

Lake Michigan Perch

Fishing Action South of the Border

Terry Bitz of Outdoor Convergence

I met with Bill Pocius, Doug Kloet, and Ernie Desotell recently to fish for perch on Lake Michigan. Bill and Doug, residents of Kenosha and Pleasant Prairie respectively, have been twisting my arm for over a year to get out and fish perch with them on the other side of the state line. Joining us was Racine resident Ernie Desotell. He is a longtime friend and fishing and hunting partner of Bill's.

The boat was launched just before sunrise at the marina in Winthrop Harbor, Illinois. As we cleared the break walls of the marina and headed out on the open water, the sun began to peek just over the low level clouds resting on the eastern side of the lake. The brilliant orange sky was reflected on the clear water and provided a dazzling view as we headed south towards the fishing grounds.



Sunrise on Lake Michigan near Winthrop Harbor, Illinois

As we neared a location that Bill and Doug had previously marked on the GPS, I asked if they ever catch salmon while fishing for perch in that area. According to Doug, it is a rare occurrence due to the fishing tactics we were using and where the salmon were currently located.

“The salmon are in closer to shore right now compared to where we are at;” he said.

Our general location was straight out from the Waukegan harbor in approximately 50 to 60 feet of water. The lake bottom has areas of rock that attract baitfish, perch and consequently anglers who want to catch the big striped fish.

The bait we used were fathead minnows and small shiners. The minnows were hooked on three-way rigs that consisted of a three-way swivel attached to the main line. A heavy two to three ounce sinker was tied to the bottom of the swivel. Attached to the side of the swivel was a trailing line about two feet long that contained a small octopus-style hook.

The tactic was very simple. We simply dropped the rig down to bottom of the lake and would slowly bounce the rig up and down off the bottom.

It did not take long for the first fish to be brought into the boat. Doug landed a 10 inch perch that left me impressed but did not elicit much reaction from Doug and Bill. These guys routinely catch perch in this location measuring 12 to 13 inches in length and both have caught fish measuring up to 15 inches.



At 7 a.m. we found an active school of fish and everybody got into the action. It was a brief frenzy but the catch included a 14 inch perch caught by Doug. The rest of us landed fish measuring 8 to 10 inches.

While the perch would occasionally smack the minnows aggressively, often the only indication something had taken the bait was that the line would get heavy.

Doug Kloet of Kenosha holding two nice perch caught on Lake Michigan

We spent the rest of the morning moving to various locations looking for active schools of fish. Often we would set up on spot and watch for fish on the fish finder holding near the bottom. “Generally, if you mark them on the finder, you can catch them;” said Bill.

This was proven out by the fact that we would often see fish on the finder as we drifted along and shortly thereafter someone would set the hook on a fish.

As the morning wore on, the size of the fish seem to decline. Outside of a second 14 inch perch landed by Doug, the rest were relatively small measuring six to eight inches in length. The lack of larger fish served in stark contrast to what is often seen in March and April.

“When you first get out (in the spring), you hardly catch anything under 13 inches;” said Doug. According to Bill, he believes some of that is due to the constant fishing pressure from anglers. “These fish have gotten picked on for over a month;” he said.

At 11 a.m. we packed up and headed back the marina where my three fishing partners quickly filleted the perch. It was a decent outing with us catching 27 fish, but below expectations for these veteran perch anglers.

“On a good day, we catch our limit in a couple of hours;” said Doug.

Considering how good those perch tasted fried in garlic butter, it will not take nearly as much arm twisting to get me out there the next time.



Ernie Desotell (L), Doug Kloet and Bill Pocius holding some of the day's catch