing the day with him.

And he caught bass, too. A particularly large fish pulled them deep into the cattails before getting tangled in the reeds and tearing off the line. Devon still talks about that fish. It was a great joy to watch him capture the spirit of fishing on his own time, his own way. In reality, though, fishing captured him. And it was the week-long surroundings that allowed him to do that in a way he couldn't have done at home, considering the hectic pace of everyday life.

Great Panfish Activity

Right smack in the middle of the 3rd Crow Wing

lies an island slightly submerged. It's probably a couple of acres in size, and has strands of lily pads and cattails springing up on top. It's a fish magnet and, of course, attracts angler attention, too. Drifting or moving slowly along the edge of this island, casting small eighth-ounce jigs tipped with twister tails captured all the fish we could want. It went from rock bass to crappie to bluegill to pumpkinseed to largemouth bass. I was quickly surprised to see that most of these guys were not the silver-dollar variety so commonplace off many docks in Minnesota. There were some big fish in the catch, surprises that yielded oohs and aahs when hoisted into the boat. Fishing along the edge of the island, it was as if you could catch fish almost at will. On top of the island, casting weedlines with spoons and frogs, bass ambushed the baits just

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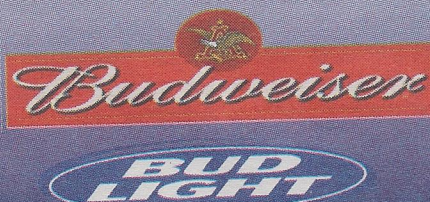
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when you least expected it.

At one point early in the week, we moved into the river between the 3rd and 4th Crow Wings, a narrow, short stretch of moving water that, at first sight, didn't appear to offer much. And old dock provided some refuge to which we tied the boat and began casting the small jigs into the weeds along the current. In one 4-hour vigil on the second day of the week, we caught nearly 100 panfish, along with a few largemouth that were worthy of the camera. The fishing amazed me.

After heading back to "camp", others from our crew were introduced to the "hotspot" and we enjoyed the solitude for a couple of days until it was discovered by more fishermen. We learned afterward that the entire creek, shallow and clear as it was, held fish, so it was rarely a matter of going without any activity.

On the morning of the third day, **Bobbi** asked if we could bass fish for awhile, so she and I jumped into the boat and headed into the northern tier of the lake where lily pads and stencil grass was abundant. We caught a few bass, nothing huge, and heard a few more sucking in frogs or

dragonflies. Still, the tranquility and sharing of the morning was a welcome blessing.

Back at the cabin by 10 a.m., others took over the boat for a couple hours of panfishing before lunch.

Who's Cooking?

Speaking of food, you were pretty much on your own, except for supper. We took turns cooking the big meal each day, but the breakfast and lunch thing was your own preference. Of course, we had enough food along for the 5th Army Division. Jodi and Bobbi saw to that. (Have you ever had potato chips for breakfast? You can do that on vacation.)

But there is always one morning during these week-long trips that has become a tradition, mostly just among the "men folk". That's the annual bacon fry. The event away from home gives us all the excuse we need to overdose on nitrates just one time of the year. Troy was in charge of the bacon, extra crisp please, while I handled the toast detail. That was it. Bacon and bread.

I won't tell you how much bacon we went through, but I will tell you we started with a bulk box of 20 pounds. Pass the

antacids please.

The suppers were a feast, most of it cooked on the grill, and ranged from pork chops to chicken to sausage to hamburger and hot dogs. After that, you fished, enjoyed the twilight wading along the shore, read a book, played board games or Texas Hold 'em. Us old guys usually retired early.

Time Well Spent

Time moves quickly when you gather the family and squeeze everyone into a cabin for a week-long visit on a Minnesota lake. It moves quickly because these are good times that everyone remembers according to their favorite activity. The fellowship, the food, the fishing, the family... all great time together that would otherwise be lost in the day-to-day busy world of people's lives back home.

Before we were half-way through the week, plans were being made for a return visit in '08. Everyone just sort of assumed it was a given, not a subject that needed any discussion. You don't come away from a place like this thinking you're probably not going to return. You will return.

Personally, the fishing was as good as any I've ever experienced. I'm an old-fashioned panfish guy at heart, and this was stuff made of virtue. I've never caught pumpkinseed sunfish so large, so beautiful with more color that you knew could exist in a wild creature. Each pumpkinseed seemed to be prettier than the last, and I was often reminded, as I stood in the boat admiring the colors on these fish, that if I didn't get it back into the water soon it was going to die.

Only God could create such a creature, I reasoned.

Now, in the dead of winter, those warm memories are being relived by all of us. The vacation will be recalled during the holiday get-togethers, with highlights of specific incidents that were especially memorable. Those memories will keep us going until summer season returns. •

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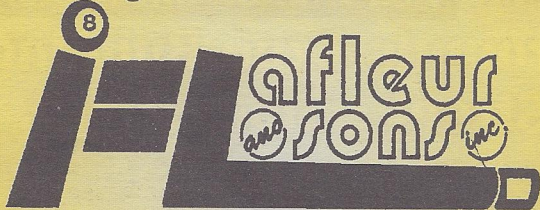
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