

## Lake Vermilion - Paradise Anew

Contributed by Bob "Bobzilla" Chochola  
Saturday, 12 April 2008

We were three days into our annual trip before we got good news from the local forecast. Storms would be moving through in the afternoon and evening and we knew that if there was ever a time to find big fish it would be during the instability of a front...

We were three days into our annual trip before we got good news from the local forecast. Storms would be moving through in the afternoon and evening and we knew that if there was ever a time to find big fish it would be during the instability of a front.

The first couple of days of our trip were rough and we spent a great deal of time doing the scout, picking up largemouth bass, smallmouth bass, and northern pike like they were going out of style. It was our first attempt at conquering Lake Vermilion near Cook, Minnesota, but we were intent on adding at least one muskie (North America's premiere fresh water gamefish) into our growing mix of species before we had to head home. Walleye fishing on this lake is legendary too and we certainly did well &ndash; I would catch my two personal best on this trip.

We did our homework ahead of time: marked maps, web site print-outs with tons of information, phone calls and e-mails to veterans of Lake Vermilion pumping them for even more information, and countless meetings of the minds, to discuss strategy. We were stoked and ready the second we launched the boats.

On day one, staring out at the massive 41-thousand acres (&ldquo;Big-V&rdquo; certainly earns her nickname), we scrambled to get settled into our cabin. Duffle bags were thrown into bedrooms to stake sacred claim to sleeping quarters that would be used later &ndash; much later. Canned goods were stowed in available cabinets as quickly as eight hands could fireman-drill them away. Perishable items made it from cooler to fridge in record time. Then it was time to get rigged and ready.

Of course, rig time is usually accompanied by a cold brew and stories of past triumphs, as if the fish were all gathered at the end of our dock impressed by our prowess. But in spite of all the fire power, all the experience, and all the confidence we arrived with, we were in awe of the lake and the wonder of what lie beneath.

It was clear to us by the time we finished day two that there was simply too much water to cover in one or even two weeks, so we began to focus on hot areas we marked near camp. We raised a few small muskies here-and-there and began to take a bite out of the abundant population of northern pike, walleye, largemouth, and smallmouth bass. Every spot, it seemed, was classic habitat where you could tangle with multiple species. Some spots were massive &ndash; two football fields worth of weed bed with well-defined edges, boat docks, stumps, and rocks galore that would all hold fish. It all looked good to us and we found many &ldquo;spots-within-a-spot&rdquo; that really stood out as prime targets in the event of a strong condition change.

And so we got that change. By late afternoon on day three the early morning forecast proved right and clouds were forming to the north and it was getting dark. We pounded water until the lightning became too dangerous and we had to take-off for the safety of camp. We still didn't have a serious sniff from a muskie, but that was about to change.

We had to stay on land to duck the electricity for about an hour, as a thin line of thunderstorms made its way through from north to south. A steady two-day light southeast wind finally shifted hard from the northeast and the front plunged through camp. Soon the storms passed leaving behind an unusual period of flat calm on the huge lake. Big-V was like glass. The first set of storms moved away to our south. We had yet to see signs of the heavy weather still several hours away to the north, moving in the same direction as the first outburst and aiming straight for us.

We grabbed our rain gear and best &ldquo;confidence&rdquo; lures, jumped in the boats, and swiftly ripped across the suddenly still Lake Vermilion to one of the areas we had been working and catching fish. It was near sunset and the break in the storms revealed a beautiful painted neon sky &ndash; a perfect backdrop to a big strike.

We worked a shoreline that had been productive walleye and pike territory from the moment we parked on it early in our trip. We had found at least six different species there and that fact just made it feel like a great place to be at prime time. We figured with that much activity before the front, big predators should move into the area to feed now that the weather patterns were shaking things up a bit. It was our best chance thus far to see a muskie, pike, or monster walleye.

The theory worked like a charm. My partner positioned the boat about a cast away from a rock reef that stuck straight out from the rip-rap shoreline. I took aim with a jerk bait to the left of the shallow water marker on top of the reef and began to work it. About half way back to the boat a 55-inch muskie came charging from the reef and took a swipe at the dodging and darting lure. The side and belly of the massive fish came clear of the water and she &ldquo;porpoised&rdquo; (a term guides use on Big-V, as it seems this sort of thing happens quite frequently) right over

the top of my bait. This was the large predator we were looking for. I never had a chance though. She was gone before I even realized what had happened.

### Why Choose Lake Vermilion?

We have been traveling all the way into Northwestern Ontario for a long time. No matter what, we have made time two weeks a year to do what we love to do best – the annual get away from it all trip with our close friends and dads to just kick-back and fish. What a wonderful time it has been battling more than our fare share of lunkers and sharing great memories that even the best digital camera in the world couldn't capture completely. For our fun, you just had to be there – for the mystery that would reveal itself right before our eyes every day and the magic that would happen with every fish we put in the boat. It was a world unknown to explore and conquer – at least it felt that way to us.

Years ago it was no big deal to hike miles through the woods carrying all our gear on our backs. Years ago we camped in tents and slept on the ground and braved all kinds of foul weather - yes we did get wet, real wet – to pursue big fish. Years ago it was "cool" to spend twelve, fourteen, or even sixteen hours straight per day in a rented boat – with a curved metal "beer can" bottom, wooden bench seats, and barely enough food and water and sun block to make it through the brutal daylight hours of "dog days," only to find out the grand finale was to be eaten by swarms of bugs after the sun went down. Years ago it was almost a requirement that we not only feel like we were leaving all of civilization behind, but that we did indeed actually part company with anything resembling modern life and human comfort on our way up through the winding roads that took us to the Mecca of fresh water fishing – The Canadian Shield. But times have changed, we have changed, and so too has our vision of the hunt.

The time had finally come for us to explore new terrain. Gas prices were through the roof. In the summer of 2006 it would have cost a small fortune to run a boat with a 90hpw on it for two weeks anywhere, much less north of the border.

And speaking of the border... Two years ago, in 2005, our crossing into Canada was a real pain in the saddle bags (if you'll pardon my Texas showing please). It took two guys with NO criminal record or DUI convictions four hours to clear the check point at International Falls - we were carrying state ID's and I had a valid passport (now a requirement, but not back then) in addition to my Texas ID.

Two men in a pick-up truck full of fishing rods, tackle boxes, coolers, pulling a trailer with a boat on it, and carrying more than the required forms of identification, I'm quite sure can be mistaken for a whole bunch of trouble by some folks, but we didn't even have any alcohol or firearms. So, to make a long story short, we decided to spend our US dollars for US accommodations on US soil for a while and started looking for a destination – south of the Canadian border.

Naturally our search quickly took us to Minnesota, where these days the fish are "really jumpin'"; Fishing magazines were full of articles telling us that we didn't necessarily have to go to Canada anymore if we wanted to catch a world class muskie or walleye. We also knew that any new lake, be it Vermilion, Mille Lacs, or Leech, would be a challenge the first time out. We decided Lake Vermillion would be our best bet, as it was about as close to Canada as you can get without actually being served back bacon on a bun and a glazed donut the size of a truck tire for breakfast.

Most resorts on Big-V are very family friendly, with fun activities available for everyone. Naturally our search narrowed to about a million places, so we put out an A.P.B. for recommendations. To make a long story short, we settled on Vermilion Dam Lodge ([www.vdl.com](http://www.vdl.com)) and were very happy with the decision. The accommodations were five-star and we found most necessities right there in camp – a roll out of bed and stone's throw away.

"In the 1940's the National Geographic Society declared Lake Vermilion one of the top ten most scenic lakes in the United States. And it still is today. With its [41,000] acres of water, 365 islands and 1200 miles of shoreline, it stretches 40 miles across the heart of Minnesota's Arrowhead Region." ([www.lakevermilion.com](http://www.lakevermilion.com))

I actually have a friend that used to vacation on Lake Vermilion when he was a kid in the 1950's. We have compared notes and relatively speaking, Big-V hasn't changed all that much over the years.

I must admit that her 41-thousand acres was a bit intimidating. She is pristine – a real beauty – with just enough human element to make things convenient and just enough wide open space to make us feel out in the wilderness. We knew we were on the right track on the way up when we ran out of paved road about twenty miles from camp. "Ah-ha! Now we're heading in the right direction." I thought to myself, as the blacktop turned to dirt. "Don't worry, we're talkin' Minnesota unpaved here, not Ontario unpaved. Those who have been to both places will know exactly what I'm talking about – no boulders, no trees, no three-foot deep potholes in Minnesota.

Once we got to camp we found an unexpected blend of vacation paradise and local flavor all over the place. Our lodge had full service everything and a big screen TV in the bar. We even had a nice pub within walking distance that served-up tasty munchies, our favorite spirits, and a live band. Smack in the middle of all that water: a bait store, marina, gift shop, grocery store, and local hang called&hellip; are you ready for this? Timbuktu. It&rsquo;s really very charming and does not gouge customers buying fuel either.

How&rsquo;s the fishing on Lake Vermilion?

If you have had success anywhere on The Canadian Shield, you will find fish on this lake too. She is very much like her big sister to the north, Lake of the Woods.

Although the term &ldquo;deep water&rdquo; means something totally different, Lake Vermilion isn&rsquo;t too unlike the deep, clear Canadian lakes either. Structure ranges from long weed lines to a great collection of rock reefs and long rocky shore line drops that seem to hold fish all the time. In the weeds, watch the sudden transition from thick cover (slop that you can&rsquo;t even get a bait through) to deep weeds &ndash; seems to be the sweet spot, at least it was while we were there. These areas are best for muskie, pike, and really big walleye.

Muskie fishing has really taken-off on Lake Vermilion in the past few years. Many trophy fish have come all year long, but the deeper into fall you go, the more big muskies seem to be willing to strike. Ed Tausk, Owner and Operator of Vermilion Dam Lodge (VDL), sent me some great photos of his guided trips from last October. If a trophy is what you&rsquo;re after, Lake Vermilion can accommodate.

Here is a little factual information provided by Duane Williams, Large Lake Specialist for the DNR Area Fisheries Headquarters in Ely, Minnesota:

"The current muskie stocking program started in 1987 when nearly 5,000 Leech Lake strain fingerlings were stocked. About 5,000 muskie have been stocked every year since 1987. These intensive stockings have apparently been successful, as reports of muskie being caught are increasing each year. Reports indicate the larger muskie now exceed 40 inches, which is the new minimum length to keep a muskie. Once muskie are well established, stocking every other year may be sufficient to maintain the population. The next step-in the muskie management program for Lake Vermilion is to evaluate the stocking and determine if they will reproduce naturally.&rdquo;

According to Mr. Tausk of VDL, in 2006 the DNR put a &ldquo;significant number of 50-inch-plus muskies&rdquo; in their Lake Vermilion nets, while they also [unofficially] determined that &ldquo;the species may indeed be reproducing naturally.&rdquo; This could be good news for muskie hunters for years to come.

No matter, this lake is a jackpot if you enjoy freshwater fishing of any kind. Lake Vermilion is approaching her prime and anyone who likes big fish and beautiful scenery will have a good time exploring her wonder. Check out Big-V&rsquo;s winter activities too. There&rsquo;s plenty to do - if you like ice fishing, snow mobiles, cross-country skiing, and a roaring fireplace, that is?

#### SOURCES:

Duane Williams, . Large Lake Specialist  
DNR Area Fisheries Headquarters Ely, MN 55731 (218-365-7280)  
Web site: [www.lakevermilion.com](http://www.lakevermilion.com)