

Lake Erie - April 2010



For days and days the temperature was in the seventies, the winds tolerable, and the fish were biting. They were biting so good, in fact, that limits of walleyes were had in less than an hour. And you're talking an average size of three to four pounds. The fishing reports were getting better by the day. Wow. I couldn't wait to get there.

Where was "there"? Lake Erie, of course. Where else?

We had a big group, twelve guys to be exact, and we'd be fishing with two charter captains, six guys per boat. Bob Hesse, the big tuna from Rod Bender Charters and Rich Laird of Rags to Riches Charters would be the guides, net boys, and on-the-water hosts. We had fished with them before with great success, so all of us, to a man, were pumped big time.

But, alas, four days before we were to leave, the weather forecast turned ugly which dampened our enthusiasm. Temperatures were predicted to drop 40 degrees. Come on! Cold fronts like that usually make fishing tough, and rain plus 30 mile per hour winds added to the bad news from the weatherman. Ugh.

Triple ugh.

Our destination was Wild Wings Resort and Campground, just a little west of Port Clinton, Ohio. Our arrival confirmed the accuracy of the weather forecast. Dick McNutt, my fishing and hunting partner for 39 years, and I, met Hesse at the nearby restaurant. Over pizza and a beer, we discussed strategy for the next day, our first day of fishing. Okay, so it was two beers.

"The forecast for the wind is changing," Hesse said, and it might come from the wrong direction and bring in muddy water."

"Great," I muttered to myself as if the forecast wasn't already bad enough.

"But you never know," he continued. "Cold fronts don't always kill the fishing. We'll see tomorrow."

McNutt and I were the first in our group to show up. And little by little the rest of the party arrived and we filled up a big house that had accommodations for twelve, nicely adjacent to the harbor where Hesse and Laird kept their boats. Twelve guys together in one big house? It was, as you might guess, a fun time.

Thursday morning came early and my group was to fish in Hesse's 30 foot Rod Bender. Joining McNutt and me were Mike Bergstrom of Lake Geneva; his father Bob Bergstrom of Spencer, Ohio; Kevin Evans of Seville, Ohio; and Dave Van Lue also of Lake Geneva.

We motored out of the harbor on to the big lake, all pretty excited because the weather wasn't quite as bad as it could have been. Heck, I'm always excited when I first take off in the morning, even if a tornado is coming.

We were just east of the nuke plant, looking for suitable water clarity.

"At this time of the year, I'm not looking for clear water. But I do want to stay away from muddy water, so what I want is what I'll simply call clean water," Bob said.

We searched for reefs that came up to ten or twelve feet that were in the right kind of water. The plan was to start a drift on one end of a reef, let the wind work the boat to the other end, while dragging baits along the bottom. The strategy worked. The bite wasn't fast and furious as it had been before the front blew in, but the captain put us on the fish, and it was our job to catch them. Without a doubt, the single best bait was a purple hair jig, in $\frac{1}{4}$ or $\frac{3}{8}$ oz. size. We used no minnows at all, just letting the subtle action of the hair trigger strikes from the 'eyes. A stinger hook was a necessity because in those cold front conditions the fish were short strikers. Most of the fish were hooked on the stinger, giving credence to the previous sentence. Mike Mulqueen of Cudahy, Wisconsin makes some of the best hair jigs around. mulqueenmmm@aol.com or 414-482-3232.

Bob and I had a great time bantering back and forth, each trying to outdo the other with a quip. He was previously the editor for the Findlay, Ohio newspaper, and perhaps both having a background in news was part of our bond. This is his 12th year as a full time charter captain.

Hesse was busy netting fish all morning. Well, good! He's the one who found the fish, so it served him right to work extra hard. And extra hard work was given by Rich, too, with the six other guys in his boat, the 32 foot Rags to Riches. By about lunch time, we had 14 full limits of fish, the 12 of us plus the two captains. With a daily bag limit of four (which increases to six later in the year) that totaled 56 fish, and at three to four pounds each, well, you do the math!

Back at the mansion, owned by Laird and called the Pine Tree Lodge, we cleaned the walleyes with electric fillet knives and an assembly line production. Everything was divided evenly and each guy had a nice big bag of fillets to take home.

If you want a great charter captain on Lake Erie for jig fishing or trolling, contact Bob at 419-722-2472 or walleyel@RodBenderCharters.com. If you want a really good recipe for walleye crab cakes, he has one. But you'll have to call him.

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