

This Month with a Susquehanna River Guide Lance Dunham

As I sit here at my computer pecking away I look outside the sliding glass doors of my den and notice the thermometer showing a nippy 5 degrees out there. No fishing with the boat today or in the near future I fear. I have several bird feeders out there and lately they have been swamped with Gold Finches in flocks of about 30 or more. My wife found a great use for our old Christmas tree . She placed it out on our back deck, put gobs of peanut butter all over it like brown tree ornaments and then poured mixed wild bird seed on it that stuck to the peanut butter creating a natural bird feeder. I also wedged some ear corn in the limbs that the larger birds and the occasional squirrel like to eat. The tree is alive with activity all day and all through the winter.

Since I can't put my boat on the water, I took it up to the good folks at Snake Creek Marine in Montrose Pa for it's annual service. They check over my motor and boat with the request that they replace anything that even might have the slightest chance to break down during the next fishing season, giving me a motor and boat that's in almost new condition each season. They know how important my boat is to me with over 220 fishing trips a season including some personal fishing time. This year I asked them to steam clean my boat carpet because even though I run it through the car wash once a week I can't ever seem to get all the dirt out. The owner Alan Coy laughed because he said they found enough river mud down deep in the carpet to plant grass! They also winterized the boat knowing it won't be back on the water until March. When I got there to pick up my boat it had just snowed the night before and then froze. It was 3 degrees in the morning when I left my house, and the roads were covered with snow and slop. They had my boat inside their heated work area. The carpet looked like it was new, the motor was all shined up and Alan went over the list of improvements they had done. Sure this extra attention costs me a couple of nickels more, but I feel I should do whatever I can to put my clients in a safe, clean, and reliable boat. I was excited, it made me feel like I needed to go fishing now just so I could play with the boat! We hooked it up to Big Blue,(my truck/suv) and I was on my way back home. Well, as the boat cooled down to the frigid outdoor temps, all that road slop started to freeze to my boat as it was kicked up by the tires on Big Blue. By the time I reached Dushore some 50 miles or so away there was over 3" of built up frozen slop on my boat. It was the dirtiest I've ever seen it ! To say the least I was a bit depressed over the situation. I pulled right into the car wash and had to wash it five times to get it all off and then the wash water kept on freezing on it but at least it was mostly clean. As soon as the temperature gets above freezing I'll wash it again to make sure I got all the salt off. I was glad that only a little slop got inside the boat on my newly cleaned carpet!

Planting grass! That reminds me of something that happened on the river to me many years ago. This was back when I used to make float trip charters from one town to another. For an

eight hour charter I knew where I had to be on the river at a certain time of the day in order to finish at 4:00 in the afternoon 12 miles away at the next access. It just so happened that around noon we always passed a certain set of islands and quite often I would see a guy in a rowboat crossing the river to one of the islands. I never really thought much about it until much later. During this particular summer we had a drought and the water was very low. The Game Commission took advantage of the low water, drove a tractor across the shallows and planted some corn on one of the islands for the wildlife. As we were floating by this island one day the urge hit me to go and “act like a bear in the woods” if you know what I mean. I landed the boat, went up the bank and there was the small corn field. Ah, the perfect place I thought. I took about ten steps through the corn and I came upon a small opening with a whole bunch of wacky weed, as we called it, growing nicely in the center. Not wanting to meet the owner or the authorities that might have been watching it, I high tailed it out of there. I told my client what I had found and being from Philadelphia he offered to go pick some evidence and fill his pockets. I told him it was a long walk back if he stayed and to get back in the boat. When I got home I called the land manager that I knew from the Game Commission. I asked him if he knew what kind of seed they planted on that island and he knew right away what I had found. He said there were many different authorities watching the area but have not been able to catch the owner of the crop. He also suggested that I stay off the other islands in the area for awhile if I didn’t want to be interrupted while “acting like a bear in the woods”. That winter I asked him about it and they never did catch the owner so they harvested the plants and destroyed them.

The winter also gives me the opportunity to make little adjustments to the boat that I’ve wanted to do all summer like add another rod protector on the port (left) side to help protect clients rods from getting stepped on. I make them out of 4” heavy duty pvc pipe and cut a 2” wide slot in them to place the rods in. I paint them black and glue outdoor carpeting inside them so high end rods don’t get scratched and the “Fishing Guide” doesn’t step on a rod tip. Oh that would be very bad. I’ve also acquired a couple of thick aluminum plates to reinforce the battery hatch cover and the livewell lid so we can stand or sit on them while fishing. Can’t get too comfortable ya know. And no I didn’t forget I need to install some cup holders in the boat decks for that all important beverage of choice. That request came up several times during last season.

This winter also gives us some time to give some planning attention to the North Branch of the Susquehanna River. We all would like to see more larger/older trophy smallmouth in the river, and what angler wouldn’t want to catch bigger smallies most of the time, it’s just more fun. You know, the 15” to 20” smallmouth that are 7 to 12 years old, those are the ones I’m talking about. Well, they’re not going to get big or old if we take them out of the river! And they won’t get big if we do total catch and release like I do either even though it will help. We need something in between and the answer is a slot limit! There is only so many pounds of food per mile of river which will sustain only so many pounds of gamefish. It is of my opinion as someone who been guiding on the river going on my 29th year and guides full time on the river over 220 days a season that in order to get bigger fish we need to harvest the legal 12”,13”and 14” smallies for the people who wish to eat them,(not me), and to provide more food in the river to grow the

larger fish. They have been in the river less time and have absorbed less heavy metals,(Mercury being just one), and PCB's making them a bit safer to eat. Leave the 15" to 20" fish alone for sport fishing anglers, which more people do these days anyway, and let the trophy fishermen harvest one 20"plus size smallie for the wall if they so desire. In about 6 years time, you would see many more trophy fish in the North Branch. We've always had a large amount of smallies on the North Branch, now let's try and grow some big ones. Along this train of thought,in comes the N.B.S.A, the North Branch Smallmouth Alliance, a conservation organization that is trying to do just that with public education and river clean ups. They will be having , as always, a public meeting next February 10th at Marks Valley View restaurant on rt6 just East of Wyalusing at 7:00PM. The local PFBC biologist and one of the Commissioners will be there to give a talk about the river and there will be time for questions. I'll be there, come join me.

Well that's my report this month, for further information, photos, and reports, visit me on my web site at www.ldguideservice.com , fish safe and I'll see you on the river.

Good fishing

Lance