

## On The Water With A Susquehanna River Guide Lance Dunham

The month of January, the beginning of a new season and I'm already itching to get back on open water. But before we talk about the new year, let's finish out the old one first. As many of you know I post a daily log on my website of every fishing charter I do with weather and water conditions included. At the end of the season I post my charter fishing stats that shows how many fish were caught of each species for each month of the season. In 2009 I had 175 regular 8 to 10 hr charters, 53 evening or half charters, and 9 cold water charters for a total of 237 charters. I spent roughly 1700 hours on the water with charters. I don't count anything on the 19 R&D fishing trips that I went out by myself to test new products and just to have some additional fun. This year I was requested by our Fish Commissioner for the North Branch, Norm Gavlick, to send him a copy along with my stats for several years back. Finally, we have a Commissioner that wants to know more fishing facts and trends about the North Branch of the river. And who better to get information from than the permitted Fishing Guides who spend more time on the river than anyone else. At least this guide of going on 30 years of chartering most every day can give him some incite of what's going on with the North Branch. We are still trying to get a slot limit up here to protect the big breeding bass between 16" and 20" and to ensure there is enough food for them in the river by allowing the harvest of the smaller/safer fish to eat of 12" up to 15". Now I obviously want more bigger and older fish for my clients to catch and release, but lets be honest, who doesn't want to consistently catch bigger fish. It is after all, at least in this day and age, mostly a sport isn't it? While this strategy will work for the North Branch of the river, I'm not so sure about the Main Branch that I'm told doesn't have nearly the same amount of fish as the North Branch. By far, I'm no expert for the Main Branch because I don't and wouldn't guide down there but I do pay attention to what the PFBC Biologist have studied and what my trusted fishing friends down there have to say about the Main Branch. That area sounds to me like it could stand a few years of total catch and release to boost the fish count per mile.

My stats for the last season are Largemouth Bass 1 fish, yes folks, each year I get one largemouth out of a weedy cove up here and that's about it , Quillback 2 fish, these are really neat, they fight like crazy and sort of look like a silver carp with a dorsal fin that goes straight up to a point. Hog Nose Sucker 3 fish, because we most likely snagged them by accident. Bluegill 5 fish, Perch 5 fish, Trout 5 fish. The trout are caught every spring about a week after they released them. This year we even caught some Brook Trout that were stocked 13 miles up the creek. I read that it costs over \$2.00 a fish to raise them. Pretty expensive musky food if you ask me. We caught 10 carp, the biggest being 38"

long and 28lbs which a great battle on the light rod it was caught on. Channel Cats 16 fish. Musky 19 fish, even the small ones are exciting on light tackle because they don't give up the fight. The biggest that was landed on our light tackle was 40" long. We lost several that were much bigger but they had their way with us and just swam away, a beautiful and exciting fish, these big fish are coming back now in numbers since the minimum size to keep one went up to 40". The PFBC gets a thumbs up for that one, thanks guys. White Sucker, or Fall Fish as some locals call them because they get very active in the cool Fall water. We caught 34 of those and you know in cool water they give a good fight. Northern Pike 42 fish. This fish has increased in numbers also over the years. Only thing is they don't fight half as well as a musky of the same size. Half way through the fight they just give up and come to the net. I'm also surprised how many anglers think they are musky. I had one angler yell to me at the river access to come see the big musky he had in his livewell. Livewell ? Big Musky ? The two just didn't go together. The guy did have a nice 30" Northern Pike. I told him that if he thought it was a musky, it was illegal to possess one under 40", however since it was a beautiful Northern Pike, he was fine. To his credit he took a photo of it right there and let it go but he was disappointed to find out it wasn't a musky. Was he going to keep it if it was? Rock Bass, we caught 79 of those. These fish are on the decline up here on the North Branch. We used to catch several hundred a year and have been getting fewer each year. I don't know if this is a good or bad thing. Walleye 386 fish, slightly down from last years total of 410. We did harvest about 20 of these good eating fish, however I won't let my clients keep a walleye over 20" and most let them all go. And then there was my favorite fish, the Smallmouth Bass where we caught and released 11,311 fish! Pound for pound the best fighting sport fish on the river! The total for the year was 11,920 fish. This count was down from last year by over a thousand fish but that was due to the ever present high dirty to muddy water conditions where the fish had a hard time even finding our lures to bite. But even under those less than perfect conditions, I think we did rather well. All the fish were caught on artificial lures, and all that were counted were witnessed by clients.

Catching all those fish with all that time on the water brings to mind a couple of myths many of the local fishermen have about fishing guides. Now I'm sure that there many be one or two fishing guides out there that aren't that ethical, but they don't last too long in the guiding game. I'm going on my 30<sup>th</sup> year as a professional fishing guide and this is what I've found. Every once and awhile I hear "Those guides are catching all OUR fish in OUR river"! I doubt that even the most talented guide can do that. Even if he could, it is in his best interest to make sure that as many fish as possible get released back to the water unharmed, remember no fish , no reason for a fishing guide, no income, no food on the table, and if you've seen me, I sure like my food. We harvested only 20 fish out of 11,920! You do the math, that's a very small percentage of even 1%. Another one is "Guides bring in all those strangers,(Flatlanders), and show them where OUR fish are then the Flatlanders come back with their own boats and catch OUR fish"! First of all,

what exactly is a “Flatlander” and why are they scorned so? I think it means most anyone out of the area that doesn’t live on a hill like us “Hillbilly’s” is considered a Flatlander. How’s that for logic. If that’s the case, some of my best and most trusted friends are Flatlanders. At least for me, most of my clients, over 95%, don’t even own a boat that could go through the shallow water rocks like I can. The other 5% may have a boat that could do it but don’t want to take the risk of putting a rock through the hull of their boat, on water they don’t know, where the next hull ripping rock is located in the next 5 seconds going 40MPH. So you see most fishing guides are no threat to the local fishery in fact most are an asset in fishing conservation information. I’ll spill my guts in angler know-how information that I’ve accumulated to any like minded catch and release angler that approaches me and if I have it to spare, even give you the lure I’m using that day. I’ve done it many times while waiting for my clients to arrive at the river. But if you’re just out to fill your stringer, you really can’t expect my help in doing so. Well that’s all I have for this first month of the year. For further reports, photo’s, and booking information please visit me on my website at [www.ldguideservice.com](http://www.ldguideservice.com). Good Fishing and I’ll see you on the river.

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