

Frozen Eyes – Fishing the Mississippi at Red Wing



The thermometer signaled us that it was way too cold to go fishin'. Yet, we went anyway. It was 18 degrees above zero on March 28, 2009 and we launched Tom Parker's Ranger boat on the public ramp in downtown Redwing, Minnesota. We were after walleyes, pre-spawn ones, that is. On this day, all walleyes caught would have been frozen 'eyes.

The water temperature followed the air temperature and had fallen four degrees over the last couple of days. The current was surging, pushing deadfall, leaves, paper cups, empty pop bottles, beer cans and other assorted debris downstream toward Prairie du Chien with a power and force known only to nature. Flotsam and jetsam greeted all those who put their fishing craft in the 36 degree water of the big river.

Tom and I knew the fishing would be great. It's the catching part that would be tough. Very tough.



We were on the Mississippi River, one of the all-time great places to catch walleyes and saugers. It's the second longest river in the United States, 2,320 miles long, originating at Lake Itasca in Minnesota and grinding its way to the Gulf of Mexico in Louisiana.

For those of you with an interest in etymology, Mississippi is a derivative of an Ojibwe Indian word meaning "big river." Big, indeed.

Shortly after we launched, a barge came by, pushed upward by powerful engines that left a swirling eddy behind it. Bins of grain, perhaps corn or wheat, were strapped together, covered to keep dry, and were bound for places north to be processed. We watched in awe as one power boat, affixed to the rear of a group of barges, pushed them all upstream as if it were nothing more than a morning's work.



How were we going to fish in these circumstances of cold water, cold front conditions, and high water? We had five presentations in mind.

Tom had the big motor fired up. The kicker had been warmed up, too, and he checked all the electronics, bow mount trolling motor, and live well. Everything was in order, so we were good to go.

Our first presentation was a Dodge Rig, a rig invented by Mark Dodge of Wisconsin. This starts with a three-way swivel to which a 13-inch dropper is tied, and then a snap swivel is tied to the end of the dropper. A pencil weight is then snapped on. To another loop of the three-way a 60-inch leader is tied. Using a loop knot, a hook is tied about half-way down, and then another hook is tied to the end of the leader with another loop knot.

The best way to fish this rig is to match the pencil weight to the current, and slowly move upstream, against the current, with small minnows lip-hooked on the two hooks. You don't fish this in the heavy current or slack water. Rather, you pull this rig on the inside of a current seam. Bites in these cold conditions were tentative, and fish would barely hang on.

There is no standard best way to set the hook. Sometimes setting it right away works; most of the time it doesn't. You just have to figure out what's right for the day you're fishing. As for Tom and me? We couldn't figure out anything that worked.

We spent a fair amount of time up near the dam at Red Wing, on the lock side of the channel. We had lots and lots of other boats for company, but most interesting of all, bald eagles delighted us with their graceful flights and perching in nearby trees. I counted five different eagles at one time, three with bald heads and two immature offspring. To tell you the truth, it didn't matter whether I caught many fish or not. To see these birds so close that I could throw a baseball and hit them was worth the price of admission.

Other good methods to nail fish in this river include casting ring worms on light jig heads into the seam on the calm water side and also dragging a small floating Rapala on a three-way rig with a pencil weight heavy enough to keep the crank bait just above the bottom.

For the anglers who love jigs, try using plain hair jigs, which are especially effective in really cold water. Mike Mulqueen, of Cudahy, Wisconsin, is a true expert doing this. He likes purples, blues, and blacks. Another technique is to tie a lead head jig, say ¼ ounce, directly to your line. Then tie a 16" piece of 4 pound test line to the eye of the jig. To the end of that leader tie a streamer fly. Cast that and fish it very slowly back toward the boat, so the streamer fly just gently flutters. It might trigger a huge strike.

For the most part, the bigger fish in the spring will come casting jigs into the shallow water on the inside side of the current seam. Dodge Rigs will generally catch more fish, but not the big hawgs.



And for the record, Tom and I did not do well on this particular day with the high water, relentless current, falling temperatures, and the ten other built-in excuses that I have. But for those who have read this column over the years, you know this to be true: Fishing trips are not always about the catching. Open your eyes. You might see a bald eagle soaring right above your boat, looking for a free lunch.

Jim Zegar can be reached at outdoors@zegar.com