

# The First Annual Free Cass River Rough Fish Derby was a great day for all.

By Tom Lounsbury

The Dead Waters of the Cass River has a lot of local history associated with it. Its name has nothing to do with being stagnant but is in reference to the fact that it lacks very little current caused by a pair of river-wide limestone shelves located over a mile apart creating a natural basin possessing a unique limestone-associated river bottom topography. In essence, it is a long and narrow lake. In 1900, a wooden bridge spanned where M-53 is now located, and where Pinney Lodge catered to visiting anglers, and even planted fish species such as walleyes to keep anglers happy.

An iron bridge would replace the wooden bridge sometime in the 1920's and the Dead Waters would remain a favorite and popular place for not only fishing but also picnics and camping. According to the archives of the Cass City Chronicle, during June 1925, two anglers from Clifford caught a 21-pound musky in the Dead Waters, which remains to this day as a favorite local "fishing hole" for anglers for a wide number of fish species. Last month, the Cass City High School Ag class released 104 chinook salmon fingerlings they had reared (from eggs) during the winter, into the Dead Waters. In my opinion, it was the perfect place on the Cass River to do so and I'm very curious as to how it all turns out in the future.

Evergreen Park (one of the four wonderful Sanilac County Parks) is located at the Cass River Dead Waters right next to M-53 and features serene and beautiful 103 woodsy acres. It offers 173 campsites, a brand-new floating dock with a kayak/canoe launch, and spacious river frontage of over half a mile. It is the perfect location and atmosphere for a fishing contest, something that members of the Cass River Greenway (CRG) realized and worked constructively with Sanilac County Parks folks to have such take place at

Evergreen Park. Thus, the First Annual Free Cass River Rough Fish Derby came into being recently on Saturday, June 7, 2025, during Michigan's Free Fishing Weekend (when a fishing license isn't required).

This is a hook and line only contest where all fish species have value and can earn prizes and awards for such things as being the longest, whether it be a creek chub, sucker, carp or northern pike. There was also an award for the most species caught by an angler. It primarily entails catch-and-release, and fish which are legal to do so, can be taken home to be utilized. None of the fish being caught were going into a nearby dumpster. Fishing from the spacious riverbank offering lots of elbowroom or by canoe and kayak were allowed.

Fish could be taken in to be identified and measured, or pictures taken of the catch placed by a tape measure which was issued to each registered contestant applied as well. This worked great for those fishing from kayaks or a distance away along the riverbank, especially when concerning catch and release fish.

It was a beautiful sunny day, featuring clear blue skies, temperatures in the low 70's, and no bugs at all. There were more than 100 contestants with over half of them being excited kids, which clearly defined a family-orientated event as the intended purpose of the contest. Also intended, was displaying the true intrinsic value of the Cass River, a real jewel of Michigan's Thumb with much to offer.

Nine different fish species were caught that day, which included two types of redhorse suckers (black and gold), carp, rock bass, smallmouth bass, pumpkin seed, white crappie and northern pike. Not to be forgotten is the small and tenacious shiner that somehow managed to bite onto the hook, and of course, had value. It is the key reason why it is called a "Rough Fish Derby", and yep, folks, they all count.

MDNR Fisheries Biologist Jason Gostiaux was on hand to help identify the different fish species, and like me, he was very curious as to how many

species could be found in the Dead Waters. According to Gostiaux, the Cass River features good, clean water, which can be determined by the various fish species being caught which prefer such.

Thanks to the wonderful support of many local businesses, plenty of prizes were available for fish being caught throughout the day as well as for awards at the conclusion of the Derby. Eppinger Lures had generously provided its various lures to hand out to all the contestants, as well as for prizes. Another generous lure manufacturer was Dan Gark of “Thump ‘EM Soft Plastics” who attended the Derby with his son, Ian, and they made a point of handing out a lot of lures to all the contestants, as well as providing some for prizes. The Harbor Beach Conservation Club was also on hand to provide free hot dogs, snacks and refreshments, and also free Zebco combo fishing poles to the first 20 kids who registered. The Marlette Boy Scouts were on hand to sell fishing lures and fire-starters they hand-crafted. Yep, it was a well-rounded affair and atmosphere along the riverbank of the Dead Waters.

At the day’s end, awards and accompanying plaques were handed out to happy recipients. Everyone was pleased with the First Annual Free Cass River Rough Fish Derby, and it seemed to be a unanimous comment from all present that there should be a Second Annual Event next year, same time, same place.

Yep, folks, there is little doubt the Dead Waters at Evergreen Park is the perfect location for the Second Annual Free Cass River Rough Fish Derby.

