

Chequamegon is the home of the smallmouth bass



Submitted

Chequamegon Bay fishing guide Roger LaPenter poses with a five-pound smallmouth bass.

Chequamegon (she-wah-me-gon). Saying the four syllables together brings the pronunciation of the world-class fishery and world-famous bay that lies on the south side of Lake Superior — about an hour drive east of Duluth. It may be best known to anglers for the great numbers and size of the natural smallmouth bass population.

Frankly, that's what grabbed my attention and made the eight-hour drive from the Quad-Cities to Ashland, Wis., a bit easier. Ashland is a spiffy lake-side community of 8,500 with much to offer and was the site of the 2010 Association of Great Lakes Outdoor Writers (AGLOW) annual conference that 150 AGLOWers recently attended.

"What length and weight makes for a trophy smallmouth bass here?" I asked Roger LaPenter upon our first meeting. LaPenter is the proprietor of Anglers All, an outdoors shop and guide service located along the south shore of the bay.

"That depends on the angler," he answered smiling. "Then what's a trophy to you?" I asked.

"Twenty-four inches and over 8 pounds," was his response.

Chris Young, outdoors editor of the State Journal Register (Springfield, Ill.) and travel partner for the trip, said he thought he saw a bit of drool at the corner of my mouth as we listened to the 30-year



— BOB GROENE —

Chequamegon Bay veteran guide describe the quality and quantity of smallmouth bass in the bay.

My golly, I've caught some Mississippi River smallmouth in the 5-pound range, heard first-hand of some 6 pounders — but nothing in personal experience beyond that. Just the thought of a 7-pound or larger smallmouth makes my head spin.

LaPenter said he's caught two 8-pounders so far, but called October "trophy month." With anticipation, I asked if he thought we would catch a 6-pounder the next day. "Should be no problem," was his smiling reply.

Higher than predicted winds the next morning spoiled our plans to land a personal best smallmouth on the huge bay. Flags were snapping in the steady 20 miles-per-hour northeast winds. The unofficial cutoff for bass fishing boats on the 84,000 acre, 10-by-30 mile fisher is 15 miles-per-hour.

Bay waves of two-feet plus sent us to the Pike Lake Chain

of seven inland lakes about 25 miles from Ashland where we steadily caught both large-mouth and smallmouth, but nothing close to a trophy.

'I like to say these are happy fish.'

Roger LaPenter,
proprietor of Anglers All

In addition to fishing and the beauty of the area that day, we had a really special lunch at a really special place, the Delta Diner — a converted railroad diner located many miles from any town and a place with a menu so unique that locals often wait an hour to be seated. I'll tell you no more, but direct you to deltadiner.com.

"Smallmouth bass fishing is great on the bay from mid-May until the end of October when I put my boat away," LaPenter explained. "While we may no longer have the number of smallmouths for 100 fish days — 30-per-day is common — and we still have great size fish."

"I like to say these are happy fish, they can see food in the clear water when they feed. And they are educated. After picking up a minnow they will swim around with it in their mouth long before an angler should gently set the hook. These bass do not hit hard."

LaPenter said because it

is mostly catch-and-release fishing — one smallmouth over 22 inches can be kept per day — he uses single hooks and sucker minnows as bait, minimizing potential harm to the fish. On the artificial end, he said crankbaits, spinnerbaits and many plastics can also be used.

Two days later we hooked up with LaPenter again and found the lake more friendly. But the smallmouth, even though scores of the mighty battlers showed up under the boat on the fish finder, were not in a feeding mood. We boated just four and no LaPenter-quality trophies.

The next day, with Roger on a river guide trip, his son took clients to the bay where they caught lots of smallmouth and many big ones. Timing is everything.

The LaPenters guide not only on the bay for smallmouth, but also on streams and rivers for a variety of fish including: muskie, walleye, northern pike and trout. When winter arrives, they guide ice fishing; and deer and grouse hunting on the thousands of acres of public land.

Anglers All guide service can be reached at (715) 682-5754; Ashland information, including lodging, can be found at www.visitashland.com or (800) 294-9484.

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