

News and views that inform, inspire, and connect the Drummond Island and De Tour Village communities and points west.

In Pursuit of Pike

By Julie Covert

When Bill Beaver got tired of schlepping buckets of minnows for ice fishing, he tried his hand at using a spear instead and was quickly hooked.

“I love spearfishing!” Bill says emphatically. This generally quiet, soft-spoken resident of Drummond Island becomes happily animated when he starts talking about spearfishing. “It’s been around thousands of years. It’s so basic.”



And by that he means; basic is good; very good.

“You can never beat the low tech of spearfishing,” Bill says. “It doesn’t cost much for the equipment. A lot of my gear I have I’ve bought at an antique store, made myself, or won.” More on the “won” part later.

He grew up downstate in Morley, Michigan. For a man who runs an ATV shop and is found in the woods when he’s not in the garage, it’s difficult to believe that his family was “not very outdoorsy,” as he describes them. “Sure, we fished a bit, but not a ton.”

Strongly built, Bill definitely looks like a guy who enjoys spending time outdoors. He does enjoy getting out into the woods to hunt deer, grouse, and other small game. But it is spearfishing that excites him the most.

“It gives me an adrenaline rush,” he says of spearfishing. “It’s so exciting to catch a big toothy fish.”

He’s referring to catching by hook or spear a pike.

“I rather work hard, long hours all summer and fall to then close the shop and go spearfishing all winter,” he says, “than to work all year and have time to do other hunting. With spearfishing I never know what I am going to see. It’s like TV. I can watch it all day.”

He’s referring to watching the 30” x 54” inch hole in the ice that he sits over jiggging a decoy waiting for something to swim into view. For Bill “something” does not always have to be pike, but that is the main reason he sits in his ice shanty for hours on end.

“I’ve seen bass, walleye, perch, pike, and even sea lamprey,” Bill tells me. “It (the sea lamprey) was a couple of feet long. I tried to get it, but I never got a clear enough shot.”

He says he even enjoys watching the grasses dance back and forth in the water, and the smaller bottom feeding fish and water insects dance in and out of view.

His interest in icefishing began in 2000 when he didn’t want his rod and reel pike fishing season to end. At first he learned how to use tip-ups, where a hole 6 - 8 inches wide is drilled in the ice and a line with a baited hook is dropped in the hole. When the fish grabs the bait, a flag, attached to the line, tips up to indicate there’s a fish on the line. That first year he caught a 36 incher on a tip-up; it is mounted and hangs on his office wall. But that was not exciting enough for him. He wanted to see it - see the fish take the bait. After a friend showed him how spearfishing worked, he eventually bought a shanty and he was hooked!

Bill is full of information and eager to share his wealth of knowledge with anyone. I told him that I didn’t want him giving away any secrets. He replies “I’m happy to talk...”



with anyone who wants to learn. There's not a lot of information available."

A large component of spearfishing is properly working with decoys. Decoys are "fish" made of a wood or plastic body, with metal fins and weighted so they will sink, bob, wiggle, wander and swim when they are attached to the end of a line on a jigging stick.

Being mechanically inclined Bill wanted to make his own decoys. He quickly realized that there was not much information available about making them, so he set about to teach himself how by analyzing how well or not other people's decoys worked. He has a large assortment of decoys that he and others have made; they are various sizes, colors, shapes and materials. The prices of decoys vary. Plastic ones start at about \$18, "worker" decoys are around \$20 - \$40 and hand



carved art pieces are upwards of \$100 or more.

A little disheartened, he picks up one in particular and says, "I bought this from a guy who assured me that it swam. But it didn't."

I could read between the lines that even though he was out some money, he worked to figure out why that decoy wouldn't swim and then made his own better.

After lots of trial and error, Bill has developed two styles of his own ice fishing decoys. One style is hand carved out of cedar branches and then hand painted and varnished. The second style, his "worker", is from a wood block cut on the table saw, sanded and painted. Both have metal fins that are adjustable and lead for proper ballast and balance. He sells his "workers" for around \$20 at his shop, Beaver's ATV Rental and Repair.

"Spearfishing is really taking off in popularity," Bill says, "because it's so simple. All you need is a hole, a saw, a spear, and a shanty. I used to use a chainsaw, but my hand ice saw can cut just as quickly without the mess and extra weight."

Only a handful states allow spearfishing - Michigan, Minnesota, North and South Dakota, Montana and Alaska.



Wisconsin allows spearfishing for sturgeon only. But in Michigan fisherman are allowed to spear a large variety of fish, depending upon the location. The Michigan Darkhouse Angling Association is an organization that is getting revitalized and is a good place for spearfishing information.

Bill is also a wealth of information on the history of spearfishing. Indians used pelts covering a stick frame long before portable or permanent shanties were conceived. And according to Bill's research, decoy ice fishing used to be done in ancient Mongolia and China. In Nova Scotia, he tells me, they spearfish for smelt. Apparently their smelt are larger than what is caught here. That has not deterred Bill, though. He's even made his own multi-pronged smelt spear, on which he has caught local smelt. He told me he's looking forward to using it more.

"I feel like I am hunting the pike. With the decoys, I'm luring them in," he says. "But it's not barbaric like a lot of people say it is. It is 'Look & Release' rather than 'Catch & Release' by not having to handle a fish to unhook it and release it."

"I wait, watch it come in, look at it, decide if I want it, and if I do I spear it," he says, "and if I don't I watch it swim away; completely unharmed and untouched. You can't do that with a hook."

Continued...

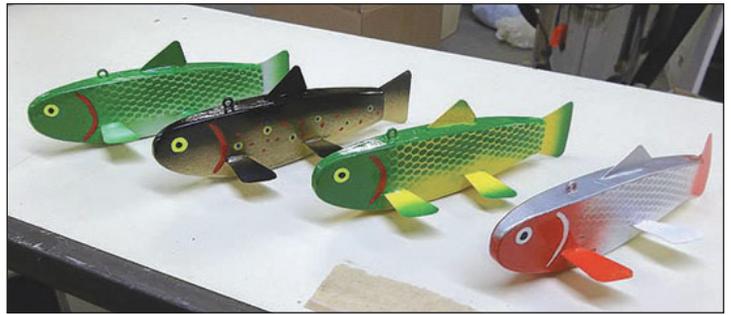
The only fish he “lost” or missed was because of his own misjudgment of the water refraction. He hit the tail and the spear slid off the fish.

Going back to the gear he won: In 2008 and 2009 he won first and second place in the Pilgrim’s Village spearfishing contest, one of which as 42 1/2 inches.

When when he feels the ice is safe, about 3 - 4 inches thick, he will take a portable shanty out to do a little fishing and scout some areas. He waits for ice of about seven inches before he puts his permanent shanty out. Then when the weather is right he’ll go out for the “morning bite,” from about 8 AM to noon. About 3 PM to dark he will go out for a few more hours. “The



last half hour is generally the most active in the afternoon,” he says. Here on Drummond he tries to go out every other day. It’s the pike that excites Bill, but he’ll drop a hook in to catch perch, bluegill or crappie.



I asked him why he does not only go out at that specific time; why sit in the cold for hours staring into a hole doing nothing?

“I never know what I am going to see and when.” He says that he even has fun just working his decoys through the water.

Bill’s interest in spearfishing is infectious. After chatting for a quick two hours I was ready to bundle up and go fishing with him to see what it really was all about.

Photos (top to bottom):

Page 2: Cutting the hole; building a decoy; waiting for pike with two decoys and spear;

Page 3: Hand carved decoy and jigging stick; finished “work” decoys.

Photos: Bill Beaver and Julie Covert

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