

Camp offers lake-for-a-day fishing

Backwoods Bear Lake post features exclusivity amid rugged, beautiful scenery

BY ERIC SHARP

FREE PRESS OUTDOORS WRITER

ESPANOLA, Ontario -- Thousands of Michigan anglers and hunters dream of heading north in search of a wilderness experience. And when they think of that kind of travel, they usually also think long distances and big bucks.

Yet there's an area in Ontario only a day's drive from Detroit that offers superb hunting and fishing in a beautiful wilderness where a fisherman can have the exquisite pleasure of being the only angler on a lake all day -- two or three lakes, for that matter.

Bear Lake Wilderness Camp is a 30-minute boat ride from a dock that lies eight miles south of Espanola, a town that's a three-hour drive east of Sault Ste. Marie.

It lies on the edge of Killarney Provincial Park in a 200-square-mile region that was cut off from development when Highway 17 was laid around it on the north. To this day there's only one paved road into the region.

"This place was kind of overlooked," said Ken Luopa, Opns Mgr at the Bear Lake camp.

Today, the region is nearly all within provincial parks or federal crown land, and a handful of private cabins that were built decades ago have since been grandfathered in.



A lot of people who come up here from the south are amazed by the size of the lakes. They're not used to fishing a lake that's 10 miles long," Luopa said. "They're from places where they fish small ponds and rivers in johnboats. I tell them the only johnboat up here is the one John owns. Even what we consider small backcountry lakes are big by their standards."

Steve Daniels came here from Louisville, Ky., to kill his first bear with a bow and arrow.

"First day, first hunt, first bear," the accountant said after taking a 200-pound black bear that Luopa and camp helper Dave Howerton skinned on the dock. "I've been hunting deer for about 20 years, but I've never even seen a bear in the woods before. "

"I got video of two other bears, then this guy came in about 5 p.m. I wasn't sure if I wanted him at first, so I made some pictures of him, too. Then I decided, 'He's a shooter,' and I took him."

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The camp consists of a small lodge and five cabins on a seven-acre island midway along the east-west axis of Bear Lake, which is roughly 12 miles long and 2 1/2 miles wide.

Rocky channels give access from Bear Lake to numerous other large lakes -- many of them simply wide spots in the Whitefish River. Short portages from Bear Lake lead to dozens of smaller lakes in Killarney. The Bear Lake camp maintains boats on many of these lakes, and anglers can reserve a lake for exclusive fishing each day.

The day I arrived, a powerful cold front came in from the west and blew at 20 knots for two days, followed by rain and cooler weather the third day. The first day I portaged into Cranberry Lake in Killarney and caught a dozen smallmouth bass and three pike up to 30 inches. The next day I portaged into Van Winkle and Cat lakes and caught about 40 smallmouth and two pike, one of them 32 inches. The third day I portaged into Beaver and Little Van Winkle lakes under clearing skies and caught about 75 smallmouth

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largemouth bass and sunfish in six hours, all on finesse crankbaits and surface lures ranging from 3/4 of an inch to 1 1/2 inches long.

The disappointing part was that most of the bass were small, 10-12 inches, with only a handful reaching 18, something I attributed to the unsettled weather. I didn't catch any of the 3- to 4-pounders for which this area is famous and which I had caught by the dozens in the southern part of Killarney four years earlier.

However, there are few better experiences for any angler than hiking a half-mile over a densely wooded ridge and finding himself alone all day on a scenic lake stuffed with game fish.

The Dranes run a low-key camp, with a maximum of 30 anglers at a time and an average of 20. They offer bear hunts for only four of the eight weeks in the Ontario fall season, and they limit the number of bear hunters to 30 a season. Rates for anglers start at \$650 per week (children 14 and under are free), and bear hunts start at about \$1,200.

"We're very conservation-oriented," Kim Drane said. "The fishermen get spread out on so many lakes that none of them gets over-fished. You sign up for a lake or a couple of lakes each day, and no one else fishes there.

Bear Lake Wilderness Camp can be reached at 705-866-7100 (through Oct. 15), 502-228-7625 (year round), or on the Internet at www.blwc.com.



Many of the remote lakes that Bear Lake Wilderness Camp use are in Killarney Wilderness Park. They have boat caches on many of the lakes in the park.

"With the bears, we bring in enough hunters to help keep the population under control, but we still have lots of bears around. Next year, we're going to a season that's archery for the first two weeks and gun hunting for the next two. Last year, we had 19 hunters, and they killed 12 bears and one wolf. We're not a catch-and-release-only camp for fishing, but most people release nearly all the fish they catch. Some of them keep a few for a shore lunch or dinner, but not many take fish back to the States," she said.

[Canada Address](#)

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