

Isle Royale Charter Fishing

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Marie: You're listening to The Fish Dish, brought to you by Eat Wisconsin Fish, a campaign of the Wisconsin Sea Grant Program. Are you fish-curious? Or are you a fish expert who wants to learn even more about Wisconsin's fisheries and cooking fish? We'll give you the latest "dish" on fish.

Your hosts are . . .

Sharon: Sharon Moen

Marie: and Marie Zhuikov

Together: Two friends who have been working for Sea Grant seemingly forever and who know a thing or two about fish.

Marie: But that's "forever" in a good way.

Sharon: Sharon runs the Eat Wisconsin Fish campaign

Marie: and Marie is a science communicator.

In this episode, Sharon and I take "The Fish Dish" to the water for a charter fishing experience on Lake Superior. One foggy morning, we visited Isle Royale National Park where we signed up for a fishing charter provided by the Rock Harbor Lodge on this wilderness island.

Sharon: So, the "Fish-o-Licious" part of our show will be a little different this time. We'll be hearing from the charter captains about their favorite way to prepare fish, and then Marie and I will discuss the delicious dinner we had from the lake trout we caught. Yes, here's a spoiler, we did catch fish on our charter, but we weren't so sure there for a while . . .

Marie: Our captains were Marina Alexander and Cole Ritchie. Now, Marina had the unusual privilege of growing up on Isle Royale, where she spent her summers. That's because her father, Kim Alexander, runs the lodge there as a concessionaire to the park service. We had a chance to talk to Marina about fishing conditions in Lake Superior before we boarded the boat.

Marina: So, we had a really late spring this year. So, the water is still really cold so the fish aren't quite right on the surface like they normally would be. In addition to that, we're seeing a lot more schools of herring. With the increased amounts of herring I think that the lake trout are feeding a lot more on herring, which is great, right? It's really great that the herring population is thriving. It also means the fish are eating a natural food source for them. But as far as getting the fish on our lure, they're not too keen on an aluminum lure when they've got tons of herring to munch on.

But I do, I have noticed the last couple days this past week, when we went out to a couple of my favorite fishing spots that they're starting to come in. We have been catching them kind of deeper.

Sharon: Deeper being like 100?

Marina: Yes, 100-plus feet. Yeah, We're using downriggers. Just primarily downriggers. I've been fishing with a surface line, but I haven't caught anything.

Sharon: And our target is lake trout?

Marina: Yeah. Mostly redbfin, a couple siscowets, too, but...

With that being said, we used to catch a lot of salmon out here, not necessarily this time of year but more in August when the surface temperature is a lot warmer. But we haven't in the last couple years. And I had heard at one point a couple of years ago that Canada stopped stocking salmon in their rivers. I think that has had kind of an impact on the salmon here. I'm not sure but I think that that could... I remember quite a few years ago it was like we were only catching salmon. It was rare to catch a lake trout. Well, that's really fun, too. Lake trout are native here more or less than the salmon so... but yeah.

Sharon: Before we plunge on, I feel the need to mention two things. The first is that when Marina was talking about "herring" earlier, she was NOT talking about ocean herring, which is a much different beast. She is talking about lake herring ... also known as cisco.

The second is that there are a variety of charter fishing opportunities on the Great Lakes. Though our adventure was in the Michigan waters of Lake Superior, Wisconsin charter captains work out of communities such as Superior, Bayfield and Ashland. Along Michigan's shores, a slew of charter captains operate from Marinette to Kenosha.

Marie: How much is a slew?

Sharon: Good question. The Wisconsin DNR licensed 375 charter captains in 2022 . A half-day trip can cost about \$700 or more. If you've gone charter fishing in the ocean, you might find Great Lakes fishing a bit slower, especially in the cold waters of Lake Superior. But it is so worth it!

Marie: Now, that 375, is that both Lake Michigan and Lake Superior?

Sharon: Yes, that is the Wisconsin waters of Michigan and Superior.

Marie: Ah.

Sharon: So, it doesn't count the other states.

Marie: Okay. Another thing we should explain is that there are four different kinds of lake trout in the waters around Isle Royale. There are leans, humpers, siscowets and redbfins. They each look a little different and are commonly found at different depths. Lean lake trout live up to their name by not having as much fat as the others. They are torpedo-shaped and are most often found at shallower depths – above 50 meters. Siscowets are full of fat and have large eyes. They are found in the deeps – between 50 meters and 150 meters. Their coloring is paler than lean lake trout or redbfins. Humpers occupy offshore midwater shoals or banks. Redfins were scientifically documented in 2014. They are found at moderate depths – around 80 meters. Their coloring is darker and more striking than the other varieties, plus they have bright red fins and wide bellies.

Why so long to officially document redbfins? That's because it took until 2014 for a team of scientists from Wisconsin and Michigan who were doing a long-term study on lake trout diversity in North America, to revisit the Isle Royale lake trout population. They expanded their sample sizes of the fish and the locations over those they had sampled in the past, and they used new methods to determine the morphs of lake trout. Redfins had probably been there all along, but the scientists just hadn't found them yet. And if they did find them in the past, they didn't have the tools available to really differentiate them from other types of lake trout.

Now it's time to head out onto the lake. Cole invited us onto the boat and told us about his background on the island.

Cole: They call it fishin', not catching. We're going to try our best, go to our good honey hole. We did pretty good the other day, so... let's give it a whirl. You ready?

Marie: Who hoo!

Marie: How long have you worked out here?

Cole: This is my first summer here.

Marie: What prompted you to come out?

Cole: I didn't want to go back to the family business. Laughs. I left Florida and came up here, unemployed. My mom emailed this one over to me and so I just stepped right into it basically. I just had a short gap in unemployment, luckily. I had the job by the time I got to Michigan from Florida. It worked out.

Someone else on the boat: What's the family business?

Cole: Timber. We own a tree service and we cut timber in the wintertime. Have a small sawmill.

Marie: So, what do you think of it out here?

Cole: It's peaceful. I love it. It's peaceful when it's like this. When the lake gets going, it's a little exciting sometimes, but... No, it's cool. It's a unique place. Very clean.

Marie: So, Cole, how did you get into fishing?

Cole: Oh fishing, I grew up doing that. My dad and I would go up to the northern tip of the lower peninsula (of Michigan) and we would fish for smallmouth bass. That was kind of the yearly getaway. We'd take the whole month of June off and then go chase the smallmouth bass around the Traverse City area, Mackinaw City, Alpena. There's so many good spots to fish for the smallmouth. I did mostly sight-fishing, small-boat fishing for bass. We'd go out of South Haven perch fishing. Spent most of my time on Lake Michigan.

Sharon: As Marina readied the fishing poles, she explained her background in fishing.

Marina: I was taught by a lot of people throughout the years. A lot of them being captains out here. Jim Call who's also from Duluth was one of my big mentors and taught me a lot about fishing and boating in general and navigating Isle Royale. But of course, my dad and brother – I have an older brother and an older sister – definitely instilled the fun of catching fish at a really really early age. And then growing up out here I met a lot of the Isle Royale families that have cabins out here. I definitely spent a lot of time fishing with those guys, too. A lot of that is just also trial and error, too. Like I said I really just enjoy fishing, so, going out and trying new things and new spots and different stuff is something I definitely enjoy.

Sharon: The trout we hoped to catch were in the deeps, so Marina needed to use downrigger balls on the fishing lines.

Marie: Sharon, why don't you explain what downrigger balls are?

Sharon: Okay. So, downrigger balls – they're shaped like cannonballs. They could have come out of a cannon. But they help take the bait down to the bottom, or the lures, to catch the fish, and keep the line bent. So, you put one of these balls on the line and then the bait – the lure – is riding off the bottom by about ... so the ball bounces off the bottom and the bait is about 6 inches higher than that.

Marie: Oh!

Sharon: So it doesn't get caught on the rocks and things.

Marina: There's a couple things that happen with downriggers. Right now, I've cranked it up, so we've got this bend in the rod. That's the tension on the line. So, when you see it kind of move, it could be moving from the water. Or the downrigger ball is sitting on the bottom, which is good and bad. I think that it kind of-bouncing off the bottom just a little bit attracts fish in a way I always like.

Cole: 55

Marina: So, Cole is constantly reading the depth and I'm constantly adjusting this, so it goes down on the bottom or comes back up, so it doesn't get snagged or vice versa.

So, I'm going to set this one up.

Boat sounds.

Cole: 65

Marina: Copy.

Beeping sounds, boat sounds.

Marie: So, if a fish gets on, do we just reel it up on this or do we take the ...

Marina: If we get a fish on, I will grab the line, make sure it's a fish too, and get it off the bottom and I'll set the hook and then I'll hand the rod over to you guys and then we'll kind of...

Marie: Don't let go of the rod. Laughs.

Marina: Yeah, rule number one!

More laughter.

Marina: What's our depth?

Cole: 70. I'm taking us in a little closer, probably keep us at 65.

Marina: Okay.

Cole: Whatever you prefer.

Marina: I mean, ideally, I'd like 100 feet but ...

Cole. Okay, we're kind of right on a shelf right now.

Marina: Okay, sounds good.

Cole: It's deeper right here.

Sharon: So, do you yell out kala, kala, kala, or anything when you catch a fish?

Cole: *Laughs.*

Marina: I say, "Fish on!"

Sharon: Okay. *Laughs.*

Cole: 80 feet.

Sharon: I went charter fishing out of Duluth. They like the Finnish, kala, kala, kala!

Marina: I definitely don't do that.

Laughter

Marina: I do not have any Finnish heritage, so....

Sharon: *Laughs.*

Marina: It would be a little inappropriate if I did. It would be funny, though.

Sharon: *Laughs.* That's right.

Marina: So, the end of the island, Blake's Point over here. And Passage Island is also out here. Between Passage and Blake's Point it's a three-mile gap. So, between the point here and Passage Island and this reef here it's a very narrow little window and it's actually a shipping lane between Thunder Bay, Canada, and Sault St. Marie and the lock system down there. Luckily, there are no shipwrecks on this reef.

Sharon: *Laughs*

Marina: Which is pretty miraculous if you think about all the ships that had to thread that needle in fog like this and, um, what are we at?

Cole: 20

Marina: On the other side of Blake's Point is a shipwreck called the Monarch. That sank in the late 1800s I think. Yeah, it kind of like got off-course in a snowstorm. It was the last trip of the year. And just smacked onto the rocks. I guess it was a bad storm, so they obviously got off the ship. One person died. One of the crew members was trying to climb to tie a line up, scaling the cliff and fell into the water and ice and died but everyone else was able to make it to shore, and they had to stay there for three days until the lighthouse keeper at Passage was able to row his boat out to Blake's Point to find out what happened.

Sharon: Oh wow.

Marina: They didn't have the greatest technology back then. It's like really hard to imagine – sure we have all this navigational aid technology, but we also have like really nice down jackets and really nice clothing technology...

Sharon: *Laughs*

Marina: So, if that happened now, I would probably still be pretty chilly, but can you imagine being in an old wool jacket, like and itchy wool jacket. Like, that's your layer.

Sharon: We kept trolling and fishing for a few hours with nothing to show for it. As the fog began to lift, we decided to take matters into our hands and offer a little sacrifice to the lake in hopes of changing our luck. I poured a bit of leftover coffee, which is precious to me, into the lake.

It worked! Soon afterward, I was reeling in my line according to Marina's instructions.

Marina: Fish on!

Pull up and then reel down. Reel, reel, reel. Pull up. Reel, reel, reel, reel...

Cole: We're at 180 Marina.

Marina: Thank you. Pull up and reel down. Gently pull up. Reel down, reel, reel, reel.

Sound of reel clicking

Marina: Pull up, reel, reel, reel, reel reel. Pull up, reel, reel, reel, reel reel.

Sharon: How deep was this one?

Marina: Oh, that one was about 170 feet.

Audience: Wow!

Sharon: Oh, I see it!

Audience: Yeah, ooh hoo! All right!

Marie: That's a big one!

Sharon: Woo hoo, I got a fish!

Marina: This is a redfin.

Marina: So, we're not skunked, so that's nice. I can breathe a little lighter.

Everybody cheers.

Marie: Then it was my turn.

Marina: All right, so you want to pull up gently. Pull up and then reel down. And it might fight a little bit. You'll want to let it do its thing. You definitely don't want this rod to go flat. You want to keep that tension.

Pull up and reel down. You want to pull up a little bit higher. Reel, reel, reel, reel reel.

Sound of reeling.

Sharon: Whoo, nice! That one does have red on it.

Marina: Yeah, this is a lot different than the first one.

Marie: Oooh, it's so cold!

Marina: So, this lure is working. So, I pulled out a second one. We'll see if I'm either going to double our luck or jinx us.

Laughter.

Marie: Sharon, I caught a fish!

Sharon: It was exciting to see you reel it in. It was really big, too. How big do you think that was?

Marie: I don't know. It's about two feet?

Sharon: Okay, we're measuring it on the cooler.

Marie: 23 inches?

Sharon: Yeah, 23, I'd say. Wow, good fish! And it's a red fin.

Marie: It's pretty!

Music from "Zenith City" by Woodblind

Marie: My trout was five pounds and Sharon's weighed four pounds. Being connected to a wild fish out of Lake Superior was memorable, even if it was only for a few minutes.

Now it's time for the Fish-o-Licious part of our podcast, where we usually discuss fish recipes which, by the way, you can find on the Eat Wisconsin Fish website (which is eatwisconsinfish.org). But today we're going to hear from Marina and Cole about their favorite fish preparations and we'll tell you what our lake trout tasted like.

Marina: My favorite way, pan frying them with a little shore lunch breading on it is really good. We grew up spending a lot of time in the evening eating our catch by taking some tin foil and the fillet, put toppings on it, wrap it up and putting it on the campfire coals.

We used to, when fishing was really really good, it always is good, but depending on the time of year, we'd have a competition among the employees on who could prepare the best fillet, you know. And you couldn't use any fish staple seasonings. You couldn't even use lemon pepper seasoning, you couldn't use cajun. You had to come up with your own spice packet.

One good way was smothering it in honey and baking it in honey and lemon. That was one way. But ultimately, the best way is wrapping it in tinfoil and putting it on the campfire and eating it that way. With our little competitions we would have we would also put little stipulations on it like no butter or you couldn't use lemon. All these things. We had so many fillets of fish, we were making fillets every night.

Cole: I have had baked, like smallmouth, that's not bad. Or baked walleye, that's pretty good. But I do prefer fried. But I like the saltwater fish, like Mahi, you can throw that right on the grill. Just blackened with a little salt and pepper. You really don't need much for that. That's delicious fish.

Sharon: Now I want to talk about the fish that we caught and ate. That was quite a mountain of fish, wasn't it?

Marie: Yeah, it was.

Sharon: But before we get to how it was prepared, I want to talk about how it was cleaned. So, I do know how to clean a fish. But we didn't clean these fish.

Marie: No.

Sharon: No, when you get a charter captain to take you out, they often – I think they always clean the fish for you. So, we didn't have to get our hands messy at all for that part. Right off the boat, they took them away and prepared them for cooking. And we also had the opportunity to have them cooked right there at the lodge. That's not always the experience you'll have with a charter captain but because it was associated with this lodge, they said, "We'll cook them for you for dinner," and we're like, "Yes, please!"

Laughter

Marie: Yeah, and so they kept the fillets in the refrigerator until dinner time, and then we had a consult with the chef, didn't we, Sharon?

Sharon: That was really fun. The chef came out to talk to us about how we wanted the fish prepared.

Marie: And tell us her idea. *(Laughs)*

Sharon: The first option was to pan sear them and then deep fry them, and I'm like, "No!" *(Laughs)* "Don't deep fry these beautiful fish!"

Marie: Yeah, because we wanted to be able to taste the fish and when you deep fry it, it covers up the flavor. And these, you know, were so fresh – just from Lake Superior – and ...

Sharon: ..within hours...

Marie: ... we wanted to taste them. Yeah, and we wanted it a little bit healthier, too, so ...

Sharon: So we opted for a sautéed plate. So, she sautéed the fish and the fillets were cut up into say, two-inch fillets so they could be evenly cooked. Then they were all heaped into the middle of this platter that was surrounded by vegetables and tartar sauce ...

Marie: And French fries, wasn't it?

Sharon: French fries, too, were part of our meal. But it was just this beautiful display. It was so beautiful that one of the other guests at the lodge asked the chef how he could have one. She had to tell him, "You can't, sorry. Unless you go charter fishing."

Marie: They used to have lake trout on the menu at the lodge, but things changed during COVID and their menu changed. So, you can't get fish at the restaurant there unless you catch it yourself, like we did. We were sorry to create some envy amongst the other diners but it was kind of fun, too. *(Laughs)*

Sharon: It was fun. And I think it's a good opportunity to talk about fish and their sustainability and why we just can't lake trout every night for dinner. They've been managed well and they're returning to our Great Lakes. In fact, Lake Superior is an amazing example of good management. And the reason that

population became so low was because of the sea lampreys that got in in the 30s through the Welland Canal. And they have really taken a toll on the lake trout fishery.

Marie: And then there's also the mercury contamination. *(Laughs)*

Sharon: They are one of the higher-end predators.

Marie: Yeah.

Sharon: And back in the day there was also some – you know, before management was in place like it is today – there was some overfishing of some of the populations. So, you talked about the four morphs that were around Isle Royale. There used to be like a hundred known morphs of lake trout throughout the Great Lakes.

Marie: Oh, wow!

Sharon: And because of sea lamprey and overfishing, some of those varieties disappeared from our current waters.

Marie: We really felt like we ate like royalty.

Sharon: Absolutely. There's nothing finer than fresh fish that you caught yourself, that somebody else cooked for you. *(Laughs)*

Marie: Uh huh and we sort of caught it ourselves but ... *(Laughs)*

Sharon: That's true, that's true.

Marie: Marina and Cole we have to thank for that, too.

Sharon: Teamwork makes the dream work.

Marie: Yeah, and it was my first time charter fishing. So, I really enjoyed that.

Sharon: Right, it was a great experience and I would definitely go again, myself.

Music from Zenith City by Woodblind

Marie: That's it for this episode of The Fish Dish. For more information about fish and recipes, visit Eat Wisconsin Fish on the web at eatwisconsinfish.org, plus Twitter and Facebook. Thanks goes to Marina Alexander and Cole Ritchie for taking us fishing. Thank you for listening!