

Working for walleyes

8-14-05

Years of DNR management on Lake Koshkonong pay off

Fisheries manager Don Bush credits Mother Nature for the great walleye fishery which now exists in Lake Koshkonong.

Although his humility is laudable, Bush deserves a tremendous amount of credit for the state of this fishery.

Managing the fish population on a lake is difficult. Managing a fish population on essentially a wide spot in a medium-sized river is nearly impossible. Bush has been striving to bring this basin into a state of balance for 25 years.

His efforts have finally achieved a state of near perfection that has endured for almost two years, with reasonable optimism that this trend will continue.

Dozens of incredibly intricate puzzle pieces must mesh for this stained water to realize its full potential. Until 2004, Mother Nature always seemed

to hold back some key component prohibiting natural harmony.

Rough fish have been a major bugaboo, tearing up vital weedbeds and muddying the water. Rather than carp about this problem, Bush has pursued aggressively a program of rough fish removal.

So far this year, contractors have removed more than 700,000 pounds of rough fish from the lake. The difference already can be seen—there are weedbeds where we've never seen them.

This critical component has permitted fish that thrive in desirable weeds to prosper. In an electro shocking survey in 2004, Bush and his crew cranked up an amazing 57+ walleye fingerlings per hour.

We haven't seen walleyes like this in Koshkonong since 1987. In the winter of 1987-88, anglers—this writer included—pounded the big walleye population down to the point where it is just now recovering. Our behavior as sports anglers during the next couple of years will set the stage for at least the next decade.

"These numbers are beyond 'way off the charts,'" Bush said. "I've seen nothing like it in nearly a quarter century of fisheries management."

This amazing year class of walleyes should reach the 15-inch legal size limit by 2008.

Meantime, the second-largest year class that hatched in 1993 continues to prosper. Those fish are huge. They are too big to eat, but not quite big enough to mount at 25- to 29-inches long.

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Our behavior as sports anglers during the next couple years will set the stage for at least the next decade. We need to practice catch-and-release!

A slot limit protecting all walleyes between 24- to 31-inches would be nice, allowing one fish of more than 31 inches, which would certainly help keep taxidermists, such as Don Rich Jr., off of welfare.

Lately the trolling bite on Kosh has slowed. This is primarily due to die-off of sago

pondweed, a self-perpetuating phenomenon that occurs every August on water bodies where this desirable—but aggravating—flora thrives.

One way to defeat the stringy weeds is plugging a split shot about 30 inches up the line above the No. 5 chartreuse or orange spinner blade crawler harness rigs that are so effective on summer walleyes in this lake.

Wisconsin law allows three lines per angler. Dragging two spinner rigs about 40 feet behind planer boards at 1.6 mph, with a Cicada "long lined" about 110 feet behind the boat is a very effective way to cash in on this bounty.

Drifting a big leech or a half-crawler through deeper holes in the river both above and below the lake also is effective.

Besides the nuisance of sago pondweed on the lines, there is a fair algae bloom on the lake right now. Although there is a greenish tinge, the overall water quality and clarity is outstanding—for Koshkonong.

With so many large predatory walleyes in the waters right now, Bush fears the big one will feed heavily on the abundant walleye fingerling population, throwing the lake out of balance once again.

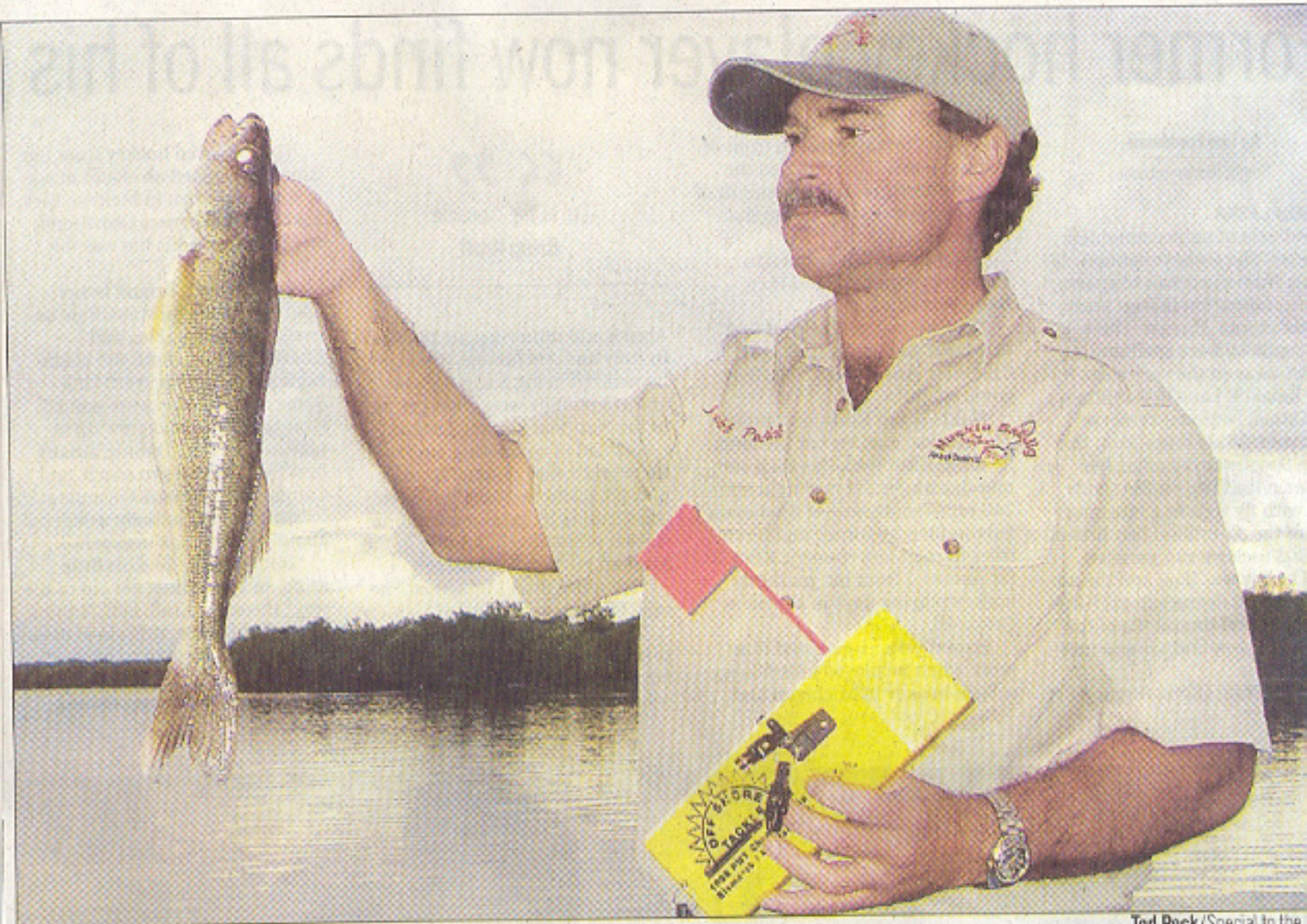
After 25 years of getting slapped around by Mother Nature, it's easy to see the cause of the biologist's apprehension.

Not that the charmingly sarcastic Bush doesn't deserve to be slapped. He does. Right on the back. Three cheers for the Edgerton flash!

Ted Peck, a certified Merchant Marine captain, is an outdoors columnist for The Janesville Gazette. E-mail him at tedpeck@aeroinc.net.



TED PECK



Ted Peck/Special to the

Fort Atkinson's Jeff Patrick knows that a spinner rig behind a planer board is a great way to catch summer walleyes on Koshkonong.