

In pursuit of “Cass Bass” on the Upper Reaches

By Tom Lounsbury

The Cass River, which winds a westerly downstream course through Michigan’s Thumb, is divided into two parts, the Upper Reaches, which is upstream of the Caro Dam, and the Lower Reaches, which is located downstream from there. Having canoed down the length of both, I can attest each feature their own distinct and unique atmosphere, including wonderful fishing opportunities. Although there are a few exceptions in certain areas where boats can be used (thanks to the aid of a couple dams – of which a new Fish Way has replaced the Frankenmuth Dam), the Cass River is primarily canoe and kayak territory, which certainly works for me and a whole lot of other folks, as it creates a more serene and harmonious atmosphere.

After a lifetime association with the river, I believe it is safe to say I am a devoted Upper Reaches “Cass Riverman”. With the family farm that I grew up on (and now owned by my wife Ginny and I) located less than a mile away from the Cass River, I’ve spent countless hours thoroughly enjoying and savoring all that it has to offer (including a favorite swimming hole). I was a toddler sitting in my mother’s lap when I caught my first fish, a rock bass, in its waters while using a cane-pole. Needless to say, folks, I was smitten with fishing in “the Cass” from then on. I can state for a fact that the Cass’s Upper Reaches offer excellent fishing opportunities for small mouth bass, rock bass and northern pike.

Maybe it is because it was the first fish I ever caught, but the rock bass remains to be my favorite fish species to this day. Not only due to its dependably feisty nature to hit the bait and lures, but it is also quite delicious in its own right to dine on. I’m never disappointed with a stringer-full of rock bass, usually representing the “meat and potatoes” of a fishing adventure, and with small mouth bass being the “gravy”. Any northern pike ending up on the stringer as well, are considered as the “dessert”. I consider getting all three species on an outing, as being a “Cass River Grand Slam”.

Thanks to the devoted efforts of a dedicated conservation group known as the Cass River Greenway (CRG), a major portion of the Cass River's Lower Reaches (from the City of Saginaw, upstream to M-46, between Vassar and Caro) has recently been designated an official water trail. This entails a number of canoe/kayak launches developed by the CRG, at regular intervals along the river to create a dependable access for avid paddlers. The only access on the Upper Reaches, however, is at the various bridges, and I can attest, for a fact, that some bridges can offer a bit of a challenge in this regard. Hopefully this will all change in the near future, because in my opinion, the official water trail should extend upstream on the Cass River, all the way to Evergreen Park at M-53. The public demand is certainly there in this situation, and the Cass River, as always, offers excellent recreational opportunities for folks.

Avid Cass Riverman, 16 year old Hugh Walker of Cass City, recently enjoyed an early bass season fishing adventure using kayaks on a stretch of the Upper Reaches, with his mother, Rebecca Walker. The crystal clear water featured a decent current which moved matters along with ease, and Hugh, using a small Rapala, would land a number of rock bass, as well as some small mouths which included a 16 inch, that was eaten with the rock bass later that night, and a very robust and plump 20 inch, which is destined to become a wall mount. Hugh came real close to getting a Cass River Grand Slam when he hooked into a very large northern pike and almost got it to his kayak before, due to the lack of a steel leader, it bit through the fishing line and got away. According to both Hugh and his mother Rebecca, it truly was a real dandy, which I know for a fact, the Cass River can readily provide.

A week later, Hugh Walker would have another memorable Upper Reaches fishing adventure (which he lives for), with his Grandfather Bob Walker, and Uncle Lane Walker, both of Kingston. The stretch they selected, per their canoe and a kayak would normally take four hours to drift and paddle down, but due to the intense fishing action they encountered, especially at certain coves, it took a bit longer. According to Bob Walker, the Cass's crystal clear water and brisk current that eased them along, reminded him of fishing on the fabled Au Sable River! Bald eagles and ospreys were also constant companions for the fishermen, which says a lot about the river's water quality.

The key to bass fishing success for the Walkers on this adventure, was using a (3 inch) black and gold, hinged Rapala, which the bass, both small mouth and rock, readily hit with a vengeance. It was estimated at the day's end, that they had hooked and landed well over 60 small mouth bass, most of which they released (they caught a lot of "just under 14 inches"), and fell one fish shy of their 3 –person limit of keepers, which entailed some respectable examples, and great eating, too. No northern pike were encountered on this wonderful Upper Reaches drift down the Cass River, but they certainly had no complaints at all.

As summer progresses, certain portions of the Cass's Upper Reaches drop in depth, which affords plenty of wade-fishing opportunities. I absolutely love the "Dog Days" (named by the Romans after the Dog Star, which can only be observed at that time of year) of late summer. Typical bug hatches which fish appreciate and feed on heavily, are then pretty much over, causing the fish not to be as picky about any bait or lures cast in their direction. Typically, I still prefer to wear jeans and tennis-shoes for wading and truly appreciate the very relaxing atmosphere this all entails.

I often use ultralight fishing tackle, as well as a fly-rod for wade-fishing, but my favorite, however, is an old fashioned cane-pole. Offering the utter simplicity of "stick and string" fishing, it is still as effective as it ever was, and it is the one fishing tool I can use to adeptly drop a bait or lure into a small hole in the lily pads for the greatest effect. I have attached a steel leader on occasion and a special lure to even catch northern pike with a cane-pole (which today is constructed of durable fiberglass that fit together in sections). There is no question in my mind that the old-fashioned cane-pole is the predecessor of the fly-rod, and you just might say, cane-poles have been working for me since I was a toddler!

Whether you go by canoe, kayak, wading, or simply sitting on the riverbank, fishing in the Upper Reaches of the Cass River offers plenty of opportunities (I do especially love going after "Cass Bass", everything else is a bonus). Due to the solitude I usually experience there, I do believe it is one of the best kept secrets.

Happy fishing, folks!

