

This Month With A Susquehanna River Guide Lance Dunham

It's the last month of the year. It's cold, the river iced up early in the slack water coves where I want and need to fish. Deer season drew me away for a couple of weeks where I lucked out with a 10 point buck but just couldn't find the right doe to tag, it was fun but now back to what I really love doing which is fishing. Remember when we got that nasty rain which turned into an ice storm? Well all that rain raised the river and took out the cove ice where I wanted to fish. So there's nothing to stop me now! "Take someone with you" came that all too familiar voice from my darling wife in the other room. OK, so now I'm slowed down a bit, got to think fast. "Got it covered dear, Joe is going to meet me at the access." She smiled "Joe huh", She won't really know until she reads my column in the paper that there isn't any Joe fishing with me today. Just me and my camera. Hey, I think I'll name it Joe! If I can have a boat tow vehicle named Big Blue, I can have a camera named Joe. Whatever works. Right guys? The wind was 10 to 15mph with a light rain when Big Blue, Joe and I arrived at the access. The water was about 2 1/2ft higher than usual. I tied the bow line to the trailer and slowly backed in. As soon as the boat began to float I was out of Big Blue and grabbed the line. I didn't want the force of the current to break the line and free float the boat, (been there, done that). I went to a sheltered area somewhat out of the strong current and proceeded to fish very slow with a 3" stick worm on a lead head jig. The water was 34 to 35 degrees. It took about ten minutes before I felt the first tap. I set the hook, more of a lift really and up comes the first walleye of the day. I switched over to a hair jig and caught a couple more along with a nice 17" smallie which didn't fight hardly at all. It took over two hours but I ended up with four walleye and two smallmouth bass from that spot. All of which were returned to the river. When I got home my wife asks the usual, "How did you guys do", "Oh I got a few, but Joe just took the pictures". I smiled, she smiled, and after 38 years together we don't argue over the small stuff anymore.

One of the many things to do in the winter is to get ready for the next season. At the top of the list is to apply for my new guide license. The PFBC, (Pa Fish and Boat Commission), sends me my application early in the month so I have time to renew it before the start of the new year. While there are several criteria to meet, CPR, first aid, insurance ect, I have those run out for me during the fishing season so they are always current in December when I apply. One thing though that I do need to purchase that runs out by the end of the year is a fishing license. Now I need to have a fishing license to get the guide license so why don't they just charge me more for the guide license and there would be less paper work. But I guess that would be too simple wouldn't it. I always buy my license at the local store in town instead of on line because I like to shop local when I can but mostly I like to chat with the owners. The lady there asks me the usual questions as she is processing my license. "Would you like a Lake Erie stamp ?", No was

the reply. "How about a trout stamp?" "Sure go ahead", never use the thing in the river but it helps the PFBC out. Then she smiles and says "I must ask, do you want to make a contribution to the PFBC"? "What, I just did with the trout stamp, and I don't even get the stamp, just the words printed on the license"! We both got a chuckle from that as she hands me my new bright yellow paper license which will fade almost to nothing by the time I'm through with it.

With the end of the year comes my end of the year fishing stats. We only had two off months where we caught less fish than usual. March which had our only flood and I only got three charters in, and October, which had extremely low water and it slowed down the count somewhat. However the year as a whole was a huge success. It gave me several new records and a new yearly catch record for the 28 years I've been guiding. It was due in part to losing very few charters, I ended up with 217 customer charters. Pretty good weather overall, and great anglers to spend the day with who were willing to let me guide them. Thanks to you all! All catches are confirmed, (witnessed) if you please. I did not include any of the times that I fished by myself in the stats. All fish were caught on artificial lures, no live bait was used. Totals by species are Smallmouth bass-12,533 fish, Walleyes-410 fish, Rock Bass-110 fish, White Suckers (fall fish)-29 fish, Muskies-14 fish, Northern Pike-13 fish, Carp-10 fish, Channel Cats-8 fish, Bluegills-7 fish, Hog Nose Suckers-4 fish, Large Mouth Bass-1 fish, Brown Trout-1 fish. That's a total of 13,140 fish or an average of 60.55 fish per trip for 217 charters. Don't worry, almost all the fish, 99.7% , were returned to the river unharmed. You can find the complete stats for each month on my website, just click on "Articles".

This leads to a couple of subjects. I had a friend ask me how much longer do I think I can continue to guide. I laughed and told him about another 22 years will make an even 50, then maybe I'll think about retirement. He said with all the pollution going on, the river will never be as good then as it is now. Hello! I just told him that this year was a new 28yr record for me! Meaning it has been getting better not worse at least for the last 28 years. Being younger, he doesn't know how really bad it once was. Further back in the 60's, when I was a little kid, we got in the 12ft boat and drifted down the river trying to catch the then 9" legal sized smallmouths to eat. Everything legal to keep was kept, that was just the way it was, the way we were taught to fish, we didn't know any better, and there were very few big fish in the river as a result. We didn't know about the benefits the fishery would get from selective harvest or catch and release of the big old breeder fish. There was raw sewage and all kinds of trash in the river. Everyone seemed to dump their garbage over the river bank for the next flood to take it downstream, and the water stunk. Throughout the years we've learned more about pollution, how bad it is, and how to stop it. We certainly haven't won the battle but we at least now we know it's a battle that must be continuously fought. To this day I won't eat more than one fish a month out of the river and that would have to be a walleye. There's just something about seeing raw sewage float by that stay's in your mind.

People ask me if we ever catch the same fish over and over. I'm here to tell you that I know we do now. Not all fish are exactly alike even in the same species. Some are bigger, smaller, fatter, have a distinguishing mark, or most often have a piece of fin missing somewhere. When

you're out on the water everyday, you notice these things. If you don't hurt or play the fish too long to exhaust them and get them right back in the water, they will bite again very soon, at least the smallmouth bass will. There is an old phrase that I've been using for years, "Fish are too valuable to be only caught once". I learned just this week that this statement was originally made famous by a fly fisherman, Lee Wulff, back in the 30's. Leave it to a fly fisherman to be decades ahead of us river rats in fish conservation.

There was one particular smallmouth bass that bit so often this season that I jokingly called it Homer because it had a home right behind one big rock at a certain place in the river and didn't seem to leave. Homer was 16" long with about an inch of tail fin missing on the bottom. We caught him four times in one week, behind the same rock. Each time a different fisherman caught him and he was released unharmed for the next person to enjoy. Now that's what catch and release fishing is all about. Well that's all I have for this month. For further reports, photos and all my fishing columns, visit me on my web site at www.ldguideservice.com. Good fishing and I'll see you on the river.

Happy Holidays

Lance