

This Month with a Susquehanna River Guide Lance Dunham

This September starts out with a very low water level on the river. As a matter of fact the flood gauge at Towanda was at minus .13ft, now that's low! I don't know how it could be less than zero, but it was. This was as low as I've seen it in many years and my jet boat along with the repair bills are showing the wear from it. Now I only need three or four inches of water over the rocks to get me where I'm going and it's just not there in many places but you do your best for the client.

For instance, myself and a client were going up river early in the month and there was only so much room and water to get through. In some places it's just wide enough for my boat to squeeze between the rocks. There was a narrow channel surrounded by rocks with a boat off to the left side fishing. We were up on plane skimming over the rocks when he noticed us coming. This not too nice of a person deliberately moved his boat in the channel to block us off. Now there aren't any brakes on a boat and if I slowed down we would have been toast. I hit the air horn but he didn't attempt to move. I swerved around to the right over a huge boulder with just a couple of inches of water on it. When we glanced off that big rock it felt like we were in the General Lee on The Dukes Of Hazard TV show. Holy crap, we were air born! Going up was ok, except for that lack of control feeling, but when we came down the lower unit of my jet motor hit the next rock and cracked what's called the boot on the bottom of the motor. This doesn't slow down a jet boat much except I was sucking in more air now and we kept right on going.

When something like this happens, you feel like going back and shall we say talk to the guy, but you're a guide, you've got a client on board that wants to fish, and you have to be PC about the whole thing and go on. We ended up catching and releasing 77 fish that day with my client getting a huge 19" Smallie that earned him a catch and release Angler Award from the Pa Fish And Boat Commission which still made it a good day.

Let's talk a little about the "Angler Award" program that the Pa Fish and Boat Commission has. This award covers most all fish in Pa. There are several categories to choose from and on my boat we always use the "Catch and Release" category. For instance a small mouth bass needs to be 19" long for the award which is about a 12 year old fish or so. A walleye needs to be 23" and the little rock bass only 8" just to name a few. You fill out the application provided on their web site and send it in with a photo of the fish. In a few weeks you will get a certificate suitable for framing along with a nice Angler Award patch from the Commission. This patch shows everyone that you have caught an exceptional fish and have release it back to the water to fight again another day. Complete details

are on the Pa Fish and Boat Commissions web site. If you have any problems finding the site, contact me and I'll help you.

The lures working this month for me are the tube jig, stick worm jig, small spinner baits, suspending jerk baits, and small crank baits. The suspending jerk bait is a lure easy for anyone to master. The ones I use the most are the Rapala X-Rap and the Rapala Husky Jerk. You can get them in most tackle shops for \$6.00 to \$7.00 range. I use the #8 size that goes down into the water around two feet or so. These are deadly when the water is light stained or semi clear. They work easier if you are standing. Just cast them out then with a downward sharp jerk towards the water to make them flash and act like a wounded minnow. Pause a couple of seconds, reel up the slack line then jerk down again. The fish will most likely strike the lure during the pause so reel in your slack line quickly to feel the strike and set the hook. A little tip for you is the colder the water the longer the pause. If the water is below 50 degrees it's not uncommon to wait five to ten seconds for a strike before you jerk the lure again. Depending on the water clarity I seldom use them in water more than 3 1/2ft deep and always over a rocky bottom.

We always see wildlife along the river and this month was no exception. We were fishing along and all of the sudden we heard quite a commotion on the river bank. There were two young mink doing a combination of fighting with each other and trying to subdue a rather large crawfish they just got out of the river. The crawfish would pinch one of the mink who would then jump up into the air to get it off while fighting to keep it from the other mink. They all ended up rolling down the bank together and back into the water. Shortly, one of them came back out with the crawfish and his buddy in hot pursuit, back up the bank they would go. They put on quite a show.

We've also been seeing many turkeys along the river getting a drink then fly across the river and start feeding. They are aware of the boat, but not frightened of it. One small flock of twelve had only gobblers in it. What a sight. And lastly we saw one of my favorite animals this month, a river otter. This was the first one I've seen this year. They always seem to be playing. He came down off the bank and went into the river then pop up about fifty foot away to watch us. Then roll around and dive back under only to pop up another fifty foot away and watch us some more.

We've been catching and releasing many fish this month, anywhere from fifty to eighty fish per day on average, but one really got my attention. We were fishing through a deep area with jigs bouncing off the bottom when all the sudden wham! I thought I had the biggest smallie in the river! It fought hard for quite a while on my light rod that I use. When I finally got it up to the top I saw it was a hybrid striper. The first one I've ever personally caught in twenty seven years of guiding. It measured 25" long and was very fat, maybe eight or nine

pounds. These are very rare up here on the North Branch. I'm guessing it came down the river from New York. It's still out there because after many photos, I released it.

And speaking of releasing fish . I often talk with people at the various river accesses I use in the 65 miles of river I guide in. One Saturday this month I watched a young man bring up a stringer of 3 small mouth bass 15" to 18" long which would be 8 to 10 year old fish. He saw me putting my boat away for the trip home and came over to talk. He wanted to know if I wanted to have the bass because he didn't want to clean them. I told him no thanks and that I don't harvest small mouth bass. I asked him why he kept the bass if he didn't want to eat them. He told me he was in a "Fish Float Tournament" where they bring in the fish to win a small amount of money and he missed the cutoff time dead line . When I told him how old those fish were he said "I wonder why they don't make the tournaments catch and release like I see on TV." Out of the mouths of babes folks.

Well that's my report for this month on the North Branch of the Susquehanna river. Boat safely and I'll see you on the river.

Good Fishing

Lance

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