

FLY FISHING THE BOUNDARY WATERS

A Fly Fishing Experience of a Lifetime

By Steve Piragis Photos by Hansi Johnson



AN ANGLER CASTS FROM THE BOW OF A CANOE IN THE BOUNDARY WATERS CANOE AREA WILDERNESS.

Murray stepped out of the canoe with a great big smile on his face. He had fished the world, from Russia's Atlantic salmon rivers to Argentina and the taimen waters of Mongolia. It was only lunch time but his arm was tired from catching fish that morning, not just making long casts. That evening around the campfire, Murray talked about the day on Basswood Lake in our own Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. You could tell there was a more in his voice than just the usual "what a great day it was." Murray talked about the arm tiring fishing; fishing like he'd never had on any of the exotic trips he'd been privileged to take. But it was more, much more, about the Boundary Waters that may have brought a tear to his eye that evening. It was about the solitude, the quiet and the water so clean he drank it straight out of the lake that he spoke. When a world traveling attorney from Los Angeles gets a little choked up about a place like the western end of Basswood and the smallmouth bass fishing in some of the cleanest water in the world, you know it's a very special place.

The guide that day was Steve Eisenmenger. To Steve, who has hundreds of weeks of fishing on Basswood under his belt, this reaction was not unusual. Basswood has been a mecca for sportsmen and women for over a century. It is the iconic northwoods lake on the US/Canadian border downstream from the headwaters of the great Rainy

River. It's a rich ecosystem blessed with a dozen or so bays and arms carved by glaciers. Some are deep and bear lake trout water while others are muddy wild rice bays harvested by the Ojibway for centuries. The gravel bottom of so much of the lake is perfect habitat for the prize quarry of the fly angler, smallmouth bass.

I've had the great good fortune to work with some of the best guides in the Boundary Waters over our many years on outfitting canoe trips here in Ely. These are unusual men and women. They love the life of the guide despite the rigors of the occupation that is seasonal and intense. I think it's the stories like that of Murray that keeps the job refreshing and vital. We all react to the emotion of others and when we show someone else a life changing experience like that which wilderness can bring, we share that happiness.

Other clients of Eisenmenger's were Bob and his son Ken from Long Island. Bob came every summer for many years. He brought his son Ken with him when he was likely in his mid-70's. It turned out to be his last trip up to the canoe country and Ken's first. For years Bob fished the lakes and streams of northern Maine. They fished with Steve over the waters Steve knew so well around Washington Island, US Point and Ranger Bay. They caught enough fish to make Ken a believer and the fried northern pike for dinner tasted so much better than any seafood in the Hamptons, especially since they

caught the pike on a fly rod after a long scrappy fight. It was the last morning of the trip before they had to catch the tow boat back to civilization and Bob could not believe what was to transpire. Ken hooked up mid-morning with a bass with the fight of which they were not familiar. The dad was duly proud of his son who landed the first smallmouth he had ever seen over 20 inches long. A few photos and a little celebrating as this queen of the canoe country swam back to the depths and Ken was back at the cast. Of course, the story goes that on very next cast there was another boil of water over the popper and yet another 20 plus inch-er was on the line. There is nothing like this in Maine, maybe nothing like it anywhere in natural lakes around the world. Bob was then the next happy angler to shed a few tears of joy for his lucky boy and the experience of a fishing lifetime.

I think we all recognize that the sport of fly fishing is way more than just the fish. If the fishing is from a canoe in the heart of Boundary Waters canoe country, there's even more magic to soak up. In my 40 or so years living in Ely the sport has grown to support several guides and bring in anglers from around the country and around the world. Much of the canoe country's waters are still being discovered for fly fishing. Like the peaks of the arctic, there are many first ascents to be had. From my experience in my favorite and not to be named Boundary Waters lake, there are smallmouth and northern pike and even walleye on tight lines right through the summer and into

fall.

Basswood is no doubt not the only lake where a fly angler can have this kind of fun but it is among the easiest to access. With some planning, a paddler can arrive in Ely for breakfast get packed up at his outfitter, meet the guide and be on the water by noon paddling to a wilderness campsite. The access to the iconic west end of Basswood has motor access from Moose Lake via tow boat service up a chain of lakes and over Prairie Portage to Basswood, then down the big lake to Washington Island where the motorized zone ends. With no portages to haul over, the fly rod can be unpacked and a fly in the water that same afternoon. Want to go farther and deeper into the wild? Paddle to the outlet of Basswood and portage the 1 mile Horse Portage and end up at another legendary fishing location: Crooked Lake.

Campsites in the BWCAW can be as comfortable as the team occupying them can conceive. If the trip is for 5 days, as many are, a guide will set up a bug free dining tarp with no see-em proof netting. Bring comfortable chairs. Cook over the fire to get the oil hot in a cast iron griddle to fry up the walleye fillets as the sun goes down and the loon chorus comes on line. Sleeping on the ground these days is nearly as good as your bed at home with invention of chambered air mattresses by Nemo and Exped. Need a shower? A camp shower is not an extravagance on a fishing trip. Lay out

the water bag on the rocks to soak up solar power all day and shower when you come in from fishing. A cocktail before dinner sitting around fire with friends and stories to share beats dinner in any fancy restaurant.

How to Fish The Boundary Waters

Every fly guide seems to have a favorite way to fish. Steve Eisenmenger likes the crayfish he ties. It's simple and it models the main prey of smallmouth bass almost all summer long. Bob from Long Island fished exclusively with a frog patterned popper. Most fly anglers I know use some version of the wooly bugger and let it sink over the fish, retrieving slowly towards the bottom where even a walleye can pick it up. My fishing partner on multiple day trips over a few years has only used one fly: a chartreuse or white Clouser minnow. We've managed to land the grand slam on a couple days of bass, walleye and northern with the Clouser. I keep the bow angled to the shore or over a reef and my bow man brings home the bacon. Just a hint when fishing from a canoe and the big one lunges for the fly, don't get too excited and tip 'er over.

It's canoe country so the fishing is best from a stable canoe. We almost always choose the Wenonah Spirit II 17 foot Kevlar ultralight canoe. The bow is broad and flared so there is room to spare and the canoe holds all the gear any twosome could ever need for a week of camping. On day trips the Spirit at just 42 pounds lets us single portage in and out and enjoy one cold beer from the cooler at the end of the day. Carbon fiber paddles are miraculously tough and weigh just 8 ounces. Logistics: Ely is about 4 hours north of the Twin Cities and in the heart of The Canoe Country. Land a walleye sandwich at the Chocolate Moose or a gourmet meal at Burntside Lodge. For a

good night's rest before your trip, A Stay in Ely is across the street from our outfitting company and Northern Grounds coffee and wine bar just opened at the other end of the block. Outfitters can arrange guides, permits, camping gear, canoes and tow service to the fishing waters. Bring a camera and your fishing gear and we'll have you on the water fishing by noon. I always recommend 5 day trips or longer. The relaxation and presence of mind that wilderness brings, takes a day or two to set in.

The best smallmouth bass fishing is in June but it remains way above average all summer long. Northern pike are ubiquitous, far ranging and voracious in every month of the summer. Walleyes are a bit easier to catch earlier in the summer but we have also found them in 3 feet of water in August. Permits to the Boundary Waters are divvied up by entry point. Basswood Lake entry requires a Moose Lake entry permit. Tow service is offered through outfitters. Planning early never hurts for busy weeks of the summer and holiday weekends. Come catch the magic!

Editors Note: Steve Piragis is owner, along with his wife Nancy, of Piragis Northwood Company, a company of canoe trip outfitters and guides in Ely, MN. Find them online at www.piragis.com or look for their ad on page 21 of this issue.

Basswood Lake lies immediately downstream from a proposed sulfide ore copper mine just outside the Boundary Waters. Steve Piragis and other local Ely citizens have organized a campaign to fight for clean water. For more information see www.savetheboundarywaters.org. You can also visit the booth for Sportsmen for the Boundary Waters at the Great Waters Fly Fishing Expo this March 17-19 and look for issue updates from MNTU as we move forward with addressing these challenges to our northern waterways.



SEARCHING FOR FISH WITH A FLY IN THE BWCAW



A SELECTION OF BOUNDARY WATERS FLIES.
FROM LEFT TO RIGHT AND TOP TO BOTTOM IN THREE COLUMNS:
COLUMN 1: DEER HAIR FROG, CHARTREUSE CLOUSER, RED/WHITE DECEIVER,
COLUMN 2: WHITE SLIDER, HARD POPPER, SWIMMING BAITFISH
COLUMN 3: CRAYFISH, RUBBER LEGGED CRAYFISH, RUBBER LEGGED BUGGER
WOOLY BUGGER, LEECH BIG AND UGLY



MORNING MIST ON THE WATER OF A BOUNDARY WATERS LAKE