

North Dakota outdoors: The lure of big fish stories

By Doug Leier



I'm comfortable considering myself "old." I remember when North Dakota had a closed fishing season, I bought my fishing license at a gas station, with a trout stamp, and signed my name on the side so as not to mark the stamp's beautiful artwork.

With that I reference the point of view of Greg Power, fisheries division chief, who began with the Game and Fish Department while I was at Wakefield Elementary school in LaMoure.

I may be old. But Greg is older.

So, when it comes to sharing stories about "big fish" from North Dakota, he has some amazing fish tales.

Greg Power first person big fish tales

My first big fish story involves bluegill and given that the current state record dates way back to 1963, a truly large bluegill tale is noteworthy. Unfortunately, many of North Dakota's fishing waters are prone to winterkill and a well-established fishery with quality fish may succumb to a long, snowy winter. This was the case 40 or so years ago for Crooked Lake in McLean County.

In April of that year, we received reports from the public of a bad fishkill at Crooked. As is often the case with winterkills, gulls and the general aforma confirmed something of concern before I observed the first dead fish. I walked about a mile of shoreline, noting thousands of dead northern pike, walleye, yellow



Greg Power Fisheries Division Chief Photo by Ashley Peterson, NDGF

perch, white sucker and bluegill beached or still floating in the lake.

At the time, Crooked Lake supported a strong fishery, so many of the dead fish were nice-sized. Just before I had planned to end my walk and turnaround, I spotted a dead fish that stood out.

It was a bluegill much, much larger than anything I had ever seen. Its size was well beyond the often-used "plate-sized" description. Instead, the fish was more the size of a large platter.

The state record bluegill stands today, as it also did back then, at 2 pounds, 12 ounces, taken from Strawberry Lake, which is connected to Crooked a couple miles upstream.

Undoubtedly, this dead fish on Crooked Lake's shore was well over 3 pounds. While this was before the days of cellphones with cameras, I still wish I had taken more time to document its size.

Then again, this is what makes big fish stories. Even though this occurred 40 or so years ago, I often still see that fish, stored away somewhere in my gray matter.

My next tale involves a northern pike I hooked but never landed while fishing. A few years back, a fishing buddy and I were jigging for walleye on the Missouri River north of Bismarck. From my perspective, there's nothing more enjoyable than using lightweight jigs to catch 16- to 18-inch walleye. We had boated several walleye when I snagged what I suspected was a tree. As often noted by

fellow anglers who experience the infamous "tree snag," after a few seconds the tree started to move ... upstream. The battle was on.

After participating in a few incidental paddlefish snags with my small jigs in the past, I fully expected the same outcome with the fish at the end of my line. Meaning, the fish would come near the surface and rocket off as my reel would sing goodbye.

That was not the case this time. The fish remained deep and kept going against the current. After about two hours (sorry, let's realistically say about a minute or two), I was able to coax the fish near the surface. As we were hoping to finally lay our eyes on this giant, it again made another deep run.

Someway, somehow my six pound test line was holding up, far better than my feeble arms. After another couple minutes, I again managed to work the fish to the surface, and we finally laid eyes on the prize. It was the largest northern pike I'd ever seen (minus a few European photos). Its shoulder width was astonishing. It was a true once-in-a-lifetime fish that had no intentions of sticking around for a photo opp.

As the pike decided enough was enough and made its final run to freedom, I swear it looked back at me with a smile. The outdoors has a way of leaving one humbled and in awe with both its beauty and wild spirit and this was one of those times.

Although this pike was likely around 30 pounds, as the years have passed, and since this is my story, I now believe it was 50 pounds.

Dakota Gardener: Attract bees to your vegetable garden

By Tom Kalb, Horticulturist



Almost all cucumber, melon, pumpkin and squash flowers require pollination by bees to produce fruit. (Flickr photo by Swallowtail Garden Seeds)

We need bees to grow a productive vegetable garden.

Almost all cucumber, melon, pumpkin and squash flowers require pollination by bees to produce fruit. Without bees, there would be a worldwide shortage of zucchini. A very sad thought, indeed.

Tomato, pepper and eggplant flowers do not need to be pollinated by bees, but the vibration of bee wings on their flowers can increase yields.

A few bees are not enough. We want lots of bees. Fruit-bearing flowers are generally receptive for pollination for only one day. In many cases, these flowers require multiple visits by bees on that day to produce quality fruit.

How can we attract bees to our vegetable gardens?

Bees, like every creature, need food. They need food from spring through fall. You can attract bees by growing a mix of flowers that provide nectar and pollen throughout the growing season.

Grow your flowers in a nearby plot or intermix the flowers among the vegetable plants. Flowers grown in clusters will be especially visible and attractive to foraging bees.

Cosmos, marigolds, sunflowers and zinnias are easy-to-grow annuals and will attract bees. Hardy perennials such as coneflower, blazing star, rudbeckia, sedum and aster will attract bees through the summer until frost.

Herbs are a great addition to a vegetable garden. The blooms of basil, bee balm, borage, chives, thyme and sage will

draw bees to your garden. Bees, like every creature, need water. Bees get especially thirsty during warm, sunny days. Having a birdbath or something as simple as a shallow tray of fresh, clean water nearby will keep bees coming to your garden. Place a few rocks in the water to provide bees a place to land on.

Bees, like every creature, need a safe shelter. Bee houses filled with hollow tubes will be used by cavity-nesting bees. These bee houses are available online and at many garden centers. Many bees nest in the ground. A patch of dry, bare soil in your yard may attract these bees.

You can protect bees by limiting your use of insecticides. Bees are insects, and most insecticides will kill bees.

If you see an insect in your garden, identify the insect and make sure it is a pest. Over 90% of the insects in your garden are beneficial or neutral to us. There are only a few troublemakers like aphids and potato beetles. You can take a photo of a mystery insect in your garden and e-mail it to your local NDSU Extension agent or me to identify.

If you have an insect pest problem, use a natural insecticide that is less toxic to bees. Neem causes minimal risk to bees. Spinosad has little effect on bees after it has dried. Spray in the evening hours when bees are much less active. Avoid spraying the blooms directly.

The recipe for attracting bees to your vegetable garden is simple. Provide them with abundant food, fresh water and safe shelter. These ingredients will lead to a garden that is both beautiful and bountiful.

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