



Steve Dike displays a keeper walleye. (Bill Harris/Special to the MDP)

Fishin' the woods

After months of anticipation, I climbed on board a jet headed for Fargo, North Dakota. Fargo was not my final destination. It just happened to have the closest, best connection to Lake of the Woods in Ontario, Canada. It was warm and sunny in Fargo, but the winters can be brutal.

I was joined by Steve Dike, Alan Reed, and Jon Horn. Our destination was the Harris Hill Resort on the south shore of Lake of the Woods. We were meeting my brother, Doug, and a fishing buddy of his, Kurt Ringwald. Five of us had done Minnesota fishing trips together in the past. Doug and Kurt live in the Chicago area. Steve was the add-a-man on this gig.

By late Saturday afternoon we arrived at the resort, minutes ahead of Doug and Kurt. We would have been there sooner if we had not birded the 18-mile road from the border town of Rainy River and the resort. Get four birders together someplace where they have never birded is a recipe for serious disruptions in any time schedule. The focus of the trip was fishing but get the four of us together and the topic invariably turns to birding.

We spent the first evening catching up and getting oriented by one of the resort's owners, Cheryl Gauthier. Lake of the Woods is huge and getting some local knowledge



Outdoors

By Bill Harris

was extremely important. She went over a map of the lake to give us some pointers on the lake's hazards and moods. On our second and third days we had hired a guide to help reduce the learning curve.

The next morning, we gathered up our gear and headed for the boats we had rented. The boats were quality 18-foot fishing boats with sonar and a GPS unit. They had a good fishing deck and comfortable seats. We were not prepared for what we saw when we arrived at the resort's dock.

The large dock with several slips that were shown on the resort's website was gone. Debris clogged the normally sandy beach. A series of weather phenomena had wreaked havoc on the shores of Lake of the Woods earlier in the year. First, the region received 8-10 feet of snow last winter, much above average. A rapid warm up in the spring sent all that snow melt into the lake.

To add insult to injury it rained steadily for a week, then several windstorms pummeled the south and east shores of the lake. The lake rose 4 feet above its usual level. The last time the lake had gotten that high was in 1950. When we arrived, it was still a foot above normal. The resort had installed makeshift docks to allow boat access. During our stay we witnessed many blown down trees, damaged lakeside buildings, and boat wreckage.

Not knowing the lay of the lake, we stayed close to the resort for the first two days. Our guide, Colin, passed along some local knowledge that allowed us to venture out a bit. Lake of the Woods is huge. One thing we learned quickly was that even a gentle, prevailing west wind produced large rollers across the south end of the lake.

A gentle breeze also allowed us to slowly drift across the lake. Doug had done some research ahead of time and determined the best fishing technique for catching fish in August was to drift using a bottom-bouncer rig with a minnow on a long leader. The bottom bouncer put the bait in deeper water. We caught most of our fish using that technique.

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All about the northern pike

Every summer, my father would take me to Northwest Ontario for a week-long fishing expedition. We would stay in a tent camp, stocked and provided by an outfitter who was a long-time family friend. Dad and I would fish from sunup to sundown, chasing the muskie, smallmouth bass and the northern pike.

Each day, we would head to shore where over an open fire we would fry up our morning's catch. The catch was usually a couple stout northern pike. We would first fry up potatoes and onions, followed by fresh filets of pike.

In the event we did not catch fish for shore lunch, we carried a couple cans of Spam. The Spam of those days came in a can, with a key attached to the bottom. The key hooked onto a tab, and you peeled off a section of the can, so when it opened, the contents were revealed. Those contents were exceptionally disgusting to my adolescent taste. The smell alone was enough to give a roadkill eating coyote the dry heaves. The moral of the story is, you better catch some fish for shore lunch, lest you have to eat that stuff.

The northern pike is a species of carnivorous fish of the genus *Esox*, or pikes. They are common to the Northern Hemisphere, oftentimes call pike. In Canada, the locals call them jacks. The scientific name for pike is *Esox Lucius*, just to make your day.

Northern pike are mostly olive green in color, shading from yellow to white along the belly. The sides have dark spots, and sometimes the fins will have spots over their reddish to orange coloring.

Pike have a pointy nose and jaws full of the



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

sharpest teeth you will never want to encounter. The average pike caught may run 22 inches and weigh 4 or 5 pounds. They can easily top 40 pounds. The all-tackle world record came from Germany in 1986, weighing in at 55 pounds. The Colorado record of 30 pounds, 11 ounces, was caught in 2006 at Stagecoach Reservoir. The beast measured 46.5 inches in length.

In the wild, pike normally live 15 years but there have been reports of some topping 25 years. Because they are such aggressive feeders, especially when food sources are short, they turn to cannibalism. This usually happens when the predator to prey ratio is 2 to 1. Because of cannibalism, there can be a high young mortality rate. Talk about bad parenting.

Pike are very territorial, and aggression arises from a need for space. Young pike tend to have their food stolen by larger ones, further increasing the aggression. Because of the territorial nature of pike, anglers can be successful in targeting large fish, once located, by hitting the same area repeatedly.

Northern pike were first introduced into Eleven Mile Reservoir by the Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW), then known as Colorado Division of Wildlife, to combat the white sucker and common carp populations that

were ravaging the trout populations.

At first, water levels fluctuated significantly because of water use in Denver. This prevented the pike from spawning in the spring, because levels were too low. This changed in the 70s and the pike were finally able to spawn and enough were around to put a whammy on the carp and sucker populations.

Pike can be really good at what they do, eating all the bad fish you want gone. However, when those levels reduce, pike will then go after the fish you don't want them to eat, like the trout. Northern pike do have a tendency to eat themselves out of house and home. Because of illegal stocking, pike now live in just about all the waters of South Park.

Pike can and do, consume fish up to half their own length. CPW has changed their regime for stocking fish in these waters. Larger sized trout, ten inches or longer, are now stocked. They are also stocked during the winter months, through the ice. This is done because during the cold times, a pike's metabolism is lower, and the newly stocked fish have a much better chance at survival. CPW continues to ask anglers to harvest all pike caught at the reservoirs of South Park.

In the Upper Colorado River Basin, biologists have declared war on the invasive species that threaten the native fishery. Those interlopers are the walleye, smallmouth bass, and the Northern pike, all of which were most likely illegally introduced over the past 30 years.

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A small northern pike I caught and released in the same waters of Ontario I fished with my dad when I was a boy 50 years ago. (Mark Rackay/Special to the MDP)



Smartwool

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The perspective of Courthouse Mountain and John Denver



Outdoors

By Paul Zaenger

On Aug. 26, 1974, musician John Denver may have recorded the most important concert of his career. Singing with his band at the Los Angeles Universal Amphitheater, he belted out many fan favorites; but at the end of the performance, to the crowd's enchantment, he belted out Rocky Mountain High. The lines are etched into America's musical canon.

That piece and the folk traditions of the 1960s and '70s seem like ancient history. But the song's lyrics are stuck in my head as I hike with friends up Courthouse Mountain. In a state full of 14,000-foot mountains, the 12,152 feet of this peak seem to not measure up. Yet, its rocky, steep terrain seem to capture some of the essence of Denver's experience; the spirit of having a relationship with wild country.

Parking at the trailhead near Owl Creek Pass, the trek leads up through dense forest. Birds add a chorus as we hike through shadows of spruce and Douglas fir. The ballads of golden crowned kinglets and warbling vireos vibrate back and forth with Rocky Mountain High stuck in my head.



A detached section of the mass of rock that holds Courthouse Mountain, Chimney Rock stabs the sky – a remnant of erosion that provokes us to marvel in the multitude of formations that punctuate the landscape from mountains to deserts. (Courtesy photo)

The song, part biography, follows a young man “born in his 27th year” who discovers a home when he first comes to the mountains.

He climbed cathedral mountains, he saw silver clouds below

He saw everything as far as you can see

And they say that he got crazy once and he tried to touch the sun

And he lost a friend but kept a memory

The trail is surprisingly steep. Friends and I huff and puff, take breaks, chug water. We glimpse expansive scenes through the forest – the ruggedness of the Cimarron Mountains: Precipice, Wetterhorn, and Coxcomb Peaks. The song

continues to reverberate in my head.

Now he walks in quiet solitude the forest and the streams

Seeking grace in every step he takes

His sight is turned inside himself to try and understand

The serenity of a clear blue mountain lake

The trees fall away as the hike steepens. The panoramas unfold. Clouds punctuate the sky. And I'm thinking, what does, exactly, a relationship with our landscape heritage look like 50 years after Denver first recorded this piece?

When we are young, the answer is easy. Physical testing outdoors (trying to touch the sun) could in-

volve hiking, swimming, fishing, camping, hunting, climbing, snowshoeing. The list goes on. Nature, as teacher, has limitless lessons; time spent is richly repaid.

Families and friends come together to take up an adventure. Courthouse Mountain sports delightful flowers – Richardson's geranium and bluebells in late summer – and we revel in the fragrance of spruce.

Denver's song is pushing us to be out there where the world is in the living. To be in an untamed territory is to witness the sunrise, to hearken to an elk bugle, to huddle by the campfire and grasp the multitude of stars. We live our lives in

relationships by spending time together. A relationship with the land comes from spending time in it, and up to whatever physical ability we have.

As we age, the accrual of lessons widens our perspective. Nature offers a quieting to our temperament in a raging world. Patience and wisdom advance. This is how our society can be as grand as the scenery in which we live.

Now his life is full of wonder but his heart still knows some fear

Of a simple thing he cannot comprehend

Why they try to tear the mountains down to bring in a couple more

More people, more scars upon the land

John Denver died in a plane crash 25 years ago October 12. And our world has rolled along pretty far from the 1970s when it was popular to get back to the land. People flocked to the outdoors during the pandemic, but that interest has seriously receded. Maybe it was only travel of convenience. It seems like the curiosity was pretty short-lived.

Do we still care, as a people, about being outdoors? To see and experience a living world?

Back on Courthouse Mountain, though not one of the highest peaks in Colorado, it speaks to us in ways that only this corner of the San Juan Mountains can do. The beauty is overwhelming. With sweat-stained shirts, sore muscles, and pounding hearts, we are bound up in the experiences that we share.

John Denver captured an immensity in our landscapes known by generations long before. We will be better people if we embrace it.

And the Colorado Rocky Mountain high

I've seen it rainin' fire in the sky

I know he'd be a poorer man if he never saw an eagle fly

Rocky Mountain high

Paul Zaenger is a retired National Park Service supervisory park ranger from the National Park Service. Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park, Mount Rushmore National Memorial, Glen Canyon National Recreation Area are among his park assignments. He can be reached at zae@bresnan.net.

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We did some casting along the shoreline weed beds with some success. Doug, Jon, and I caught several smallmouth bass with crankbaits and spinners. Alan caught a 33-inch long northern pike casting. Kurt caught another large northern pike. Once we figured out the bottom bouncer method, collectively we caught enough fish to keep us entertained and provide four meals.

Lake of the Woods is known for its walleye fishing, but that's not the only fish we hauled in. We caught sauger, perch, and crappie, as well. We released most of the fish we caught, saving a few walleye and crappie for dinners.

Now to the birding part of the trip. Our Colorado crew's

focus was on warblers that nest in the region that we do not normally see in Colorado. Since we would be near water, ducks and shore birds were also on our list. There were a few agriculture fields, but the vast majority of landscape away from water was dense woods. We avoided traipsing through the woods, full of ticks and mosquitos. sticking to trails and primitive roads.

The resort puts out feeders that are surrounded by large shrubs and trees, so we spotted lots of birds that were not necessarily interested in the feeders. We ended up seeing 70-plus species of birds. Lots of common terns, three different flycatchers including an alder flycatcher and eastern wood peewees, both life birds for me.

Warblers included black and white, yellow, Wilson's, chest-

nut-sided, Tennessee, mourning, pine, American redstart, common yellowthroat, yellow-rumped, Nashville, and Blackburnian. Other good sightings were an American bittern, lots of American white pelicans and red-eyed vireos, solitary sandpipers, and blue jays.

The North Woods landscape is totally different from that of our western Colorado turf. It's flat and wet. I feel most at home peering out over mountains and canyons but have learned to appreciate the beauty of dense woods and the rocky shorelines of clear lakes. Wild is good in all its expressions.

Bill Harris has traveled the back country of the Colorado Plateau since 1976 and is author of “Bicycling the Uncompahgre Plateau.”

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Biologists use electro-fishing gear to cover nearly 700 miles of water annually trying to keep a lid on the invasive species. Anglers are asked to do their part, and not practice catch and release when targeting these invasive interlopers. Wyoming and Utah have adopted a “must kill” policy when an angler catches one of these fish in waters deemed to be a critical habitat. Colorado is currently considering a zero-tolerance policy for non-native predators.

I enjoyed catching pike, and still do from time to time. We never did have to eat Spam for our shore lunch because of some advice my grandfather passed on to us.

He said, “You won't have to eat that fried Spam as long as you aren't too particular when lunch time is.”

Sometimes we did not eat lunch until dark, but at least we didn't have to eat the Spam.

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