

John Gillespie – Turns Lemons Into Lemonade The Wisconsin Waters and Woods Television Show

For many anglers, tuning in each week to watch John Gillespie's Wisconsin's Waters and Woods television show is a part of their weekend. I had the opportunity to talk to John Gillespie recently about his unique fishing show, its history and what makes it a success.

Gillespie got his start in television as a sportscaster. He started his career in Rhinelander, Wisconsin, then moved around to other cities such as Green Bay, Dallas, Toledo and Milwaukee as opportunities were offered.

Sportscasting runs in the family. Gillespie's father Earl was the legendary radio broadcaster for the Milwaukee Braves and Wisconsin Badgers football; and served as the sports director for WITI-TV (Channel 6) in Milwaukee. Gillespie has a son who is a sportscaster for a TV station in Green Bay.

John Gillespie (right) with Pete Maina – Phone courtesy of Pete Maina.



Gillespie ended his sports casting career in 1990 when he was fired from WTMJ-TV (Channel 4) in Milwaukee. Not wanting to move his family again, he decided to start his own outdoors show

“We sold the house and bought a TV camera,” said Gillespie.

He started Waters and Woods in 1991. Over 850 shows later, Gillespie is still on the air and the show is now broadcast in seven states on over thirty stations; quite a feat considering that he has to purchase air time on each station and pursue his own advertising.

“We buy the airtime. I personally sell the advertising,” he said.

Without those advertisers, Gillespie says the show would not be possible. The advertisers supply the funds; he buys the airtime, pays his part-time cameraman and makes his living off what's leftover after the expenses are paid. Gillespie edits the program himself, a skill he learned from his days as a sportscaster.

The current format of the show has Gillespie generally fishing a body of water in Wisconsin with a fishing guide who knows that water well. He and the guide show the viewers the lures, baits and techniques they are using; all of which help the viewer to catch fish on that and other bodies of water. The format has made the show quite popular.

Gillespie credits the fishing guides featured on his program with helping to make the show a success. However, there is no doubt the benefits go both ways. Many of the guides he fishes with have become very well known, and much of that can be attributed to their regular appearance on his show. A recent episode generated 100 calls to the guide/owner of the resort that hosted Gillespie and his fishing guest.

While the guides may supply the fishing knowledge, Gillespie supplies the energy. Routine viewers can attest that Gillespie is quite excitable on camera; something he admits people have criticized him for.

“I do get flack but I want it to be entertaining,” said Gillespie. He said that catching fish for him is exciting and that excitement is what the viewers see and hear.

“Nothing is ever scripted on our show,” he said. That means that he comes up with terms such as “slobosaurusrex” and “wally walleye” on the spot.

According to Gillespie, people have even accused him of being intoxicated on the show. He said that is completely false and as a matter of policy, alcohol consumption is strictly prohibited while the program is taped.

It can be certainly argued that he doesn't mind laughing at himself. The opening video sequence for the program shows him falling over backwards in a boat while attempting to set a hook on a muskie.

“What happens in the boat goes on TV,” said Gillespie.

Besides falling down in the boat, his audience has seen him with hooks in the hands and sitting in an emergency room being treated for a broken collar bone; suffered from a fall on the ice.

One of the things that make his outdoor show unique is that each week is a new program. While most other outdoor programs will have about thirteen new episodes in a season, Gillespie has fifty-two.

When asked why he keeps such a demanding schedule, “With five kids, I do want to get out of the house,” Gillespie replied. He then admitted that running the show every week helps make it financially viable.

Because of the schedule, viewers see fishing as it truly is, which means sometimes the fish are biting and sometimes they are not. Most other shows spend multiple days on location to capture footage of fish being caught.

Also, due to the show does not repeating, viewers have often asked to buy copies of the program. Gillespie started to do that last fall and viewers can now purchase copies on DVD at www.petemaina.com. I noticed an interesting purchase option that allows people to create a custom DVD that contains four episodes of their choice.

Gillespie said, “(I am) proof there is life after being fired”. He has certainly proven that to be the case with his successful show.

John Gillespie’s Wisconsin’s Waters and Woods can be watched in Kenosha County on WVTM (Channel 18) out of Milwaukee, Fox Sports Net (Wisconsin), and Comcast Sports Net (Chicago). It airs at various times on Saturday, Sunday and Monday.

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