

Anglers like challenge of Koshkonong

By Steve Engelbert
The Janesville Gazette Staff

To fish Lake Koshkonong well consistently takes insight and intelligence, but the fishing can be great.

For that, people who have fished Koshkonong for years thank Don Bush, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources fish biologist.

"Don Bush is the savior of Lake Koshkonong," said Ted Peck, an outdoorsman who writes a fishing-hunting column for The Gazette. "I deeply admire the man for what he's done there."

Bush stocks the lake and Rock River with thousands of walleyes from the Bark River Hatchery.

The walleye operation is Bush's biggest accomplishment, veteran anglers say.

"Don Bush has put a lot of time, money and work into the Bark River Hatchery," said Jeff Grams of Edgerton, who has fished the big lake since his boyhood. "That's done wonders for the lake."

Peck also credits Bush for stocking sauger, a fish in the walleye family. The saugers make up perhaps 40 to 50 percent of the walleye-type fish, he said.

"Sauger have grown in size," he said. "We're talking 18- and 19-inch sauger now, and that's a quality fish."

The lake has cycles, of course. Fish populations go up and down. And the fish are not necessarily easy to catch. But that's what Peck, a Koshkonong angler for 25 years, likes about it.

"Koshkonong is by far the most enigmatic lake in the state line area," Peck said. "It will challenge you as a fisherman. Sometimes, just about the time you have it figured out, it will change on you."

One of the keys to taking fish on Koshkonong is to view it not as a lake, but as a slow-moving river, Peck said. The river merely widens south of Fort Atkinson and north of Newville.

When the river is up, as it was after the big rains the first week of August, anglers should move upstream toward Fort Atkinson, Peck said.

"Food and oxygen are coming down the river," Peck said. "When the temperature is very warm, some of the cooler species, walleyes, they'll try to find the coolest water they can. Just like somebody finding a window in a house fire, trying to

suck that air."

When the river is stable, Peck often trolls between Carcajou Point and Thiebeau Point, because of bottom structure there.

Before the Indianford Dam backed up the river, the Indians hauled shale to build a road through the swamp from Carcajou to Thiebeau.

Other than the shale road and the rock pile in Stinkers Bay, the big shallow lake has very little structure, and structure is what walleyes crave.

"Beyond a doubt, the most effective lure is a no. 7 or no. 5 firetiger Shad Rap," Peck said. "It's that obnoxious chartreuse-fluorescent orange."

The white bass, rebounding now from a disastrous die-off in 1989, are best taken on a 1/3-ounce cicada. "I like chrome and chartreuse," Peck said.

"White bass are nomads," Peck said. "Walleyes like structure. White bass just cruise. The key to finding white bass is to cover a lot of water. Troll really fast, at 2.8 to 3 mph, and any evening you'll take six or eight white bass, easy."

Grams and a friend seek walleyes on the lake three times a week, or so.

"It's kind of a hot or cold lake to fish," Grams said. "They're either biting or not. If you can see a foot or so (into the water), you should catch some fish if you're doing the right things."

He also recommends Shad Raps, and in the same sizes Peck suggests.

Grams had a good spring, he said. But he describes the 1998 fishing season on Koshkonong as only average. This spring, Grams had a day when he and a partner boated 100 fish, releasing all but five fish that were 15 inches long or longer.

Gary Peterson of Edgerton, a Koshkonong fisherman for 40 years, prefers ice fishing for walleyes to summer trolling, though he does both.

"I've had a shack since 1968," he said.

Fishing pressure is much heavier than it was in the 1960s and '70s, Peterson said. In those days, perhaps as few as 10 ice fishing shacks were on the lake during winter. Now there are many, as well as people driving out for the day and fishing, he said.

Consequently, fewer big walleyes are available.

"With everybody fishing out there, they get to be 15 inches, the legal size, and they get taken off," Peterson said. "People have money to buy boats, more leisure time. It's close to Illinois. People hear about the walleye fishing, and it's only an hour from there."

Peck would like to see the walleye bag limit cut to two and the size limit raised to 18 inches, he said.

"A 15-inch walleye is a stupid fish," Peck said. "You can catch them going around the block. Two 18-inchers are going to feed a family of four."

The changing conditions and challenge of Koshkonong keep Peck coming back, he said.

"The slightest little nuance in presentation can make all the difference in the world," he said.

He urged anglers to watch conditions and respond to what the lake offers.

"Don't be frustrated by the lake," he said. "I've never been skunked on Lake Koshkonong."

"But sometimes I've run out of time before I caught a fish."

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