

# MERCER WISCONSIN

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Most inland water lakes in Wisconsin close the season on game fish such as walleye, northern pike, and bass in early March. The season resumes traditionally the first Saturday in May, this year May 5th. There are many significant dates throughout the year: January 1st, December 25th, July 4th...opening day of deer hunting and of course opening day of the new fishing season. After a long winter there is a lot of pent up demand to be in a boat or on a bank on the open water with fishing rod in hand.

There are some water ways in Wisconsin open year-round to game fish such as the Wisconsin River, Mississippi River and the Winnebago system. I grew up in Oshkosh and learned to fish on Lake Winnebago and the connecting Fox River, arguably one of the best walleye fisheries in the Midwest. In early May however, the allure of the Northwoods and camping on an island on the Turtle Flambeau Flowage (TFF) brought me to the northern part of the state. Thirty years later I still often camp opening weekend on the TFF.

Early May is a special time, the night air

is usually cold the stars are bright the spring peepers loud. The spring air has the smell of pine trees and of new leaves sprouting, but has an earthy organic smell compared to the summer air. A few years back I camped on the east end where the current from the Flambeau River had opened up a narrow sliver of about 5 miles of fishable water (most of the main body of the flowage was still iced over). The ice had also confined a couple hundred migrating loons, a variety of diver ducks, geese and swans to the available open water. With the added bonus of a howling wolf near camp. I got very little sleep that night, but what an exhilarating loss of sleep! The night camp fire serves a multitude of purposes: the first walleyes of the year fried over it, warmth, aroma and its mesmerizing effects that usually puts me to sleep in my camp chair after a long day on the water.

At the time of this writing (mid-April) we just had our biggest snow storm of the year; the lakes are heavily covered in ice. It is looking like a repeat of 2013 and 2014 in which many lakes were still covered



with ice for the opening weekend. This is a strange anomaly which generally only happens about once every 20 years. If this is the case, there will still be water to fish where there is current from rivers. On the TFF, the north end has the strong current from the Turtle River and the east end current from the Flambeau River, each end has a public landing though smaller than the main landings on the flowage.

Opening weekend being a time-honored tradition for many fishermen, is the busiest weekend of the year on the water. With that said, there is still plenty of elbow room on the northern Wisconsin lakes. With thousands of Lakes within a short drive of Mercer Wi. where I live, it is still possible to find a lake off the beaten trail in which you may be the only boat on the water. The





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lakes that are popular, while on the water, fisherman are spread out, but the boat landings may be congested with a short wait time to launch and a little farther walk to park your vehicle, for most of us after the long winter it is a small price to pay to finally be back on the open water.

Being a fishing guide, I usually have customers opening weekend, if I camp I pick them up at the dock and avoid any line at the landing. My kids grew up camping on the TFF before them, one of my first dates with my wife was a camping weekend in May on the TFF. But you don't need to be a camper to enjoy the north woods in the Mercer area, most people opt for the comfort of a bed. There is a lot of good lodging in the area, in town there are a number of hotels, there are many fine resorts in the area and an abundance of vacation rental homes. The Mercer Area Chamber of Commerce and the Turtle Flambeau Flowage Association are good sources for accommodations.

There is an abundance of species to fish for but early in the season most fisherman are targeting walleyes. Early in the season

on the TFF perch are commonly brought to the boat as a bonus, as far as table fare in the fresh water category, these two fish varieties are pretty hard to beat.

Most of the fishing my customers and I do is jig fishing. In May it is almost exclusively with minnows, extra-large fatheads are the bait of choice. The perch on the TFF that are brought into the daily bag (limit 10 panfish of any species) are big in size and will take an extra-large fathead minnow, no need to buy different bait for them. The size of the jig is dependent on depth of water fished and the amount of current, if fishing in a river channel. In water under 8' we usually use 1/16 oz. jigs, over 8' or if windy 1/8oz. jigs very seldom bigger than 1/8 oz.

The walleyes on the TFF aren't suspended and are relating to the bottom hence you want to make sure you are slowly working your bait across the bottom. Being a flowage, you will quickly find out that the fish are often relating to the wood structure laying on or protruding off the bottom. When fishing areas with a lot of wood structure

weed less jigs will help keep you from constantly tying on new jigs due to losing them to the wood snags. I use Jack's jigs, other good weed less jigs are Invasion jigs and Reeves jigs they are available in the two sport shops in Mercer.

Another asset that will help bring fish to the net is a quality fishing rod. I fish with St. Croix rods, they are manufactured in nearby Park Falls Wisconsin. St. Croix has a fantastic retail store where their rods are available they also now give factory tours.

A medium lite fast action in 6'6" or 7' makes for a good walleye jigging rod. I have found that equipping my customers with high end gear helps them detect the often-subtle bite of a walleye and land more fish. A 6-8lb. braided line like Fire Line or Power Pro also adds a great deal of bite detecting sensitivity to your tackle. I tie the jig directly to the braid with the darker stained water of the TFF I've not found a need to use a mono leader.


Last year on opening Sunday three customers and I caught a limit of nice walleyes by early afternoon and headed to an island for shore lunch. We did well fishing in only 3-5' of water with 1/16 oz. weedless jigs and minnows. Each year is different, this year with a late spring the bite might be in deeper water fishing walleyes

relating to current and holes in the original river channels, but that's only a guess.

Have fun, enjoy the fishing and the great outdoors.

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