

Pages from a North Country Notebook

by George Vukelich

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BLUEGILLS

"God must have loved the common bluegill, because She made so many of them."

She certainly made a big batch of them for Lake Wingra and they all looked like they were stamped out in a button factory.

They were itty-bitty fishies, just barely bite-sized, the most impressive of them hardly bigger than poker chips.

Well, I've been fishing Wingra with a great deal of intensity this Winter, sometimes alone, sometimes in the warming company of other assorted nuts, and we're here to tell you that the Button Bluegills—the "kivver" minnows as Charlie Bran calls them—no longer dominate the Wingra fishery as they once did.

The Wingra bluegills are getting bigger. Granted, they aren't in the Squaw Bay class yet, and the Old Pro from Waubesa still looks at you like your ears are loose, but the bluegills in Wingra are getting bigger than they used to get. And I've got witnesses.

Vince Coletti. And his Magical Mystery Tour sled. All members of the Olson clan and others, honorary and in good standing. Even Jim Thrun after drilling two dozen "dry holes" last weekend wound up prospecting for panfish.

Everybody agrees: More little bluegills are growing up. And more big people are happy about that than you can shake a jigging stick at.

I think everybody's happy about it except me.

George Vukelich has won many awards for his environmental essays. He writes for Isthmus of Madison and hosts "Pages from a North Country Notebook" on Wisconsin Public Radio. Material printed here represents excerpts (not necessarily in sequence) from North Country Notebook, published by North Country Press.

Photo by Bruce Fritz



What normal person is going to trudge out onto the ice in freezing temperatures, drill a hole, and then sit there contemplating it for hours on end, day after day, month after month?

Oh, sure. I know the way the argument goes: Bigger bluegills mean better fishing because now they'll be worth keeping and cleaning. Hell, I always kept and cleaned—fileted, yet—the itty-bitty ones. They taste as good—better—than the big ones.

I always agreed with the Old Weed Eater and Wild Asparagus Stalker, Euell Gibbons, when he discoursed on the peewee bluegill:

"Everyone agrees that the bluegill is delicious, but very few think it is worth the effort required to clean, cook, and pick the meat from the bones. I don't agree. To me, cleaning, cooking, and eating bluegills is an essential part of the pleasure I derive from this colorful little fish. Properly cleaning a bluegill is an art well worth learning. I not only clean and skin them, I filet them. Yes, I really do, and I'm not a surgeon either. My whole family considers these little half ounce filets the finest fish I ever bring home."

Right on, Euell! I even *scale* the teensy-weensy ones, leaving the skin on because the skin is what holds the meat together. "Waste not, want not," The Old Man used to say in another place and in another language.

Bigger bluegills also mean bigger crowds. Aye. There's the rub. The word is out and the crowds are coming. They're a different breed and they're changing the old neighborhood.

There's even a guy out there with a power auger for God's sake. He drills more holes than Thrun but it's like meditating in the cathedral when the sky-bus roars over.

You don't need the eyes of an eagle to see what's coming next. So, I'm going to find a pond, a puddle where the bluegills are so small nobody in his right mind would fish for them. And I'm going to fish for them. All Winter long.

And when people ask me where I've been all Winter, I'll tell them I went back to work.

A NOSE FOR ICE FISHING

Steady Eddy calls them "the folks who fish the hardwater." They wear thermal underwear, drill holes in the ice until it looks like a prairie dog colony, and are unashamed to admit they use maggots for bait.

They're in their element right now, contemplating the Buddha at the Bottom-of-the-Lake and doing their thing on the glacier.

"You don't have to be crazy to go ice fishing," Steady Eddy preaches down at the bait shop, "but it doesn't hurt."

It could even help a little.

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"No normal person," Steady concedes. "Just us."

I always figured that The Old Man's rationale was as good as any I ever heard.

"With our big noses," he used to say of his tribe, "we are natural-born ice fishermen."

The Old Man held the theory that broad noses and economy-sized nostrils preheated the North Country air so that it entered your lungs like a warm soup.

That, of course, assumed that you were breathing through your nose and keeping your mouth shut. If you were dumb enough to walk around with your mouth open after Christmas, the winter air would sear your lungs like a snort of paint thinner and you deserved to die outside like the idiot you were.

The Old Man would be pleased to learn that even respected scientists accept this native wisdom and suggest that little-nosed people are courting disaster if they live north of Birmingham, Alabama.

It is because of The Old Man's vision that I now spend so much of the North Country Winter out on the ice. "I don't know why we do it," Steady repeats in amazement. "We are probably following in a great tradition."

The Old Man bequeathed to me not only his nose but other essential gear as well; tipups, ice skimmer, a gaff, jigging sticks, and poles.

I treasure them as I would the relics of a saint, primitive artifacts from a past that never knew the comfort and ease to be found in toasty Sorel boots



There are great lessons to be learned on the ice, even as there are great lessons to be learned on open water, and I know now what The Old Man was waiting for me to learn up in the Chain of Lakes country. He was waiting for me to be aware.

from Canada, ice augers from Sweden, and snowmobile suits that keep you as warm as an igloo.

I fish almost every day of the Winter now, and I think that I love the ice as much as I love the open water. I also think this is what The Old Man must have felt for the North Country in those growing-up years when I thought he wasn't as smart as he turned out to be.

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waiting for me to learn up in the Chain of Lakes country. He was waiting for me to be aware.

I don't think he ever used that word or knew it existed, but that's what he was waiting for.

Not just the awareness that the bluegills are schooled at six feet and hitting the green ice fly or that the light tap on the gold Rapala was a bass and not a perch.

It's the awareness that you're sitting out there all alone on the windswept ice like an old Eskimo, removed from the family and waiting for the polar bear to find you.

The awareness that you're sitting out there

like a live coal removed from the ring of live coals. Apart. Solitary. Vulnerable. In the mouth of the prowling wind.

Sustained by no others.

Sustained by what, then?

Far out on the ice there are crows settling down on the blinding surface and walking stiffly around the bodies of abandoned dead fish.

One comes eventually to an awareness of the scavengers among us, and one eventually goes beyond the initial revulsion and respects them for what they do in this world.

They go about their work with a ritualistic dignity. They are professional, correct, estimating the logistics of disposing of the dead before them. Then they proceed to pick out its eyes.

On the way off the ice this day, I answer the crows and detour a quarter mile to pick up an empty red Coleman fuel can with which the crows cannot cope.

I call down The Old Man's wrath on the slob who littered. Unless awareness finds him soon, he will be bedridden until Spring.

Michael Roberts

IT'S NOT THE WEATHER THAT FROSTS YOU

Steady Eddy figures this would have been a great winter for icefishing if it hadn't been for the weather.

Or, to be specific, if it hadn't been for the way media reports on the weather.

"On TV," he laments, "they use words like *bitter* cold, *cruel*, *painful* temperatures, and *killer* storms. They make it sound like Siberia out there, so nobody goes out."

The weather has shut down the bait shop for three straight weekends in a row. Weekends are usually bonanzas in normal winters, when the sun is up, the air is calm and the heavy, strong perch coming out of the ice touch your very soul with their vibrations.

Only the hardest of souls fish when the winds are up, and if the winds are strong, even the hardest of souls stop fishing. The winter winds sweeping the length of North Country lakes have all the sting of the Russian steppe.

The irony is that the winter started out so full of promise. We had ice early. We had snow early. The prognosis was great.

But then, Steady says, the cold settled in, and the media kept reminding everybody that while this particular batch of frigid Arctic air was finally moving out, we had better enjoy the brief respite because an equally frigid batch of Arctic air was about to move in.

"It's not the weather that frosts me," Steady says. "It's the way the media report it. It's enough to scare you out of your Sorels."

Calvin Rutstrum was saying the same thing when he wrote in *Paradise Below Zero*:

"At this writing, in an outer Minneapolis-St.

Paul suburb on the St. Croix River, I am looking through an array of picture windows on the heaviest field of drifted snow that has fallen over the Midwest in memory...

"Indoors, a battery of thermostats automatically control the desired temperature of each individual room. At hand are the amenities of modern life—good books, stereophonic music, radio, television, and a choice of fine food. Since my body from hours of indoor relaxation has temporarily been deprived of much nerve force and strength, a physically compelling desire obsesses me to remain within the warmth of my shelter."

On the other hand, Rutstrum says, he knows from many winters' experience the value of physical activity in this season, so out he goes into the "frigid atmosphere" to enjoy the durable benefits of a natural winter environment. He goes on:

"I meet the outdoors on its own variable terms. Enjoying an unexplainable lust for the challenge of adverse weather—a sort of love for crisis all through life—I will venture outdoors on foot or on snowshoes with proper clothing no matter how



As the coffee began to simmer, they shed their outer jackets and mitts. Outside, it was still close to twenty below and the snow was whispering. After an hour they began to relax and talk quietly of many things.

rugged the weather, a blizzard, in truth, being preferred."

The initial effect upon one's comfort, Calvin says, will be apparent: At first, the body suggests—though the mind tends to overrule—that a mistake has been made in even leaving the comfort of indoors at all.

Then, gradually, a change is sensed. The anatomical furnace, having been stoked with food before leaving, starts to generate natural heat—a physiological change from indoor torpor to outdoor animation that becomes surprisingly apparent.

"The Old Guy," Steady says in admiration, "has got that right."

One of the coziest places in all outdoors is an icefishing shack on the windswept ice—and if there's a blizzard blowing, all the better.

Plastic is okay, but we are talking character. We are talking poetry as well as practicality. We are talking what Sigurd Olson in the *Singing Wilderness*, called "the dark house."

"Though it was twenty below we took off for the old haunts... A tiny tar paper shack off the end of a long point was our goal. A friend had set it up weeks ago, told us where the spear was cached and the wooden decoy. For its use, we were to bring him a fish. That meant we had to take two. We shoveled the snow away from the door, fanned a flame to life in the little stove, and dug the spear and the decoy out of a drift. Six inches of ice had to be cut out of the hole. We filled the coffeepot, closed the door, and settled down to wait. Outside the wind howled, but the little shelter was cozy and warm...."

At first, Sigurd reports, they could see nothing but the green translucent water, but gradually their vision adjusted and they could see farther and farther into the depths, finally to the bottom itself. Liquid streamed through the snow and ice, and the bottom all but glowed.

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If more people had a dark house to fish in, maybe more people would be fishing. Then again, it may not be the weather that spooked people. Maybe it was Steady Eddy himself when he was on National Public Radio's "All Things Considered" with Susan Stamberg the other day discussing ice fishing. When she asked him what a good bait was, he said: "Maggots." When Susan asked how you kept the maggots from freezing, Steady said: "You keep them in your mouth until you use them."

Steady said Susan freaked out. He also said, "That's eastern folks for you."

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