

On Wisconsin Outdoors

With the Dick Ellis Experts

Northern Exposure

Guide brings out Geneva's trophy pike

By Dick Ellis

Lenny Young sat in the bow chair of the Alumacraft and intently watched more line tumble off the reel, tighten, and disappear into a riled Lake Geneva. As the pike moved to eat, a wind sock slowed the drift over the vast weed bed painted with whitecaps. Professional Guide Jim Tostrud fired a few last second reminders at Young. Anticipation hung over the boat like the growing thunderheads to the west.

Was the pike carrying the 8-inch sucker off for breakfast 40 inches? Probably not. But in Tostrud's boat, four northern pike at 40-inches or better had been caught and released during the final dog days of July and a new August. Eight pike larger than "40" had been caught and released this summer. And Tostrud has the photos and story burned to memory that recalls the pike that fell just short of the "magic-50" that he caught and released on an August morning several years ago.

"I have no doubt that there are 50-inch pike in Lake Geneva," Tostrud said with one eye on his newest student. "I've never caught one. It's just a guess. But there are monsters in here. The nice thing about fishing with these big suckers is that we eliminate any chance



Patrick MacDonald, 14, poses for a photo before releasing a 43-inch pike caught and released while fishing with Guide Jim Tostrud in August on Lake Geneva.

of catching something small. The other day we caught and released 43 and 37-inch pike at the same time right where we're sitting. We're not going to

catch the numbers like panfish or bass, but put a dozen fish in the boat averaging 26 to 32- inches and most people are going to say that's a great day of

fishing."

Young and I had come to Lake Geneva on the heels of a hot bite for large pike, like most of Tostrud's clients, a bit awe-struck by what we "might" catch. Although we were also on the heels of pounding thunderstorms and a cold front that tempered the optimism, the real chance to catch a 40-inch pike in Wisconsin trumps all negatives. Most of us lack the expertise to do it alone on Geneva, a monstrous 5400 acre lake and Wisconsin's second deepest inland water at 150-plus feet. Tostrud, though is the great equalizer, having fished the lake his whole life with the expertise needed to find, catch, and release northern pike. Young could catch the fish. I was certain to catch a Tostrud story.

Tostrud met us at a city of Lake Geneva landing with 18 large suckers in the live-well and laid out the game plan. We would be fishing the thermocline over weed beds and drifting with the contour lines of structure where large pike congregate in ambush of roaming baitfish. Find those baitfish, Tostrud said, and find those predatorial gamefish too. Offer an easy meal, suckers, in the pike's comfort zone where warm and cold water meet; the thermocline, and



LEFT: Guide Jim Tostrud prepares to release a 45-inch pike taken on Lake Geneva, one of four northerns over 40-inches his clients have caught and released in the last two weeks. RIGHT: The use of circle hooks help Guide Jim Tostrud maintain a high catch and release percentage on large northern pike without injuring the fish. Here, a lip-hooked pike on Lake Geneva struggles for freedom near the boat.

expect action on big fish. The arsenal would include 12-pound monofilament line, 30-pound fluorocarbon leaders and Daiichi circle hooks that promote lip-hooked fish that can be safely released.

“We do slow, contour drifts over the weeds looking for active fish on the thermocline,” he said “The surface temperature right now is 81-degrees. These big pike aren’t going to be up here unless it’s just to grab a meal and go back down. This summer we have eight legitimate pike over 40 inches. We caught and released a 44 two weeks ago and a 43 yesterday on the edge of the weeds on the thermocline. You have to let the fish eat the bait a little; you can’t hit them right away or you’ll just bring up a shredded piece of meat. They hit the sucker sideways and run. Then they turn it headfirst to eat it. We give them a count to 13 and set the hooks. We see a huge safe return rate and very minimal mortality. I love these

fish. I don’t want to hurt any of them.”

Tostrud does want his clients to catch northerns and hopes that the numbers caught and the law of averages dictate that a select few of the pike will be the coveted monsters. He tutors Young and me to keep the bail open and the line held between thumb and forefinger so that the pike retreating with its meal feels no resistance from the line and rod until the angler is ready to set the hook. Despite the cold front, a strikeless first drift taps into the impatience of a man who knows the lake and expects action.

“What’s wrong?” he asks more of himself than of us after 15 minutes produces no pike. “We should have had one by now. These fish will go right to the bait. They’re looking for an easy meal and they want to go eat it.”

His attention turns to Young when the line tightens and steadily disappears into Geneva. “Don’t set it hard,” he

says quietly. “When you do set it, keep constant pressure on the fish. The guys that pump the rod are the guys that lose the fish.”

Tostrud gives the green light to set the hook. Young follows directions by bowing the rod toward the retreating fish until the fish itself takes out all slack. All that is necessary to set the hooks is lifting the rod. The rod doubles in half. After a good fight of perhaps a minute a 28-inch pike is caught and quickly released to fight again. It is the first of a dozen pike we will land to 30 inches. The big girl doesn’t show up. But the anticipation of “What’s down there” that comes with each hit keeps us on the edge of our seat all morning long.

“I’ve been fishing for walleyes for 50 years, but this kind of fishing for big pike with large suckers was totally new,” Young said. “To sum it up it was exciting and a learning experience at the same time. We were fishing with someone I quickly learned to totally

trust. I wanted to ask so many questions, and Jim taught us so much that will translate to my walleye fishing too. I can’t wait to get back on the water.”

“It is more than a catching experience,” Tostrud said. “It is a learning experience. You can take the techniques you learn here and take it to any lake and put it into place. But it’s also fun. Lots of times you’ll have double or triple strikes at the same time. IF you do this on your own, I recommend buying at least 18 to 24 suckers. We caught 25 pike the day before you came and we average 20 strikes a day. Sometimes, we have many more than that. That’s pretty awesome.” ^{WO}

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