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KENNEBEC JOURNAL

OUTDOORS: There's nothing quite like fishing for smallies on upper Kennebec

BY TRAVIS BARRETT
KENNEBEC JOURNAL Morning Sentinel

05/31/2008

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Staff photo by Travis Barrett

TOP WATER: A smallmouth bass tries to wriggle free from a hook on the upper Kennebec River.

THE FORKS -- Most of the time I spend looking around in wonder, hardly believing that this is the Kennebec River.

For someone who grew up right smack in the heart of central Maine, the Kennebec was something that flooded out homes and local businesses once every few years and carried a reputation for being dirty. I'd never fished it at all, save for one night every winter when we'd rent one of the hundreds of little smelt camps south of Hallowell to huddle around a rusty woodstove.

But the Kennebec River, which sprawls across Maine's midsection -- from Moosehead Lake to Popham Beach -- is more than just the former home of a "Whatever Race" for paddlers. In its northern reaches, it's home to some fantastic smallmouth bass fishing.

I was more than happy to find that out firsthand this week.

Chris Russell grew up in Gardiner and now, as a four-seasons guide at Northern Outdoors in The Forks, makes his home in Caratunk.

Even after wrestling bone-rattling wind and white-capped waves for eight full hours, there really isn't much that can hold a candle to smallmouth bass fishing in a quiet and secluded location.

Target species

The smallmouth bass -- a member of the sunfish family, of all things -- isn't a native species, having once been introduced into Maine waters where it has thrived.

According to the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, adult "smallies" typically weigh between two and three pounds in Maine, with a few exceeding four pounds. Anything larger than that is rare -- with the state record smallmouth clocking in at eight pounds.

It's not surprising that the upper reaches of the Kennebec River make fine smallmouth habitat.

They prefer rocky bottoms littered with small gravel -- precisely the kind of place they build redds, or nests, to lay eggs -- and there are tree stumps and roots to be found everywhere. It makes for great ambush territory for feeding smallies.

Water temperatures this week still hovered around the mid-50-degree range, still shy of optimum spawning range. And, particularly in the spring, they can be found in extremely shallow water -- never more than three or four feet deep.

"Once they're done spawning and the weather warms up, they'll start spreading out," Russell said. "Right now, they're really all stacked up in the same spots getting ready to spawn. But once they're done with that, they'll be all over the place in here."

Developmental concerns

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But the fish are virtually the only thing that are all over the place in the upper Kennebec River.

Impoundments like Wyman Lake and Indian Pond, for example, create the illusion of remote northern Maine lakes, with fishing for all things from brook trout and landlocked salmon to smallmouth bass and brown trout. What hasn't followed the fishing, thankfully enough, is development.

Powering the fishing boat forward along the shoreline, you can go a mile at a time without seeing so much as a remote camp. There are few other boats around -- virtually none, in fact, on a week day, except for a couple of canoes.

Less than two hours by car from Augusta and I feel I'm in one of the most remote locations in Maine.

Best of all, the fishing simply adds to the mystique. It's top-quality angling, habitat natural and unencumbered by the sprawl of housing development that has more immediately affected central Maine's fishing opportunities.

A day's work

Chris Russell and I notice the redd at the same time -- the way the sunlight hits it under the cover of sweeping pine branches, it's as though a spotlight hangs over it.

"Try giving it a throw over there," he says to me, and I oblige.

And, for once on a day where my poor casting skills were only intensified by the unrelentless winds, I'm actually able to cast exactly where I want -- just a few feet beyond the redd. I begin a slow retrieve and feel the resistance.

At first, I'm not sure if it's a fish or another stump I've snagged my line on -- I'd already lost more lures than I'd cared to count, though I'm sure Chris has put an invoice in the mail already to account for the damage to his tackle box.

Chris says it's typical of smallmouth bass in the spring.

"They've all been subtle strikes," he says. "None of them have really come up and attacked anything -- but that's kind of the way it is when they're spawning. They're really just seeing what it is, picking it up in their mouth and moving it away from the nest."

Soon, though, my line makes the unmistakable dive to the bottom as the rod tip bends. It's a fish -- and a nice one, too. A leap into the air give us the first glimpse of the smallie.





"You may want to lip this one into the boat," Chris says. "It's a nice one."

Indeed, it is. Full of eggs and easily more than 18 inches in length, we figure the female is pushing four pounds.

No one else was there to see it. No one else around to drive their boat right over to the small little inlet where we were fishing. Seclusion and smallies on the upper Kennebec -- it's hard to imagine a better day on the water.


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