

Outdoors

Durkin: Hot fishing at Turtle-Flambeau Flowage

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PATRICK DURKIN|For the State Journal | [No Comments Posted](#) | Posted: Saturday, August 20, 2011 5:00 pm

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Patrick Durkin|For the State Journal
Jeff Robl of Mercer unhooks a walleye caught on the Turtle-Flambeau Flowage.

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MERCER -- More than 20 years had passed since Jeff Robl and I met in person to swap stories and photos about our North Woods deer hunts.

We had stayed in touch since that meeting in Oshkosh, but always by telephone. Never had we shared a camp, cabin or canoe, even though we had often hunted within miles of each other from northwestern Ontario to northern Wisconsin.

Every offseason, however, we shared tips, stories and insights from recent hunts. And so it was that we talked last month about similar but separate plans for autumn. As our conversation neared its end, I said I'd be near Mercer on July 31 and asked if the fish were biting.

I half-expected him to say he didn't fish. After all, our deer talks had never before drifted to fishing. Robl must have had the same thought because he asked, "You fish?"

Robl said he and his wife, Ginger, and their sons had been catching perch, walleyes, bluegills and smallmouth bass on the Turtle-Flambeau Flowage since May. This wasn't unusual for them. They had fished and camped there long before moving to Mercer several years ago. Even so, this might be the best fishing summer he could recall.

That didn't stop Robl from worrying when we met at Mercer's BP gas station on Highway 51. As we drove to the flowage, he chuckled at the clear skies, calm air and rising temperatures.

"When it's cloudy and blowing a little, you just know you'll catch them," he said. "But I usually stay home on days like this. With sunshine and flat water, we'll have to go into the rocks, stumps and trees to find them."

No problem. The Turtle-Flambeau Flowage has lots of rocks and wood throughout its 314 islands, 330 miles of shoreline and 14,000 acres of water. And if it hadn't already accumulated enough woody debris since its creation in 1926, a tornado increased the supply a year ago when sweeping through.

Three campers ended up in the hospital that night, July 27, 2010. And evidence of the tornado remains everywhere. At one point Robl stopped his boat to show me a large, thick, tree-strewn bog the tornado tore from one shoreline and beached near another a half-mile away.

Pointing to the bog's former home, Robl said: "When it was over there, it was one of my favorite walleye spots."

From 7:30 to 10 a.m., we fished troughs, rocky points, shallow humps and drop-offs as Robl showed me around the flowage. At each stop we hooked leeches and nightcrawlers beneath slip-bobbers on two lines, and sometimes jiggged a third bait beneath the boat.

Our first stop yielded a small walleye, two small bluegills and several rock bass. The next stop brought big perch and our first eating-size walleye. When the next few stops produced no fish, we moved into deeper

water so Robl could search for a rocky, stumpy hump six feet below.

"I haven't broken down and bought one of those GPS gizmos yet," he said. "I still triangulate with landmarks to find my spots."

Robl does use a depth-finder, though, and before long he tossed out a black buoy to mark the hump. Robl then moved the boat upwind about 10 yards and we dropped anchor at 10:30 a.m.

A light breeze rippled the flowage, but not enough to disguise the humidity and rising temperatures. After wiping his brow, Robl pointed to jagged clusters on the depth-finder's screen. The underwater ridge had snared an impressive collection of logs and branches as they tried floating by over the years.

"We'll lose some jigs, but that's the price you pay if you want fish," Robl said.

I notched our first snag when reeling in to check my bait minutes later. When freeing it proved futile, I snapped the line and watched my bobber float away.

"Put on a new one," Robl said. "We'll look for it when we're done."

Over the next hour we caught perch, walleyes and a pint-sized smallmouth. We quit when we each had our two-walleye limit. By that time we had also surrendered about a pound of sweat to the sun and five bobbers to the debris below.

The bobbers weren't difficult to retrieve, however. They simply floated to the surface and drifted away, creating a sparse debris field downwind of the boat. We pulled our anchors, motored slowly after the bobbers and rescued them one by one.

After we returned to Robl's home and admired his impressive deer mounts, I watched his son Tom, 14, grab a fillet knife and expertly clean our catch. Tom then helped his dad pack the fillets in ice for my trip home.

This was one hot, calm day when it paid to fish the Turtle-Flambeau - and discover a shared interest besides deer hunting.

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