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Destination: Wide Open Door County Smallies

By Robert Montgomery
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So often, disappointment quickly follows a spectacular start. For one reason or another, fish that cooperated for the first half-hour or so suddenly turn surly, and bites for the rest of the day are few and far between.

But such was not the case in early July on a little bay of Door County, Wis., on the Lake Michigan side. For more than six straight hours, guide Dale Stroschein (Wacky Walleye Guide Service) and his companion experienced angling nirvana as they caught and released 80 to 100 smallmouth bass, most of which weighed 3 to 4 pounds.

At least 10 topped 5 pounds, with the largest weighing 5-14.

"It's the kind of day that guys dream about," Stroschein said afterward. "I've had good days up here before, but nothing like this. This was the best day I've ever had."

His angling partner enthusiastically agreed.

Aside from the numbers and quality, what made the bite so spectacular is that the fish were in 3 to 6 feet of water most of the time, and sometimes, even shallower. Also, they seemed oblivious to the fishermen while roaming the skinny water in feeding packs.

Their large, brown bodies gave the appearance of redfish roaming saltwater flats.

"One smallmouth following another that you've hooked is normal," said the guide. "Two is abnormal. You don't see it that often. But we had 15 to 20 fish following."

Early on, the fish slammed chartreuse/white spinnerbaits. A couple that appeared to weigh 6 pounds or better rolled all over topwater lures, but came unbuttoned near the boat.

Then, as the bass moved shallower, tubes in shades of gold and smoke became the favored baits. Stroschein used Berkley PowerBait, while his partner opted for Strike King's new coffee-scented tubes.

The guide theorized that the bass had moved into this little bay on the east side of the peninsula to feed on crawfish. "Zebra mussels don't like it this shallow, so crawfish can live here," he said.

Ironically, Stroschein had not planned on fishing here, but strong west winds made water too rough on the bay side, as well as at Washington Island on the tip.

"Guides hit these little bays (on the Lake Michigan side) in spring," he said. "But overall, they don't get much pressure."

That's not surprising, considering that the Green Bay side of Door County has a stellar reputation for

smallmouth bass fishing, as well. Better than a 4-pound average typically is needed to win the Sturgeon Bay Open Bass Tournament in May.

Door County Trip Check

Location: The Door County peninsula lies along the eastern edge of Wisconsin, with Lake Michigan to the east and Green Bay to the west. Although the Green Bay side is more noted for bass fishing, coves, harbors and bays on both sides are rich with smallmouth. Door County is about 150 miles from Milwaukee, 230 miles from Chicago and 310 miles from Minneapolis.

Lodging: Small towns along the peninsula offer an abundance of lodging that ranges from quaint and quiet to modern and luxurious. The former includes Coachlite Inn of Sister Bay, 800-745-5031 or 920-854-5503, www.coachliteinn.com; and Journey's End Motel & Cabins in Baileys Harbor, 800-944-3582 or 920-839-2887, www.journeysendmotel.com. For the latter, check out Westwood Shores Waterfront Resort in Sturgeon Bay, 800-440-4057 or 920-746-4057, www.westwoodshores.net.

Local Info: Door County Visitor Bureau, 800-527-3529, www.doorcounty.com, info@doorcounty.com; ReelAction Sport Fishing Charters, 920-360-2136, www.reelactioncharters.com; Bousley's Sport Fishing Charters, 920-746-4560, www.bousleyfishing.com; Bushman Sport Fishing Team, 920-246-1827, www.fishkenoshadoorcounty.com; Wacky Walleye Guide Service, 888-879-5548 or 920-743-5731, www.sandbaybeachresort.com.

Weighing In

300 - Miles of shoreline in Door County

10 - Number of historic lighthouses along those 300 miles

4+ - Average weight of bass needed to win the Sturgeon Bay Open Bass Tournament, presented each May

2.1 - Millions of visitors per year to Door County — but most aren't fishing. Of those who do fish, the majority pursue salmon

Online information

Best Times To Go: Early May into June often is the best time to fish for Door County smallmouth bass, but bronzebacks will bite all summer and into October. Fishing heats up first to the south and on the Green Bay side. Then it moves north as the water warms.

Lures To Pack: Tubes and grubs probably are the top baits for Door County bass. Try smoke and watermelon shades, as well as goby and crawfish colors. Chug Bugs, Spooks and jointed Rapalas will take bass on top. Husky Jerks and Rogues in black/gold/orange are good choices when the bass want jerkbaits. Chartreuse spinnerbaits also can be effective.

Techniques: For prespawn smallmouth, throw jerkbaits, especially around flats with rocks, sand and/or weeds in 2 to 12 feet of water. Water is clearer in the spring, so long casts often are necessary to keep from spooking fish. Drop tubes onto beds to catch spawning bass. White is a good color choice to heighten visibility. Grubs and tubes will draw bites through summer and into fall. Try a variety of retrieves to find the bite, focusing on flats, trenches, wrecks, points, reefs and humps. A chartreuse spinnerbait buzzed along and into weedlines, especially near rocks, will draw strikes, especially on windy and/or overcast days. Try topwaters early and late around flats.