

Valley Angler Smelt Fishing By Bill Thompson

For someone who loves fishing as much as I do I never really got into the sport until my mid twenties. I have been trying to make up for lost time ever since. One of the things I missed out was smelt fishing. Even though I was born on the banks of the Kennebec River in Gardiner Maine, up until this past week I had never fished for smelt. Thanks to my friend Rich Quint I can finally say that I have been smelt fishing.

The smelt I am referring to here are the salt water version, not the type found in many of our nearby lakes. The sea run rainbow smelt is an anadromous species that can be found in most coastal rivers of New Hampshire and Maine. These tasty little fish begin to make their spawning runs just about the time ice begins to form on the rivers and have been highly sought after since Colonial, times although I am sure that the Native Americans that inhabited the region probably introduced them to the European settlers.

The Kennebec River is famous for its saltwater smelt runs. The Kennebec is tidal all the way up to Augusta, which pretty much marks the end of the run although historically they ran as far as Waterville. The removal of the Edward's Dam in Augusta has helped in the restoration of the original run. During the 1800's a large commercial fishery for smelt prospered. The harvesting of smelt was more valuable than shad or salmon. Today the smelt run is still a valuable recreational fishery.

In December, as soon as the ice is sound, small villages of smelt shacks begin to appear from Hallowell on down through Merrymeeting Bay. River towns like Gardiner, Randolph, Pittston, Topsham, Dresden and Bowdoinham are all home to numerous smelt camps. The shacks or shanties are placed along the banks of the river in neat rows sort of resembling town houses. Each house will accommodate from two to six fishermen. The shacks are heated by small wood stoves. On one side of the shack is an open troth, through which the lines are dropped. The term shack or shanty aptly describes them as most are roughly constructed. Our shanty was covered with canvas and the door had gaps in it that you could fit your arm through. All and all they are more than adequate and quite comfortable.

Our trip was to have been last week, however due to a great deal of slush on the ice we had to postpone until this past Tuesday, when there was a favorable tide. The runs are dependent on the tides and vary from camp to camp; in our case an incoming tide is best. In order to catch the tide we had to leave Conway at four in the morning. Readers of this column will no doubt know of my personal preference for the "evening rise". However, when it comes to smelt fishing you do what you have to do. And so it came to be that Tuesday morning, at four, I met up with Rich and Dave Weathers at B's parking lot. Unfortunately B's was not open, or I might have lingered over a good cup of hot coffee.

Our destination was Bowdoinham, Maine and the River Bend Smelt Camp. After a two hour drive we arrived at the camps. From the trunk of Dave's car we unloaded our gear and proceeded to the office to register and pick up bait. It is important to make reservations in advance so that your shack will be ready and also because these camps are often sold out, especially on weekends. Rich had made all the arrangements in advance and they were expecting us.

Once registered we walked down a gang plank to the ice where the camps were aligned in a row. Our shack was to be number 1, located at the head of the row. It was darker than the inside of your pocket and even though it was a short walk it was good to enter the little shanty which was warmed by a small wood stove and lit with a couple of bare light bulbs. Quite cheery.

We quickly got set up. Folding chairs were taken down from the wall where they had been hung. A couple of buckets were produced and filled with water from the open troth. A couple of pine boards were placed over the top of the bucket, to serve as a platform on which to cut bait. The preferred bait is sea worms. I have had some experience with sea worms before and am well aware that they have a good set of pincher's and can give you a nasty bite. Rich unwrapped a couple of worms and placed them on the board. He took out his jack knife and removed the heads of the worms eliminating the threat of biting once and for all. The worms were than chopped into short pieces about a quarter on an inch long. The hooks were soon baited and dropped into the open troth.

Rich makes all of his own smelt rods. Sometime ago Rich was able to acquire a quantity of broken rod tips. The rods are about two feet long with maybe one guide and a tip. The grip is made from a dowel. A couple of smaller dowels are set into the handle at opposing angles and this serves as the reel. Nothing to fancy, just the basics. The line is threaded through a small bobber after which a sinker is added and then the hook tied on. Rich likes to wrap the bend of the hook with red thread or wool. I probably should not have mentioned this as I think it is an old family secret. After the hook is baited, with a piece of worm, it dropped into the water in hopes that an unwary smelt will happen by and eat the worm.

Being the newbe I was subject to a certain amount of good natured kidding. Rich insisted that in order to insure success the rods should be blessed. Which makes since, after all they bless fishing fleets, don't they? I balked at the suggestion that the worms should be warmed be placing them in your mouth. I didn't fall off the cabbage truck yesterday; I have heard this one before and like I said I have dealt with sea worms before. Apparently a good deal of piratical joking goes on in these camps. Rich said that it was not too unusual for someone from another camp to sneak out and place a board over the chimney of a camp down the line. I was told that on one occasion some character had lowered himself into the troth in his camp, swam under the ice and came up in the next camp no doubt scaring the hell out of the residents. It is a good bet that on some occasions a certain amount of drinking goes on in these camps.

We had just got our lines in the water when I caught the first fish of the day. As it turned out it was the only smelt I caught all day. I think that there is a curse that goes along with catching the first fish. Rich and Dave, on the other hand, began to catch fish and continued to catch fish for some time while I set and watched my bobber with no hits. This, of course, only served to increase the amount of ribbing I was to endure. It would seem that anyone who writes a fishing column should be some kind fishing expert. I am sure that there are many who are well aware that this is an urban myth perpetuated by the writers themselves. In the end Rich was kind enough to give me a few extra smelt to add to my one and only.

I must admit that I had a great time despite the ribbing and would do it again, although I might pick a more convenient tide. Both Dave and Rich make great fishing companions. Should you like to give smelting a try there are several camps in the area of Merrymeeting Bay to choice from. The camp that we went to is river Bend Smelt Camp in Bowdoinham. They are located at 24 Wallentine Rd. off Route 24. They can be reached at 207-666-5945.

See you on the river.