

Monsters Of Makoop

BY ROBERT BRODHAGEN

"Almeda, just keep your rod tip up a little so your Beetle Spin doesn't catch in the cabbage; it's only 2-1/2 feet here." She gives Jim that look while conforming to his wishes and as she had already started adjusting the rod's position... "Yes dear," she replies while muttering under her breath. "I know how you hate it when anyone gets snagged"...an immense jerk! No, not Jim this time, as Almeda's rod is almost ripped from her grip. The shallow water predator has caught them both off guard. The eight-pound line with matched walleye rod and reel is tested to its max as the heavy fish ploughs for deeper cover. Jim is already thankful for the habit he has recently developed while in "toothy" waters. He takes the time to tie on three inches of Tyger leader material between the line and lure. A cutoff would occur immediately in most cases with such a vicious strike.

While Almeda attempts to regain her composure from the startling attack, Jim works to keep the line away from the motor and once again reminds Almeda to "Keep your rod tip up!" Of course now it is for a different reason. Almeda has heard the same routine almost every time she's hooked a fish since they were married over 40 years ago.

A little psychology is needed here; the difference between male and female thinking comes into play. Men tend to get excited quickly thinking a record fish might be on the end of the line, while most women are a lot less serious, having the ability to stay calm. From many gals' point of view, this is just part of a nice outing; catch a few fish, have some intermittent chit chat and enjoy some relaxing time reading the latest in Oprah's choice of novels. "Fish On" does not always set her into a frenzy as she is capable of multi-tasking and remembering the 50 years of coaching to: keep the rod tip up and bent, don't let any slack in the line, check the drag to be sure it's playing out smoothly, and don't hurry the fish. Men, however, take many years to get to this point. They often enlist a fishing buddy to talk them through these steps and keep panic at bay. After decades of coaching and repetition they may feel confident to handle this on their own...scratch that...I'm 57 and remember vividly, on several occasions this season, "losing it" when thinking a monster was at the end of my line. Tripping over tackle boxes, struggling with a net, adrenaline running rampant, panic over the thought that the northern of all "northern" would be lost before it could be caught and photographed for future fame and chest-puffing fish tales told to any poor soul who happened to be within ear shot. Then that calm voice comes to me from the front of the boat, "Take a deep breath dear. Calm down and I'll talk you through this." Although both helpful and reassuring, the statement is usually riddled with sarcasm, not unlike my mother-in-law's at Christmas dinner. Oh, sorry! I kind of went into a tangent there... back to the monster.

After a ten-minute battle, the bull dogging fish is wrestled to the net. A heavy girthed, 39-inch northern pike has a quick photo shoot and is released. "You know Almeda, maybe we should switch to the heavy rods. Rob's been bugging me to get rid of the walleye tackle and focus on big pike", Jim says. Boy, did that turn out to be the right decision. This would turn out to be the newly opened Makoop Lake Lodge's greatest big fish days, to date.

But first, let me give you a little history. The Bearskin First Nation Indian Reservation began this project in 1999 but never completed the building. A few fishing groups toughed it out the first year, but lack of government funding forced its closure. With some new money available, I was asked to help market and manage its revival. The American Plan Lodge with 24/7 generator electricity, complete with fully modern bathrooms and flush toilets, can handle a maximum of 20, and is finally ready to rock and roll.

I had invited several friends and well-known fishermen to help me explore the 28,000 acres of Makoop Lake. Our spring

excursion turned up some unbelievable fast, shallow water walleye fishing; likened to that of fishing white bass in Nebraska according to Dick Turpin, former head of Wildlife Enforcement in that state. Jim and Dick boated 47 walleye in 20 minutes. Tom Brown, from the Mr. Walleye Team and freelance, outdoor writer Tim Lesmiester were also along. They decided one evening after Tom ripped seven 28- to 32-inch pike in seven casts in a spot they referred to henceforth as—you guessed it—"The Snake Pit," to cast a flat with some immersing weeds just 150 yards north of the "pit." Tom's choice of large Rapala muskie baits led to walleye after walleye in the 22- to 25-inch range. Tim proceeded to take some of the finest sunset and silhouette shots I have ever seen. The fast and furious walleye bite was distracting us from my primary goal, big pike.

Although several 35- to 42-inch northern (Big John Dalton from Council Bluffs hauled in the 42) and countless 28- to 34-inchers were boated mostly on walleye rigging, the pike to this point had not been spectacular. Keep in mind that we knew so very little about the lake. Their job was to find the deepest water in the lake, the deepest water in various areas, and some of the key fishing structures related to them. Yes, I am a disciple of the late Buck Perry "Spoonplugging System." Some mid-lake humps were spotted from the aircraft, but on-the-water research would provide most of the much-needed information. The problem is they were getting wrapped up in the fun of fishing. Who would believe that these old farts (my pet name for the group; me being the young buck at 57) would have such a whale of a time without catching the "whale?"

Having said that the job at hand was to find some new whale (big pike) locations and the techniques needed to catch them, it just didn't happen that first week of June and would take a return trip with their wives in summer to accomplish the goal.

We are "Back to the Future" now to early August, and with already a week under our belts, the results are more or less the same. Jim and I had been fishing the honey hole, which is just a two-minute boat ride from camp. This is, bar none, the best fish-holding structure that



any of us "old farts" have encountered. Fifty to a couple hundred fish are caught there daily, including walleye, northern and the odd white fish, using walleye tackle—1/4-ounce jigs tipped with white, pink or orange Gulp. Northland Tackles' Slurppie also worked well, with a three-inch piece of Tyger Leader. Casting and/or trolling crankbaits is my favorite. I heard what sounded like giggling school kids and noticed that the new guests from California, approximately 150 yards from our boat, were trying to hold a picture fish up for a shot. Jim and I went over for a closer look and found that the 43-inch northern had fallen for a 2-1/2-inch Five of Diamonds. These fellows had boated and released several other fish between 35 and 39 inches, and two others over 40. Needless to say, they were ecstatic.

"Jim, this is what the majority of our guests want—to cast their arms off using the 'tackle box table fare!' After all, they've spent a small fortune on the stuff for their trip. This is the type of hot action that I need you to help figure out," I mention. Shortly after it was time to head back to the lodge.

I pushed Jim and Almeda's boat out the next morning about 9 a.m., which was early for them. At 70 years young, Jim's got me convinced the fish don't bit until he gets there. It's a beautiful sunny day, light west wind, and the third or fourth day into a stable weather pattern. "Fish should jump in the boat today," I challenge. "I need some big ones!" I can already see him reaching for their walleye rods. "Good luck!" I add.

Some while later I hear, "ROB, ROB!"

my wife Sandy calls from the lodge deck. I am concerned as I move from the fish house in a hurried gate. "What's the matter?" I ask. "Jim has got a story. I've never seen him so excited, not to mention he found your Crown Royal!" she adds (Remember this is a fly-in!).

As Jim "the fishing professor" McDonnell began his tale, we sat in awe as the small digital camera, which Almeda was controlling, produced image after image verifying the existence of Makoop's Monster Pike. Fourteen northern pike between 40 and 46 inches were caught and released between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. Jim said that Almeda's 45-inch monster was 30 pounds with an enormous girth. Another dozen 34- to 39-inchers were also released. When Almeda landed that first 39-incher on the beetle spin, Jim finally took my lead to target northern only using the heavy equipment. The 3-1/2-inch spoons were deadly with the Five of Diamonds (chartreuse/hot red diamonds). Jim said it was the best "big-fish" day he has ever experienced in 60 years of fishing. This goes to show us baby boomers that if we choose to "Live until we die," that some of our best memories are yet to come!

The phenomenal bite continued for five days with 35 monsters measuring 40 to 46 inches, another 70 ranging from 34 to 39 inches, and 100 plus at 28 to 33 inches. The key time was midday, 10 a.m. until 3 p.m.

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