

This month with a Susquehanna River Guide Lance Dunham

Here it is, the second month of a new and I'm sure exciting year. This will be my 28th year guiding on the Susquehanna River. People ask me, what does a fishing guide do in the off season when they can't fish? I know some head South with boat in tow for three months . I had a big Outfitter offer me a guiding job South of the boarder in my off season a few years back, they were looking for river guides and the money was good, but being a married man, I still wanted my house key to fit the front door when I got back so I turned them down. There is a ton of things for me to do anyway in the off season. I do wood working now for my wife at her floral factory in Dushore, I've got a bunch of custom fishing rods to make for clients, there are about 1800 lead head jigs to pour in assorted weights for the next season (I tell my wife that this is why I'm half brain dead), along with the other lures I make. This is when I also do fishing seminars for various organizations interested in the river and fishing.

One of the more fun things to do are the couple of sportsman Expo's I do in the winter. The first one being the Early Bird Expo at the end of last month at the Fair grounds in Bloomsburg . I get to talk to anglers interested in my charters and to quite a few that will come up to me and just want to talk fishing. The number one question I always hear is "When is the best time to come fishing with you." My number one answer is always, "Whenever you can make it here." You see in the 27 years that I've been guiding I've only been skunked twice on the river, and that was in major floods that we shouldn't have been on in the first place. Also I guarantee that my clients catch a fish and either they don't pay for the charter, or the trip gets rescheduled. Now mind you, they actually have to try to catch a fish my way first. Some people just like to go for a boat ride, and that's just fine, but that's another story. However as a rule of thumb the big fish are easier to catch in cool water, and the big numbers of fish are caught in the warm water. The extremes of plain hot over 78 degrees, or plain cold under 38 degrees water are the most difficult to fish, along with plain mud. It all depends on Mother Nature and your expertise with a fishing rod. But one thing is certain, you will catch a fish, because I will show you how.

Traditionally, for most of the month of February, the ice has the slow water coves covered making them impossible to fish with a boat. For those who are brave or foolish enough to fish through the river ice, the rewards can be great in Walleyes, Northern Pike, and Musky. But the river ice many times is weak from the current going underneath and from the constant rising and lowering of water levels. I've seen a foot of ice go out in a single day because of the moving water.

I learned a long time ago from a veteran river ice fisherman who took me under his wing and showed me how to fish the river through the ice. He had two rules he always wanted me to follow. Rule #1, never take more equipment with you than you can carry in two hands. Rule #2, always take someone with you because of rule #1. In other words, he would take his gas auger to drill the holes and I would take two buckets filled with our jigging rods, bait, coffee, and a rope for emergencies.

The best time to ice fish for walleyes was in the twilight hours to dark, or low light conditions. We would start in the dark on the ice at 5:00AM drilling holes and the best fishing seemed to be just before dawn and an hour after first light. It was always a little scary drilling in the dark because you didn't know how thick the ice was until you got the first hole drilled. Once we got to fishing you always needed to listen to the ice. Depending on the temperature, and the water flow, the ice would settle and indeed crack. Every time we would hear a boom, it meant that the ice was moving in some way and it was my job to take the flashlight and check it out. One time when this happened I found that the entire ice cove was starting to move, there was a moving 3" wide crack not two foot from shore. My ice veteran friend was on his feet, yelling at me to get my gear and get off the ice. In the 45 seconds it took for us to gather up and run for shore the 3" wide crack was now a 2ft wide crack and we jumped to the safety of dry land. I now thoroughly understood about his rules #1 and #2. His experience with river ice saved our bacon that day. A couple of years later, he passed away unexpectedly and so did my craving for river ice fishing. I still go to the river to talk with the ice fishermen in the winter and to check out how soon I can get my boat on open water.

People often ask me if I ever fell out of my boat. The answer is no, I'm always aware of my surroundings good or bad, and try to stay out of trouble. Now I've hit some terrible rocks and sunken trees before putting some major dents in the boat, but I've always managed to stay in the boat because I knew what was coming, good, bad, or ugly. I have had to go retrieve my boat a few times after I got out to push through shallow water much to the delight of my clients who were waving good-bye and having a good laugh while I was trying to catch up. There was one such time as I recall many years back in October when I just had a float boat with a little motor and we would launch at one town and my wife would pick us up eight hours later at the next town down river. Well during the trip it started raining very hard and my client had his small boy with him so it was decided to end the trip. I remember the water was around 50 degrees, I motored the rest of the way in and we ended up at our destination about two hours early. I pulled the boat on shore as far as I could but didn't tie it to anything. My clients car was there waiting for him so he got in and started home. The heavy rain never stopped and I had a two hour wait for my wife. There were no cell phones that worked on the river back then and I was wet through and cold. I started to walk in circles around the parking area to keep warm

in the heavy down pour. By the time she arrived, on time I'm reminded, I had the uncontrollable shakes, an early warning sign of hypothermia. I jumped in the truck and turned on the heater full blast. I told her I just had to get warm before I loaded the boat. It took about a half an hour before I had control of my hands again. I started to back down the ramp with the truck and trailer and the boat was gone! The water had come up enough to float it out into the river about 50ft and it was on it's way down river. I yelled out a few expletives I can't repeat here, kicked off my boots, and started in after it. The wife's getting all excited on the shore, yelling for me to come back which isn't helping at all, I needed that boat for tomorrows charter and that was that. When I got about 10ft from the boat I was up to my chest in water and started to swim for it. I grabbed the line (rope) off the bow and hung on. It was at this point I realized I had a lot of clothes on which was making it difficult to pull myself up over the side of the boat to get in. When I got my coat and bib overalls off it was then easy to pull myself in. I'm a few hundred feet down river now resting in the boat, catching my breath in the rain, not cold at all at this point but exhausted, listening to my wife yelling something back at the launch which I knew wasn't helping. I started the motor up and went back. When I got home I took a very long hot shower to get thawed out. Oh those were the good old days all right. I've since bought the best rain gear money can buy, got a jet boat so I don't need to rely on anyone to pick me up, and cell phones work just fine on the river, even though I've lost two so far somewhere at the bottom. And my wife still retains the right to yell at me once in a while even if it doesn't help.

Well that's my report for the river this month, next month I should find some open water on the river to fish. In the mean time boat safely and I'll see you on the river.

Good Fishing

Lance

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