

## Abundance

When I was a kid not much lived in the Great Lakes except carp, sea lamprey, and alewives. Especially alewives. Someone calculated that if you netted a hundred pounds of living things from the lakes, ninety of those pounds would be alewives. Those little fish were a plague. They filled the lakes to overflowing, and every spring they died by the millions, their carcasses washing up on the beaches in heaps like snow drifts.

There were few predators to keep them in check. The sea lamprey had seen to that. After they invaded the lakes they wiped out most of the trout and whitefish. By the 1960s most people figured the lakes were ruined.

Then biologists released coho salmon smolts into Michigan's Platte River and everything changed. Suddenly the lakes were alive again. More alive than ever. The salmon gobbled alewives like potato chips and grew at an unbelievable rate. Nobody was prepared for what would happen when they returned to Platte Bay in August 1967.

I was thirteen that summer, and my parents and brother and I were there to meet the salmon. Our boat was a fourteen-foot runabout with an outboard motor, and our fishing tackle was the same as we used for pike and bass on inland lakes. It would be a few years before advanced equipment came along and initiated what writer John Geirach would call a "high-tech war on the fish."

The best way to find the schools of salmon in Platte Bay was to look for a crowd. Anglers would scan the water with binoculars, and when they saw congested boats and bent rods, would speed to their vicinity and begin trolling.

My father resisted doing that. He was an old-school guy who preferred to fish in solitude. Later we would fling ourselves into the fray and catch salmon, many of them. But now, on this early trip, Dad refused to follow the herd.

We motored away from shore, toward the horizon. Wisconsin was out there somewhere, far beyond sight. We went out miles farther than anyone else, until shore was a distant band of green and the water beneath us was a deeper blue than I had ever seen in any lake or ocean.

I saw a swirl beside the boat. Then another. And another. A large fish as bright as stainless steel vaulted into the air thirty or forty feet ahead of us and landed in a blossom of spray.

Salmon!

Dad cut the motor, and the boat heaved in the wash and stopped. Beneath the surface, blue streaks shot past. They looked like bolts of ice-colored electricity, an electric invasion, flowing around us like a river around a rock. For a hundred yards in every direction fish swirled and porpoised, leaped free of the water, charging through schools of alewives.

“Cast! Cast!”

We grabbed our spinning rods rigged with big silver Rapalas and cast wildly. Fish slammed the lures, one after another. My fish leaped and ran beneath the boat and leaped again on the other side – covering the distance so quickly that I thought it had to be two fish jumping. Then it tore line off my reel in a lunatic run. It went hundreds of feet in the time it took me to shout for help. I didn’t know any fish could be that fast or strong. I was never in control of it. Not even for a moment. Dad netted his fish, a spectacular ten-pound buck, but mine ran until I panicked. I tightened the drag on my reel – cranked down on it to try to slow the fish – and the fish took my lure and kept it, and left me wanting more.

All these years later I still can’t cast a lure into big water without expecting something extraordinary to happen. I expect to hook uncontrollable fish, to tap powerful forces, to be suddenly surrounded by schools of marauding predators. Who could ever have guessed that these lakes, once so close to destruction, would thrive again?

The breadth, depth, and unpredictability of the Great Lakes always gets me where it counts. And the abundance -- and variety -- of life in them. Throw in endless opportunities for adventure and you’ve got the stuff of obsession.

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