



FAMILY TIME

story and photos by TJ Schwanky

It's been four years now that Alberta anglers have been required to participate in the limited-entry draw process to retain walleye from a number of lakes in the province. While this draw process was fraught with pitfalls for the first couple years and it met fierce opposition from a number of anglers, it looks as though it's here to stay. I've been fortunate enough to draw tags for three of those years and last year we managed to pick up undersubscribed tags, so we've been able to enjoy some great feeds of fish for all four years that the draw has been in place.

Fish and Wildlife seemed to miss the point of these tags in the beginning and were somewhat perplexed when anglers didn't jump all over them. They didn't realize that they were selling walleye by the pound and nothing more. For some reason, they figured anglers would shell out big bucks to keep a few ounces of fillets. It wasn't the case but after a return trip to the drawing board, they seem to have gotten it right now. Anglers have the opportunity to get out and enjoy a day on the water with the added bonus of some fillets for the fry pan.

While many anglers still refuse to participate in the draw just on principal alone, we've made it an annual outing with my folks. With my busy life, it seems I don't get to share



The author's Mom, Yvonne, with a big Pigeon Lake walleye.

many days afield with them so these tags are the perfect excuse. If you draw them, you have to make time to go and I do.

My Mom just started fishing four years ago when she drew her first Pigeon Lake tags so I guess I'm a little more accepting of these tags than most. There aren't many lakes anywhere in North America where you can take a total

novice fishing and expect they will catch 50-plus walleye in a day but at Pigeon Lake, it's pretty well a guarantee.

I've been fishing Pigeon pretty hard for the past decade and a half and I've seen it go from the best trophy fishery in Alberta to a lake

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Jet keeps an eye on an incoming walleye.

overrun with average-sized walleye. It was a victim of well-intentioned but over-zealous management in the mid '90s when biologists felt the sky was falling on Alberta's walleye. If we learned one thing from that fiasco it's that Alberta's walleye populations are far more resilient than ever thought. There's no doubt that with the limited number of lakes in Alberta and the heavy angling pressure that walleye require special attention, but it's also obvious that we can protect them to death.

But, as we headed out in the rain on a cool August morning none of that seemed to matter. Mom kept looking at the grey skies to the west and saying, "Don't worry it's going to be a sunny day." Vanessa and Dad weren't so convinced but we were snug and dry in our rain suits so it was off to the humps in the middle of the lake that we headed.

The great thing about Pigeon is that you can catch walleye virtually anywhere and in any depth but as it was a calm day, I thought we'd start at the humps; away from the other boats that were clustered along the break off the Provincial campground.

Somehow, I'd managed to lose the GPS coordinates to the humps but I took a bearing for the far shore and about three miles later the sonar reading started coming up rapidly. I'd hit the southern tip of the south hump bang on. I quickly saved the coordinates

and we dropped anchor on a shelf in 15 feet of water.

Amazingly, the rain had stopped and the sun was doing its best to peek through the clouds. "See, I told you," Mom said smiling.

While I was baiting up Mom's slip bobber rig, Vanessa was already into a scrappy walleye that she boated in no time. It was right at 47 centimetres but we had vowed to hold out for walleye over 48.5 centimetres so back in the lake it went. Mom's bobber quickly went down too and she reeled a fat 47 centimetre walleye into the boat.

There's definitely nothing complicated about catching walleye in Pigeon Lake. Quite honestly, if you took a couple jigs and a couple tubs of frozen minnows with you, you'd be set for the day. I've never seen walleye so in tune with frozen minnows as they are in Pigeon.

There's definitely no sense in buying more expensive baits, that's for sure. I usually plan on a couple tubs of minnows per person for a day of fishing on Pigeon and rare is the day when you come home with bait left over.

While we were all using Realbait Walleye Flasher jigs, Vanessa was really putting on a



The Walleye Flasher jig is a great lure to use when fishing Pigeon lake.

clinic when it came to catching walleye. I'm not a huge believer when it comes to colour selection for walleye but I finally had to ask what she was using. She had selected a glow/green head and it seemed the walleye really liked it. With a heavy bloom of algae on the water there was little question that the glow-in-the-dark jig would be easier to find so I soon had everyone switched over to glow jigs. It definitely made a difference and I quickly had to abandon my fishing rod in favour of the net as the walleye were coming in as fast as everyone got their hooks in the water. Double and triple headers became the rule rather than the exception. I was in charge of carefully

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The author nets another Pigeon Lake walleye for his Mom.

measuring each fish and we soon had a cooler full of fat walleye, with the smallest being right at 48.5 centimetres. There were definitely going to be some great meals of fresh walleye fillets to enjoy.

The weather continued to get better as the day progressed and the walleye action stayed hot and heavy. While the term is often over used, it quite possibly was a perfect day fishing. It was around four in the afternoon when we used our final tag and everyone agreed it had been one of our best days ever. With a three-hour drive ahead of us, we decided to call it a day. I honestly have no idea how many fish came to the boat on that warm August day but it was definitely in excess of 200. We are really blessed to have places like this in Alberta where you can take a novice

angler, young or old, and have them catch fish at a fevered pace.

Trips like this really make me reflect upon how lucky I am to be able to enjoy these times with my folks. While both are in their mid 70s, they are very active and thoroughly relish in getting out and enjoying Alberta's outdoor bounty. As our lives get busier and busier, we need to make a conscious effort to make the time for these trips. Mom and Dad, despite not being real outdoor people, took the time to foster my love of hunting and fishing and outings like this are the least I can do. Whether it's your kids or your parents, time spent hunting and fishing with them is the best investment of your time that there is. I'll keep applying for tags or picking up undersubscribed tags for Pigeon for as long as

Mom and Dad are able to go.

I have little doubt that you'll see an increased number of Alberta's lakes going on draw in the ensuing years and I guess it's just another sign of how much this province is growing and the impact it's having on our fish and wildlife resources. The opportunities to go fishing in Alberta are pretty well limitless but the ability to take a fish home for the fry pan will likely become increasingly less as our population grows, despite the best efforts of our fisheries managers. Compound the increasing population with development on



The jig and minnow is deadly on Pigeon Lake (above). The author holds up one of many healthy Pigeon Lake walleye (below).



lakes like Pigeon, and our fisheries are facing some real challenges. I've never seen the algae so bad on Pigeon or the number of dead whitefish that I did and I can't help but think that the housing explosion around the lake isn't at least partially responsible.

But all those worries seemed miles away as we headed down the highway towards home. We recounted the stories of the day and had to laugh at our pup, Jet, curled up on the seat between Mom and Dad. He was sound asleep. He had a busy day keeping track of all the fish that everyone was catching and he could now finally take a break. It wasn't long before Dad was drifting off to sleep as well. It had been a long day. It had been a great day. It had been a day that all of us came away from a little more complete. Family time will do that. ■

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