Our sandhills secret

By Ev Tarrell
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Standing up front on our 16-foot john boat, if I jumped up only slightly, I could accomplish two things: see over the cattails that smothered the front of the boat and also keep my dad's anxiety at bay just enough to allow me to maintain my controversial perch atop the bow.

Anything more than slight jumps definitely would have me sitting down in the seat like I was continually being asked to do. There was for sure something very special behind that wall of cattails.

From my "bird's eye view," I could make out a secret pocket of water secluded behind the mass of vegetation that smothered the shallow end of this Sand Hill's lake. "It's cool back there," I exclaimed. "I think we're gonna have to get a run at it and ram through em'…it's the only way."

My dad smiled and calmly came back with "I think we can pick our way through, boys; just be patient." Twenty seconds later, the last of the clinging cattails gave up their grasp and we floated cleanly into our private "mini lake." While calmer minds had once again prevailed, ramming those reeds clearly would have been a lot more fun!

The chatter between my brothers and me was typical of grade school boys. "Dad, this is awesome back here." "I'll bet no one else has ever been back here!" "We can't tell anyone about this spot, ever…OK?"

Dad just smiled. I'm sure we sounded like we had just found buried treasure. Truth is, we had! To this day, I am uncertain if that secret pocket was really that special or if it was just the warm May weather, or maybe just the evening bite coming on, but we started catching fish like crazy!

Big bluegills, big perch, and even big largemouth were hitting basically anything sharp that we could tie onto our lines. We even had bass "tearing away" at my little brother's bobber as he retrieved it back across the top! Honest! Now that is fishing!

That was Memorial Day weekend 1976, my brothers and I were fresh out on summer break, and we had just "cut our teeth" on fishing the Sandhills of Nebraska in May.

Even though I later learned that our secret pocket was not so secret, it's still there. I saw it two years ago when I had a chance to return to that lake and dangle a few tear drops through the ice for some big bluegills.

Despite being almost 35 years later, you know I walked right to that pocket without even a sideways glance. Strange how outdoor memories are forever burned into our minds.

My wife prays that just a little of that same skill set would somehow manifest into even the slight ability to locate car keys, checkbooks, TV remotes or maybe, just maybe, recall our anniversary. So far, no meaningful progress along these lines but "we" have made it one of my goals for 2012 !

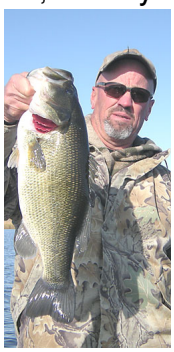
The fishing trip I just described was truly a very special day on the water and one that I will never forget, but it is still just one of many incredible days I have had fishing the Sandhills. Even

though bass may not “tear away” at your bobbers on every trip, great fishing is more the rule than the exception when it comes to mid-spring fishing in this incredible area of Nebraska. Here is a frame-up of “how” “when” “where” and “what to expect” when hitting the Sandhills this spring.

Where: All regions of the Sandhills have great lakes that basically “come alive” in May and offer great action on a variety of game fish. Two great areas that “float to the top” of the list though are the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge south of Valentine and the Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge north of Oshkosh. These two federally managed systems, offer multiple lakes and opportunities at numerous species of fish as well.

On the Crescent Lake system, try Blue Lake, Crescent Lake, and Island Lake. Blue and Island can offer some hot action on perch and largemouth. Island offers a chance at crappie as well, and Blue Lake holds some great bluegill.

On the Valentine system, for bass try Watts, Pelican, and Hackberry Lakes. Fishing for northern pike can be fantastic in this system, and your best bets are Clear Lake, Dewey Lake, and once again, Pelican Lake. Panfishing is excellent in most of this refuge.



Many State of Nebraska owned and also privately owned Sandhill lakes are available for fishing. One of my all-time favorite Sandhill lakes is state-operated Smith Lake Wildlife Area south of Rushville. This lake offers incredible action on a variety of game fish and provides trophy-sized fish of almost every species.

When: The time to hit the Sandhills is now! While May is just awakening, the good fishing is kicking off particularly in the shallower lakes that have already warmed. The fishing will continually get better as May unfolds and then start to get tougher into mid-June as vegetation starts to accumulate and makes the fishing more difficult.

How: Almost all species of fish are relating to the shallower water and the reed beds that thrive in these areas. For panfish, casting small artificial in these areas works extremely well.

Don’t forget the old standby, though: panfish still love the old “bobber and bait” technique! There simply is not a better rig ever invented for kids than a good old-fashioned red and white bobber, so don’t be too proud to get back to the simple side. Northern Pike are very predictable and regularly willing to bite in many of these lakes!

Spinnerbaits, spoons, and crank baits all work well for northern. For bass, go with soft plastics, spinner baits, and shallow-running crank baits. Top water techniques come into play for bass in early morning and later evenings.

Top water bass’n” on the Valentine Refuge can be incredible and it is worth carving out an evening just for this opportunity. At the end of the day, almost all fish in these lakes are shallow right now, so don’t try to out think it. Concentrate on the weed beds, and experiment with a variety of lures and retrieves until you find the key.

What you should know: The Valentine and Crescent Lake refuges have been well managed

over the years but there are a few unique regulations that are part of this management program. Only electric motors are allowed and, while gas engines are permitted on your boat, fuel lines must be disconnected at all times.

Overnight camping is not permitted on either of the refuges and fishing is allowed only during daylight hours. Travel time is permitted around this fishing window though. Live minnows are not allowed on either refuge.

Almost all of the lakes mentioned have functional boat ramps and docks on the more popular locations. Incidentally, Watts Lake on the Valentine Refuge has good access for the handicapped fisherman.

While many state length and bag limits apply on these federal refuges, many special restrictions are in force as well. If you plan to fish either of these two refuges, going on line beforehand, stopping at the refuge headquarters when entering, or both are “must haves.”

As far as the state lakes that are available in the Sandhills, again, many options are available. Go on line at www.outdoornebraska.ne.gov for details on available options.

I have spent a lot of time in the Sandhills chasing a variety of critters and setting hooks on whatever would hit my lures. I can promise you that we are truly blessed to have such an incredible resource so close at hand and one that is so much like it was thousands of years ago.

And, as if the beauty were not enough, the fishing is simple and the fish are eager to bite a lure or worm as well. The locals claim that they have even seen Sandhill fish raise little white flags out of the water saying “Take me! Take me!” Now that’s fishing!

OK, the “bass hitting the bobber story”… I promise is 100 percent true, but that last part—a little debatable, maybe. See you out there!