

Of The Outdoors | Gary Howey

In The Heart Of The Sandhills

BY GARY HOWEY

Hartington, Neb.

VALENTINE, Neb. – Our destination, Valentine, Nebraska, located in north central Nebraska in the part of the state known as the Sandhills, a picturesque part of the state where you will find seven different ecosystems coming together.

When most folks think of Valentine, they think about the excellent canoeing and tubing down the Niobrara River. Among the other attractions and outdoor opportunities found in the Valentine area, include several waterfalls, including; Nebraska's tallest waterfall, Smith falls and the Snake River falls. Other attractions all located within a short, drive from Valentine, include the McKelvie National Forest, the Valentine Na-



Gary HOWEY

tional Migratory Bird Refuge, Fort Niobrara National Wildlife and Valentine State Fish.

On this trip, we will be spending time on another of the vacation and fishing destinations in the area, as we would be fishing and filming on Merritt Reservoir with Team Outdoorsmen Adventures member Steve Isom of Valentine.

Merritt Reservoir, a three thousand acre reservoir is located twenty-six miles southwest of Valentine; the reservoir holds excellent populations of walleye, smallmouth bass, crappies, and channel catfish and is one of the few lakes in Nebraska with Muskies.

Several Nebraska State record fish have come from these waters including the state record Channel Catfish. In 1985 a thirty-nine inch fish tipping the scales at 41 lbs. 8 ounces came from these waters, the following year the record was tied when another big catfish, also weighing 41 lbs. 8 ounce fish was taken from the reservoir.

Merritt is also the home of the Nebraska record Muskellunge (Muskie), the state record fish came from the reservoir in 1992, the a fifty-two inch fish weighed in at 41 pounds 8 ounces.

Steve, who fishes the reservoir often, had been doing quite well as on a recent trip, one of the anglers in his boat landed a nine and one half pound walleye.

We awoke at 4 a.m. to heavy rain, wind and lightning, which are not ideal weather conditions for fishing. At 4:10 a.m., our rooms at the Traveler's Inn Motel (www.tradewindslodge.com) our headquarters for this trip shook. Later that day, the shaking we experi-

enced early that morning turned out to be an earthquake registering 3.3 on the Richter scale. Not something, which would keep us off the water just another that, could make fishing tough.

As the rain subsided at 5:30 am we headed for the dam, hoping the strange weather conditions we had encountered had not jinxed us. We started casting along the face of the dam, where the Alewife was stacked up. Alewife, the main forage fish on the lake for walleyes, white bass and the pelicans, all of which were along the dam feeding on these fish.

We started casting swim baits and crankbaits in towards standing vegetation standing in the shallow water where we took several small walleyes, a few Alewife's and white bass before I set the hook on a larger fish, a walleye, one measuring seventeen inches.

We worked the face of the dam hard; managing to land numerous walleye is the 15-inch size as well as white bass in the three-pound range.

As the bite slowed, we headed for the Boardman Creek to probe along the edge of the arrowhead plants growing in the water along the shoreline.

We pulled into the area where other anglers were anchored, using slip bobber rigs, drifting them along the edge weed beds.

Steve would keep the boat moving, using the trolling motor to work the outside edge of the weed beds, allowing us to fish along the drop off into deeper water with our livebait rigs baited with leeches and crawlers while he cast his swimbait into the weedbeds.

The smaller walleyes holding along the edge of the weedbeds were very aggressive, with the large fish being no shows.

Steve's swimbait splashed down in between two masses of weeds, raising his rod, he cranked hard on the handle working his bait back through the weeds. His rod was bent forward by a savage strike; he quickly put pressure on the fish trying to keep it from burying in the weeds. Slowly but surely, he gained on the fish, pulling it out into the open water in the direction of the boat.

Knowing this was a bigger fish, I stood ready with the net, and as it surfaced alongside the boat, I slid the net in under the fish, bringing the twenty-inch fish, the largest of the day into the boat.

We moved several times trying to locate larger fish, as we changed depth several times, moving to different locations on the reservoir where the only larger fish we found were white bass and drum, the larger walleyes just weren't in the mood.

The fantastic big fish bite, which



PHOTO: LARRY MYHRE

Merritt Reservoir which is located in the heart of the Sandhills, located just south of Valentine, Nebraska is the home of the Nebraska state record Channel Catfish and Muskies. This walleye just couldn't resist the spinnerbait Team Outdoorsmen Adventures member Steve Isom (Valentine) was using while fishing one of his favorite bodies of water, Merritt Reservoir.

Merritt is known for, did not happen as we finished out the day with two good walleyes, seventeen and twenty-one inches, numerous white bass in the two to three pounds range and a lot of smaller fish.

Not only is Merritt a great place to fish, it's also the place to go if you into boating and camping, as you will find both primitive and modern overnight facilities areas on Merritt along with five boat docks and two fish cleaning stations.

There is a dump station located at the Main Area, southeast of the dam as well. Cedar Bay Campground has 28 electric sites and 18 standard sites without electricity. In the Beed's Landing area, there are 20 electric sites and eleven standard campsites without electricity, these along with 140 tent sites are found throughout the lake as well as over 200 picnic tables

and eight picnic shelters make Merritt an ideal place for camping.

Merritt Trading Post lies adjacent to the dam where there are fifteen cabins with kitchens, restaurant, boat and paddleboat rental, fuel, RV hookups, fishing guide service, public showers, and a public laundromat.

The Sandhills of Nebraska, with Merritt and its great fisheries are just a small part of what this part of the state has to offer. Down the road, you can count on our crew returning to the area, where once again we will enjoy all Cherry County has to offer and once again to test the waters of this Sandhills Reservoir.

For more information on all that's going on in the Valentine area, you can contact the Valentine Chamber at 800-658-4024 or on line at visitvalentine.org

Gary Howey, Hartington, Nebraska, is a former tournament angler, fishing and hunting guide. He is the Producer/Host of the award winning Outdoorsmen Adventures television series, seen locally in Channels 2 and 98 at Saturday at 6:30 pm and Sunday at 7:00 am. It airs on KTTM/KTTW-TV Fox, Sioux Falls/Huron, S.D. on Saturdays at 6:30 am and on the MIDCO Sports Network Thursday at 5:30 pm and Sunday at 10:00 am. The show can be seen in nine states in the upper Midwest He and Simon Fuller Co-Host the Outdoor Adventures radio program on Classic Hits 106.3, ESPN Sports Radio 1570 in Southeastern South Dakota and Northeast Nebraska. In Northwest Iowa, it airs on KCHE 92.1 FM. If you are looking for more outdoor information, check out www.outdoorsmenadventures.com.

OUTDOORS DIGEST

10th Annual Bat Festival At Custer State Park

CUSTER STATE PARK – The South Dakota Bat Working Group (SDBWG) will present the 10th Annual South Dakota Bat Festival on Saturday, Aug. 15, at 6 p.m. MDT in Custer State Park's Tatanka Theater in Game Lodge Campground.

Biologists will answer questions about bats and at 7 p.m. there will be a lecture-presentation. The festival also includes educational bat displays, crafts for kids and refreshments.

After the presentation, "bat-detectors" will be used to listen to bats flying overhead in Game Lodge Campground.

The purpose of the SDBWG is to work to protect bats and bat habitat through action, education and cooperation with federal, state, tribal and private landowners. The group aims to raise awareness about the role bats play in maintaining healthy ecosystems, and to work with public land managers and private landowners and provide alternatives that will reduce possible adverse effects to bats or bat habitat.

For more information on the festival and the South Dakota Bat Working Group, please contact Joel Tigner at 605-390-2061.

SD State Parks Celebrate Summer

PIERRE – Though days are shortening, South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks (GFP) is celebrating the warm summer nights. Programs take place throughout the weekend, focusing on connecting members of the community to the beauties of their area.

South Dakota State Parks are hosting the following events this weekend.

Saturday, August 15

The Science of Nature – Chief White Crane Recreation Area, Yankton. 11 a.m. CT. Info: 605.668.2985

Critter Detective – Newton Hills State Park, Canton. 1 p.m. CT. Info: 605.987.2263

Perseid Meteor and Star Party – Palisade State Park, Garretson. 10 p.m. CT. Info: 605.594.3824

For more information, view the events calendar at gfp.sd.gov.

BY STEPHEN HUDEK

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Take cover, Central Florida bears, the Motor City Madman is coming for you.

On the first day bear-hunting licenses became available in Florida, rocker Ted Nugent, known for searing guitar riffs and outspoken advocacy for hunting and gun rights, snapped up one to participate in the state's first hunt in more than two decades.

He is one of more than 1,100 people who have gotten permits so far, state wildlife authorities said.

Nugent, a Detroit rocker whose hits include "Cat Scratch Fever," "Stranglehold," and "Wango Tango," also spoke out recently in support of Minnesota dentist Walter

James Palmer who killed a protected lion on a hunting expedition in Zimbabwe.

In a phone interview, Nugent said he has been following Florida's bear saga.

"Wildlife can only be one of two things: It can only be an asset or a liability," Nugent said, citing the spike in nuisance bears. "Currently the Central Florida bear population is a liability because it is not valued as the renewable resource that God designed it as..."

"Let me give an Uncle Ted alert to everyone: (All

animals) are beloved. We love them all. We want them healthy and balanced, and if you fail to harvest the surplus, they will not be healthy and balanced," he said.

"The reason there hasn't been a bear season until now – even after more than 6,000 nuisance complaints – the reason we've waited so long is because of the scourge of political correctness dispensed by the idiots who claim the defenseless animals need protecting."

"Hellooooo! It's a (expletive) bear!"

Nugent, who has sold more than 30 million records and claims more than 33.7 million followers on Facebook, said he plans to hunt bears with friends in Central Florida when the hunt opens Oct. 24. He did not disclose what weapon he would use.

The rock star said he has hunted lions, elephants and other big game in Africa more than 20 times.

As an out-of-state resident, Nugent's license cost him \$300. He listed a Texas address on his application.

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