

Disabled anglers get a dream fishing trip on Lake Michigan

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Contributed photo

Caleb Janssen, a 12-year-old Muskegon resident with spina bifida, reels in a steelhead during a special Lake Michigan fishing trip on Sept. 12, which was sponsored by the Grand Rapids Wheelchair Sports Association and the Muskegon Charter Boat Association.

Thanks to the Grand Rapids Wheelchair Sports Association and the Muskegon Charter Boat Association, several disabled anglers and their family members got to experience the excitement of trolling for trout and salmon on Lake Michigan.

Three charter local services — “Margie J,” captained by Drew Morris; “Code Blue,” captained by Greg Weheler; and “Addiction,” captained by Brian Hietala — discounted their usual fees in order to make this special event possible.

“This is our second year of arranging charters for our disabled members,” said Allan Pomranka, who serves as the fishing director of the GRWSA. “It takes a community effort to make this possible.”

The beneficiaries on the Sept. 12 excursion were Caleb Janssen, who is an energetic 12-year-old with spina bifida, his father Eric Janssen, grandfather Harlan Janssen from Wisconsin, Pat Besta (who is paralyzed from the waist down) and his 11-year-old twin boys Joe and Nicholas — none of whom had ever experienced a Lake Michigan fishing trip.

At the first light of day, we were motoring through the channel but our sleep-deprived crew (try waking 11- and 12-year-olds at 5 a.m.!) seemed excited to start on their new adventure.

“I’ve got some fish going out in 200 feet of water near the shelf,” Morris explained. “But it could be a rough ride as it looks

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likes 3-5 foot waves, and some bigger, coming out of the northwest.”

Due to the wave conditions, most of the other boaters made the decision to set up a trolling pattern inside the arms and channel. But Morris reasoned that if our crew could take the waves, the chances of catching a few fish would be much better by going out into deeper water.

The ride out was “bumpy” to say the least, but our novice crew voiced no complaints — that is until Grandpa Harlan began to take on an ashen hue.

Although he had the dubious distinction of being the first on board to all victim to motion sickness , he wasn’t the last as all but one of the novice anglers took turns battled seasickness.

In spite of the rough conditions, we still managed to have three fish on while working our way out to the “shelf.” But in each instance, following a brief fight, the fish managed to escape and the cooler remained empty.

Although we remained confident, our outing hadn’t gone as planned as the waves were larger than forecasted, the fish we did hook were lost and our novice crew was beginning to feel the combined effects of sleep deprivation and motion sickness.

Maybe a snack would help?

Eric Janssen’s stomach calmed to the point where he took out a banana — but he didn’t have it for long!

“A BANANA!” Morris exclaimed. “You should NEVER bring a banana on board a charter fishing boat — that’s bad luck! Some of the charters have signs instructing their clients to never bring a banana.”

Whether or not there was any validity to the banana curse, Eric Janssen soon tossed it overboard.

And just seconds later ... fish-on!

This time, Caleb, with the assistance of his dad, managed to reel in a 6-pound steelhead. During the next 30 minutes we had a couple more short hits followed by another steelhead, this one caught by Nicholas.

Strangely enough, in addition to the fish starting to hit and having a couple nice trout in the box, the wave action calmed to less than two-foot swells. And if all that weren’t enough, our team of novice anglers once again had smiles on their faces as the dreaded “Mal De Mer” (seasickness) had passed.

More importantly, all three boats caught fish (all trout, no salmon) and the GRWSA participants were treated to an experience they will never forget.

“This program has worked out very well and we hope to make it bigger next year,” Pomranka said.

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