

This Month with a Susquehanna River Guide Lance Dunham

The month of December started out with the first week being pretty darn cold and with the deer hunting season going on my boat sat in my driveway with the cover on. Last year, the weather was warm enough that I fished right through December and even into some of January, but this year it just seemed like it wanted to be winter. However the second week the air got up to the 40's and by that Thursday I just couldn't stand it any longer. It was to be a sunny day but the nights had been very cold and ice was forming.

As usual, the alarm goes off at 5:00AM and I announce to my wife that I'm fishing today and not hunting. "Take someone along with you to help" she says. I tell her in my most masculine voice that I can conjure up at 5:00AM, "Help, I don't need anyone to help, I'm a river guide, I help other people fish all year long, what an insult". I really know that she worries about me fishing alone in the winter and that I tend to take a few more chances when I'm alone and don't have a client to think of. So I drive the Green Weenie with boat in tow over to the river to one of the local accesses and there is about six foot of ice along the edge and a whole bunch of ice flows all over the river. Crap, I can't get in here so I drive to another access that I know has more current and therefore no river edge ice.

I get there and sure enough no river edge ice but there are still those 2ft to 3ft mush ice flows all over the river, hundreds of them! Now maybe if I had someone there with me to talk me out of it, or if I had a client with me, I might have turned around and went home, but being alone, fishing just seemed like the thing to do. I back the boat in and the little ice flows are whacking the boat shoving it down river off the trailer. Gee, I thought, too bad I don't have someone to help hold the boat rope! The river current wasn't too bad, but when I tried to fish by slowing down the boat with the trolling motor, all those little ice flows were catching my line making my presentation way too fast for the sluggish fish. I went to a few places I know of down river for some slow, slack water and find most are filled with ice. I tucked up behind them to get away from the ice flows and I finally get down to some serious fishing. The water temperature was 37 degrees a foot under the surface. I catch a couple of small mouth bass and some short walleyes on hair jigs and continued with this pattern of fishing the slow water at a couple more spots down river.

Ending up with about ten fish in the three hours I was out I proved something I already knew and that was anytime that you can put a boat on open water you can catch fish if you know where to go and what to do when you get there.

So now I was about four miles down river and had to get back up through all those small mushy ice burgs. What should have taken about eight minutes to get back with the jet boat, took me about an hour! I couldn't go up on plane because I didn't want to hurt the boat hull and anyone who knows anything about jet motors knows you can't steer very well when you go slow so I hit quite a few mushy ice flows going back. When they got sucked up in the motor, the motor would race, I'd stop moving, and the jet would spit out the ice mush like a snow cone. I got to go fishing again about a week later and the river was clear of ice with typical winter fishing conditions. It was great! Please remember to

always wear your PFD (personal floatation device) when fishing in the cold water. It may make the difference of getting to fish another day if you fall in. You can bet I wear mine in the winter. Yes, I may get a little adventurous when I'm by myself, but I try, try mind you, not to be stupid! Works most of the time. Also dress warm paying particular attention to your head, hands, and feet where your body will lose its heat first. If you are comfortable you can concentrate on fishing easier. If you've got a pair of ski goggles or an old snowmobile helmet with a face shield, it will save your eyes from watering up in the cold wind when running your boat and you can see where you are going. Sure it may look a little dorky, but I'm at the age that comfort overrules looking cool every time.

The main lure that I used this month was the hair jig. The hair jig is a very old lure that was used long before the invention of the plastic worm. It consists of a hook with lead molded on at the top for weight and a hair material tied on just behind the head. When the water is cold and I mean from 39 degrees to ice, the fishing gets very slow. The fish are sluggish and won't chase your lure like they did in the warmer water, but they still got to eat. You need to be fishing something as slow as the river will let you without it getting caught on the bottom and that lure is the jig fished very slow. Plastics tend to be less flexible when they get super cold and natural hair will be moved by itself under those conditions. The finer the hair, the more movement your jig will have. Rabbit or fox hair would be better than deer hair as an example. I make my hair jigs out of a long streamer hair which is combed out wool. This hair is so fine that when a smallmouth bass strikes at the lure, they have some trouble spitting it out because it gets caught on their sandpaper like mouth, giving you more time to detect the bite and set the hook. Cast the jig out in slow water out of the current. Almost vibrate your wrist and reel in the slack very slowly, keeping in contact with the lure, pause if you can. A smallmouth cold water bite feels like you got caught on a few wet leaves pulling up off the bottom. The walleye bite is more of a tap on your lure then you feel weight. As I always tell my clients, when in doubt, set the hook and reel. A good sensitive rod will also give you an edge in detecting winter strikes.

I don't see as much wildlife on the river in the winter as you do in the fall. The one day there were flock after flock of Canada geese flying South, along with many flocks of ducks. You still have the chickadees and snow birds in the bushes with the occasional cardinal. And there is still a bald eagle here or there but most have moved on to easier fishing with less ice. I saw several mink and a beautiful red fox hunting the shoreline, and it always amazes me to see how many deer are on the islands during deer season.

I keep a well documented count of all fish caught during the year, and my daily log sheet which I have on my web site, shows how many fish were caught each day, who was fishing with me, what the water and weather conditions were, and what lures we used to catch the fish with. I do fish by myself on occasion, however I don't count those fish as being documented so they don't show up in my count. Now that it is the end of the year I'll show you what the totals ended up to be. We had a new record number of fish caught this year due in part to the lack of rain, low water and easy fishing. Add that to the great fishing my clients did along with the low number of days lost due to high muddy water and you end up with a total of 11,873 fish caught from my boat. Out of that number of fish, only a total

of 22 walleye were harvested. All the rest were released to fight again another day. There were 11,086 smallmouth bass caught, 515 walleyes caught, 194 rock bass caught, 24 white suckers caught, 20 channel catfish caught, 12 northern pike caught, 9 carp caught, 7 bluegills caught, 3 hog nose suckers caught, 1 trout caught, 1 muskie caught, and 1 stripper caught.

You can tell that I mainly fish for smallmouth bass and walleye. The rest were incidentals. All of the fish were caught on artificial lures just because I think it's more fun to fish with them.

And when you go fishing, please remember to practice selective harvest. If you want some fish to eat, harvest the smaller legal ones and let the old breeders go to fight again another day. Think of the hurt to the resource of just what my boat would do if we kept all the legal fish we could, there wouldn't be many old fish left in the 65 miles where we fish.

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

Happy Holidays and good fishing.

Lance

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