

OUTDOORS



LARRY PORTER/THE WORLD-HERALD

Bernie Cox, who owns North Star Air in Pickle Lake, Ontario, climbs after takeoff above fishermen Tom Brown and Jim McDonnell. Many fishermen fly into the lake.

Call of wild lures Iowan

By LARRY PORTER

WORLD-HERALD CORRESPONDENT

NORTH CARIBOU LAKE, Ont. — A pair of loons floated past the dock, and an early-morning smile spread across the face of Reno Rodeghiero as he listened to their haunting calls.

A ruffed grouse somewhere behind the cook shack began to beat its wings in a drum-like mating ritual. The wing beats were slow at first, much like the chug-chug-chug of an old steam locomotive as it starts to climb a steep grade. Then the wings beat faster and faster until they were only blurs.

A pair of Canada geese set up a clatter, honking as they took to the air.

Rodeghiero, who lives near Hudson, Iowa, drank in the sights and sounds as the 82,000-acre North Woods lake stretched, yawned and woke up. For 40 years, Rodeghiero lived the corporate life as a John Deere engineer. He never took a fishing vacation. Plans for canoeing trips were put on hold year after year. The outdoors called, but he plugged his ears.

Rodeghiero, 65, is now retired. When a group of friends invited him to join them on a fly-in fishing trip to this northern Ontario lake, he heeded the call of the wild.

"It has been 20 years since I fished," Rodeghiero said. "My fishing consisted of drowning bait. And that wasn't all bad. It was usually a family thing. I didn't catch anything, but the tensions from life seemed to melt away. But if you're not catching anything, it's really hard to get enthused about fishing."

Rodeghiero figured even he would be able to catch a few fish during his week-long stay on North Caribou. But the opportunity to catch fish wasn't why he accepted the invitation.

"This was a great opportunity for an adventure," Rodeghiero said. "I finally realized that if I don't start doing these things now, I never will do them. When you're 20, you're going to live forever. You don't have to do these things yet. But eventually you realize that if you're going to experience these things, you'd better get on the stick and get going."

Rodeghiero teamed with Al Schneider of Hudson, an experienced angler who is also a retired John Deere engineer. Schneider ran the boat and taught Rodeghiero how to fish. But the rookie angler had a rocky start.

"The first northern pike Al caught weighed about 14 pounds," Rodeghiero said. "I netted it and brought it into the boat. It started flopping around, and Al told me to grab it. I looked down at that fish, saw that mouth and those teeth and said, 'There is no way I'm grabbing that thing.' That was the honest truth. It's funny now, but at the time I was embarrassed. I wouldn't grab that fish for anything."

North Woods adventure

Outfitter Rob Brodhagen lives in Dryden, Ontario, and may be contacted by calling 807-937-6533 or by e-mail at robs@drytel.net.

North Caribou Lake is 100 miles north of the small town of Pickle Lake in northern Ontario. North Caribou can be reached only by float plane.

It didn't take long for Rodeghiero to lose his fear of handling big northerns. He even caught a 41-incher, which likely was a 20-pounder. But the walleye?

"Those darn walleye keep flaring out and want to jab you," he said. "I think the walleye are more fun to catch than northerns. They're beautiful. You can see them coming up in that clear water. Their mouths are wide open, their fins are out, their gills are flared. They're just monster looking things. I got over my fear of northerns that first day, but I still fear walleye."

Most anglers say that North Caribou is the best walleye lake they have ever fished. The average walleye is 21 inches long. Although it is unusual to catch walleye longer than 26 inches, the largest I caught measured 28 3/4 inches.

"It's the best walleye lake we've ever seen," said outfitter Rob Brodhagen of Dryden, who has been operating fishing camps throughout Ontario for 35 years.

Tom Brown of Shoreview, Minn., and Jim McDonnell of Royal, Iowa, accompanied me. We used jigs tipped with Berkley Gulp and PowerBait to catch our walleye.

But we didn't have tunnel vision. The walleye were plentiful and fun to catch, but the hope of catching a lunker northern often pried us off our walleye spots. McDonnell, who celebrated his 70th birthday during the trip, celebrated by catching five northerns that were longer than the magical 40-inch mark.

McDonnell's largest, which was just over 42 inches, came on a quarter-ounce jig and a 3-inch black Gulp grub in 15 feet of water while he was fishing for walleye. The other four were caught in shallow water on a 3-inch Northland Forage gold spoon.

The fish cooperated even though it snowed portions of three days and the temperature one morning dipped into the teens.

"Why didn't I start doing these adventures earlier?" Rodeghiero said. "That really started to hit home. I would have really had a great time if my son had been up here with me. I have been backpacking with my son before, but he really would have enjoyed this."

"This is a doorway to other adventures. It was a wakeup call telling me to get these adventures in while I'm still physically able to do it. I've got to make up for lost time because I didn't do these things earlier in life."



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Jim McDonnell of Royal, Iowa, holds a 41-inch northern pike, one of five trophy fish over 40 inches he caught during the trip.



Reno Rodeghiero of Hudson, Iowa, enjoys his first Canada fishing trip at age 65. At left, a black bear sits in the grass near a highway south of Pickle Lake.

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Reno Rodeghiero