

Ensure a Successful Boundary Waters Canoe Area Fishing Trip

There are ways to improve your odds for catching fish on a Boundary Waters canoe camping trip. I'll share with you five sure fire ways to experience success on your BWCA canoe trip.

Make sure the Boundary Waters lake you are fishing in has the type of fish in it you are trying to catch. There's no bigger waste of time than jigging for walleye when you're on a lake that doesn't contain walleye. The MN DNR has a listing of most of the lakes in the BWCA and what type of fish are in them. Make sure you're using the right technique to catch fish on the right lake.

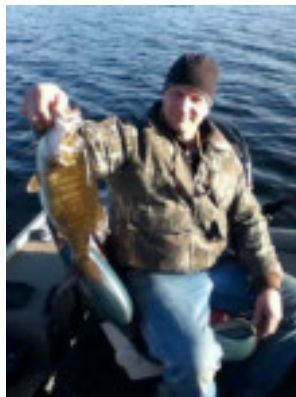
When you're on a Boundary Waters fishing trip make sure you bring along a good variety of lures and plenty of them. There's nothing more depressing than losing the hot lure and not having a replacement one in your tackle box. You'll no doubt lose a lure or two by getting them snagged on logs or rocks so bring along plenty of them so you don't find yourself without the one lure that was working the best.

Before you head into the wilderness waters of the BWCA make sure you have good line on your reel. Replace old fishing line with new 8-10 pound test and plenty of it. Remember you'll get snags and tangles and you want to have enough line even if you have to cut it a couple of times.

Go through the hassle of bringing along live bait. Chances are you'll be able to catch plenty of fish in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness without live bait but why take the chance? You can increase your chance of catching fish by having a good variety of bait for the fish to choose from.

Lastly, spend plenty of time fishing while you're on your Boundary Waters canoe trip. If you're constantly paddling from campsite to campsite then you won't have as much time to fish. You'll lower your odds for catching fish if you don't spend enough time fishing. Plan to set up a base camp and spend the majority of your time with your line in the water.

Consider these five BWCA fishing tips when you're planning your next Boundary Waters Canoe camping trip. You'll improve your odds of catching fish and of enjoying a fresh meal of fish while on your Boundary Waters fishing trip.



BWCA Fishing Trips

Voyageur Canoe Outfitter's direct access into the Boundary Waters provides an angler with an opportunity to catch trophy fish as well as lots of BWCA fishing action. The Boundary Waters has some of the best smallmouth bass fishing around. Bass provide hours of action and entertainment in both the BWCA and Quetico Park.

The Boundary Waters is just a stone's throw away from Voyageur Canoe Outfitters and where the state record walleye was caught. There's nothing like a shore lunch of fresh walleye at a campsite on Saganaga Lake or on an island in the BWCA.

Both lake trout and northern pike are plentiful in these pristine wilderness waters around the Gunflint Trail. Fish from a canoe or use a boat and motor on Saganaga Lake where you'll find the waters teeming with tasty Walleye, Feisty Smallmouth, nasty tempered Northern pike and the elusive Lake Trout.

General Fishing Tips

Fishing from a canoe in the Boundary Waters or Quetico Park is different than fishing from the comfort of a boat. When you portage into the canoe country you will not want to carry every lure, sinker or spoon you have. What you decide to bring should depend upon the species you plan to fish for so you do not have unnecessary tackle to haul around.

Fishing is best done once you have established your campsite unless you are only doing minimal portages. While it is tempting to fish while you are traveling between campsites experience has taught me people aren't interested in back tracking to retrieve a lure snagged on a log a half of a mile behind the canoe when they have a destination in mind. I have also learned walking amongst trees on a portage with a rod and reel can sometimes result in broken rods or fishing line strung out the entire length of the portage. To make transporting your rod and reel across a portage easier remove the reel and pack it into one of your bags. Your fishing rods can be safely portaged inside of the canoe by using Velcro straps. Just take one strip of Velcro for the tip of the rod and one for the butt end of the rod and secure it to the inside of the canoe.

When you're heading into the BWCA or Quetico Park it isn't feasible to bring multiple rods per person. One rod per person should be enough for a canoe country fishing trip. A 5 ½ to 6-foot medium action rod is a good choice. You can bring two reels along with heavier line on one and lighter line on the other.

Since you are a long distance from the nearest hospital you should be extra careful when fishing in the Boundary Waters or Quetico Park. We've had guests paddle back with a lure in their hand because a northern pike shook while they were trying to remove the hook and we've even seen a hook stuck in a person's eye due to a fishing partner's careless casting. Unattended lures can be just as dangerous as casted lures so always remove lures from the line when you are finished fishing. To prevent injury from an unattended lure we have a rule around our place and when we are out on trips. If anyone finds an unattended rod with a lure on it then the lure becomes his or hers.

We have put together some information for your BWCA or Quetico Park fishing trip to help you catch fish. Below you will find our suggestions of what specific tackle you should use for each of the four main species in our area. Find our suggested Tackle Box Checklist for a suggested tackle box packing list and learn about catch and release fishing and fish cleaning techniques here.

Walleye



Length: 12 to 29 inches.

Weight: 10 oz. to over 20 pounds. Back is greenish-yellow with a brassy hue. Sides brassy-yellow with dark mottling. Stomach is white. Dark spot at rear of spiny dorsal fin. Anal fin and lower lobe of tail fin are white. Eyes are opaque-silver in color. Moderate canine-like teeth.

Table Quality: Because of savory flesh it is considered one of the finest tasting fish available. The meat is white, flaky and has a very mild flavor.

Habitat: Bottom oriented fish, due to their sensitivity to light, preferring to stay in deep water during the day, moving to shallow waters during the night. Spawn in spring, in relatively shallow water, over clean gravel or rocky bottoms.

Food: Walleye prefer fish but will eat crayfish and worms.

Angling: Because of light-sensitive eyes, walleyes feed more actively early in the morning, late in the evening, or at night. Effective lures and baits include, minnows, leeches nightcrawlers, jigs, spinners and minnow imitating plugs.



How to catch a walleye-Rapalas, Smithwick rattling Rogues, slip bobbers, plain hooks, Lindy rigs, jigs, Swedish Pimple, Leeches, leech locker, 6-pound test. A Walleye dinner is what many canoe country guests seek while camping. Walleye are the most elusive species found in the Boundary Waters and Quetico Park. Since they are a somewhat finicky species it isn't wise to use bulky items such as leaders and big hooks when fishing for them. Walleye are nocturnal and do much of their feeding in the evenings and early mornings so this is when you can experience some outstanding action. Using slip bobbers with leeches is probably the best method for catching walleye but probably not the most exciting. Jigging with a leech is a little bit more fun and can also be productive. In May and June walleyes are usually in 10-15 feet of water where water enters the lake or along shores and points. In the evenings walleye tend to go a little shallower even into depths of just 5 feet of water, this is when you can use your Smithwick's or floating Rapalas. In July, August and September walleyes move into deeper water usually down to 30 feet of depth. Casting deep diving rapalas in the evening over reefs in about 10 feet of water will produce good results in these months.

Smallmouth Bass



Length: 12 to 22 inches.

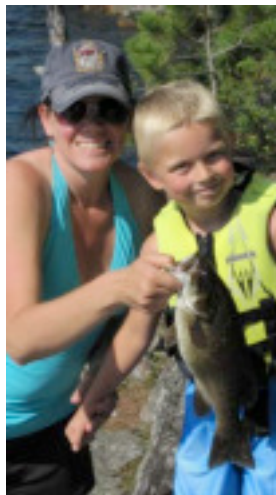
Weight: 8 ounces to 7 pounds. Smallmouth often are bronze to brownish green in color, with dark vertical bars on sides. In contrast to the Largemouth bass, the upper jaw does not extend beyond rear margin of eye. Eye reddish in color. Shallow notch in dorsal fin. Soft dorsal fin has 13 to 15 rays.

Table Quality: The meat is mild tasting, white, flaky and low in oil content.

Habitat: Found in North America, they prefer rocky habitats in streams and lakes with clear waters.

Food: Shad and crayfish are consumed in lakes; and crayfish and minnows in streams. In streams, Smallmouth can be very aggressive when insects are available.

Angling: Effective lures for Smallmouth, are those that resemble minnows, jigs, plastic worms and streamer flies. Live baits include minnows, insects and crayfish.



How to catch Smallmouth- Mepps spinners, worm baits, jigs, and Lazy Ikes, 6-18lb. test. Smallmouth are abundant in the canoe country and can be found the majority of the summer along the shoreline, around reefs and at the beginning and end of moving water. Underwater rocks and logs provide great cover for bass so they like to hang out there. They also like weeds but will prefer trocks and if both rocks and weeds are found together then prepare for some hot action. Smallmouth Bass are excellent eating and great fighters so you will enjoy catching them.

Northern Pike



Length: 12 to 47 inches.

Weight: 8 ounces to 24 pounds. The northern pike is a very elongated, somewhat laterally compressed fish. Back and sides, dusky olive-green with rows of light oval spots. Dorsal, anal and tail fin have round to oblong darkened spots. Dorsal fin located far back on an elongated body. Large canine-like teeth. Cheeks completely scaled, only upper half of the gill cover is scaled.

Table Quality: The meat is white, firm, flaky and has good flavor, but each fillet has a row of Y-bones. By cutting around the bones they can be removed.

Habitat: Prefer shallow water and areas congested with aquatic weeds. Spawn just after ice thaws; Adhesive eggs simply scattered over the bottom or onto vegetation.

Food: Fish make up the bulk of their diet but they will also take frogs, crayfish, waterdogs, ducks, birds, and mice.

Angling: Effective lures and bait for pike are "LARGE" spoons, spinners, plugs. Northern pike have sharp teeth, so many anglers use a wire leader to prevent the line from being cut.



How to catch northern pike- Spoons, Rattle Traps, leaders, Rapalas, and Lazy Ikes, 6-10 lb test. Northern pike are plentiful and people fishing for other species will usually catch a northern along with their other fish. In May and early June northern can be caught near running water. In mid-June when weed beds begin to form they provide great habitat for northern pike. Fishing these weed beds, points or around islands in the summer and fall can be especially productive. Northerns can be caught on many lures used to catch other species, but if you are pursuing the northern exclusively, then try using a steel leader and spoon. They are a territorial species and will hit anything in their area. Since the water in our area remains cool throughout the summer, Northern are great eating especially when you remove the Y bone. Find out how to do so here. [Link to y bone removal process.](#)

Lake Trout



Length: Large fish - 3 to 100 pounds. Lake Trout have a raised tooth crest on the head of the vomer. The tail is forked. Body is generally blue-gray or bronze-green with pale spots on the sides and back.

Table Quality: An excellent table fish.

Habitat: Lake trout require cold, clear, well oxygenated water. In summer they often move to depths of 50 to 100 feet, but in spring and fall you can find them at depths of 20 feet or less. They prefer water from 40 to 52 degree F.

Food: In most waters, lake trout rely heavily on small fish.

Angling: Most are taken by trolling with spoons or minnow-like plugs attached to wire-line rigs or downriggers. They can also be taken by bottom-fishing with whole or cut fish.



How to catch lake trout-Sutton spoons, Swedish Pimples, and other spoons, 12 lb. test and up. Lake trout love water temperatures of around 44 degrees. In the spring you can fish in quite shallow water for them and as the summer goes on you will need to fish deeper. Trolling a Sutton spoon is an effective way to catch Lake Trout throughout the season. Make sure to bring enough weights along so you can get your spoon down to the bottom of the lake, up to 2 oz. When Trout are deep you will need to troll very slowly with lots of line out to get it down to the 30-50 feet range and deeper. Troll just fast enough to feel the lure turning over. Lake trout are delicious to eat but do not provide a lot of action.

Fish Cleaning and Care Tips

Fishing in the Boundary Waters and Quetico Park can be a rewarding experience. Most anglers are successful and catch way more fish than they can possibly eat. Because there is no way to keep fish cold or fresh until you get back to civilization it will be necessary to practice catch and release fishing.

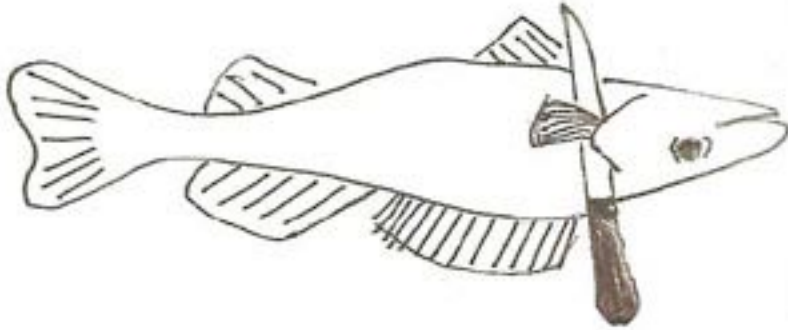
Some people attempt to keep their fish alive on a stringer overnight or in a homemade live well. This is not a good idea because it can attract unwanted visitors and the fish usually ends up being eaten before morning by a snapping turtle, eagle or otter. If you intend to keep the fish then it's best to filet and eat the fish as soon as possible. The fish from the deep cold lakes are delicious and people enjoy eating all four species. Northern pike is excellent eating especially if you learn how to remove the Y bones. After cleaning your fish be sure to dispose of the remains properly.

In the Boundary Waters anglers must bury their fish remains far from a BWCA campsite.

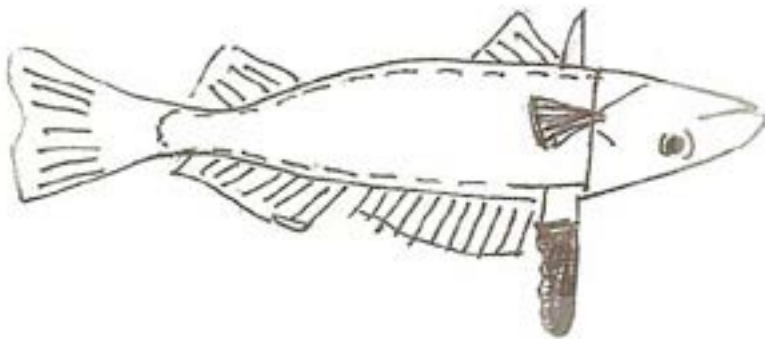
In the Quetico Park anglers are asked to return the remains of their fish to deep water in the lake they caught the fish on.

How to Filet a Fish

1 The first cut should be behind the gill and front fins. Angle the knife towards the fish's head so you don't waste part of the fillet. Cut down to the backbone without cutting through.

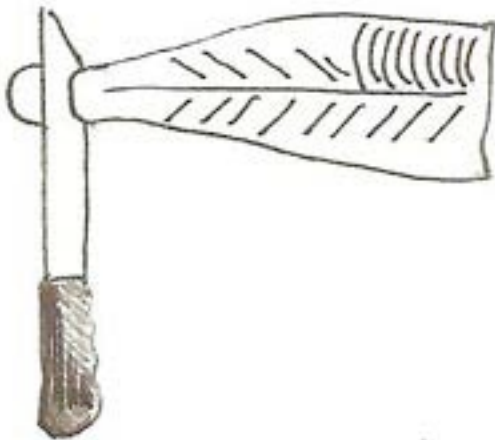


2 Feel for the hard backbone and cut along the backbone toward the tail. Be sure to cut through all the rib bones, but don't cut through the backbone.



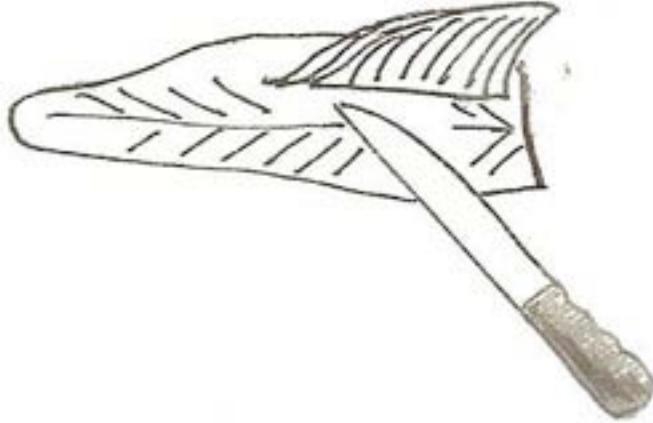
3 Turn the fish over and follow steps 1 and 2. (Filet the other side using the same method.)

4 Place the fillets skin side down. Starting at the tail, cut the meat off the skin.



5 Next you will need to cut the rib cage off of each fillet. Take your fillet knife and go under the rib bones from

the top to the bottom, cutting rib bones free. You will want to keep the knife RIGHT UNDER the bones, so you can conserve most of the fillet.



Catch and Release Fishing in the Boundary Waters

We encourage catch and release fishing in the Boundary Waters and Quetico Park. This helps to ensure quality fishing for canoe country campers who visit in the future. While it is nice to get a photo of your fish it is better for the fish if it is done while the fish is in the water. If you must have a photo of yourself with a fish you plan to release then be sure to follow the guidelines below and remember to support the weight of the fish body with a hand under its belly and keep the fish horizontal. Do not hold a fish by the lower jaw because it can damage jaw muscles that will affect the ability of the fish to feed after release. It's fun to catch a fish and even more rewarding to watch it swim away after you have released it.

- Be Prepared. Too many times I have casted a lure into the water not expecting to catch a fish and one ends up stuck on my lure. I then find myself struggling to reach a needle nose or other tool in order to release the fish. Always plan to catch a fish and have a needle nose, gloves or whatever else you need nearby so you can quickly and efficiently release a fish.
- Be Efficient. You can increase the rate of survival if you avoid over playing the fish. Retrieve the fish deliberately, not too quickly, slowly or sporadically. This will help reduce the stress and fatigue a fish experiences.
- Go Barbless. The use of barbless hooks or cutting the barbs off of lures can aide in a quick release that does less damage to a fish.
- Wear Rubberized Gloves. I know it might look silly and your friends may make fun of you but if you are planning to release a fish then wear rubber gloves. It helps protect the coat of slime the fish needs on its body and gloves allow you to get a firm grip without squeezing the fish too hard. Touching fish with your bare hands can cause fungus growth or infections leading to the death of the fish.
- Fish Belong in Water. If at all possible it is best to release a fish while the fish is still in the water. Air is an enemy of fish and sunlight can damage their eyes. To release a fish in the water just reach over the side of the watercraft and use a needle-nosed pliers to gently remove the hook from the fish and watch it swim away.
- Cut the Line. When a fish has swallowed the hook do not try to remove the hook from inside of the fish. Just cut the line as close to the hook as possible and over time the hook will dissolve or dislodge.
- Handle With Care. If you must touch the fish then either wear gloves or wet your hands first to protect the slime coating. Keep your fingers out of the gills and eyes and hold the fish firmly without squeezing and prevent the fish from battering itself on hard or hot surfaces. Support the body of the fish with a hand under the stomach even while it is in the water so the pressure on the hook is eliminated.
- Use Nets Sparingly. If you must bring the fish into the boat with a net then be sure it is a rubberized net. This type of net will cause less damage to the fish.

- Release with Care. Gently return the fish to the water in a headfirst position pointing it straight down to allow the fish to plunge into the water.
- Fish CPR. A fish may need to be revived if it is exhausted or if it has spent too much time out of the water. Hold the fish in the water in their normal swimming position while supporting the belly and holding both the mouth and gills open. Move them forward or hold them facing into a current to allow water to pass through their gills. They should swim away under their own power.

Give each fish the best fighting chance at survival so they may go on to live and reproduce for other generations. If all efforts to release a fish fail then consider it as part of your catch and enjoy a meal of fresh fish.

Tackle

Fishing in the BWCA or Quetico is a rewarding experience. The area offers four main species of fish including Walleye, Smallmouth Bass, Northern, and Lake Trout. The state record Walleye weighing 17lbs. 9oz. was caught in Saganaga lake one of our entry points into the Boundary Waters. The state record Northern, Lake Trout, and Brook Trout were all caught in the Canoe Area as well. As you can see the trophy fish are out there along with many smaller breeds of these fish. We have tried to compile a helpful list of fishing tips which will hopefully enhance what you already know.

Tackle Box Checklist

- a soft sided tackle box of a very small size (one per canoe)
- one or two fillet knives per group
- needle nose pliers with cutter
- extra spool of line
- red and white spoon (1/2 oz-3/4oz are good sizes)
- copper and orange hammered spoon
- steel leaders 6-8 inches in length
- Sutton spoon (silver)
- Smithwick rattlin' Rogue (blue & silver, black & silver, or fire tiger)
- Rapala 3-4, sizes 9-18, mix floaters & divers, blue, silver, perch
- Rattle Trap
- Lazy Ike
- Possibly one Shad Rap or one Fat Rap
- a handful of lead head jigs, varying from 1/4oz-1/2oz, assorted colors with yellow being being a favorite
- fuzzy grub tails
- Swedish Pimple, yellow or red
- Berkly power grub or other Berkly power baits
- Mepps spinners 4 or 5 varying color size and with or without tails #2 or #3 with buck tails or with silver blades are our favorite
- a couple of slip bobbers with matching split shot
- Lindy rigs either plain hook floater or spinner
- plain hooks
- leeches and leech locker

This is a large list of tackle but it covers fishing for all the species. Not everyone wants to fish for all the species so look over the following and bring what you want to fish for. Keep in mind these lakes have been formed by glaciers and there are many rock outcroppings for your lures to get snagged on, so bring enough gear to cover your losses. You may have noticed we did not include a landing net on our list. This is because we feel it is too bulky to carry along. You may lose a few fish because of this, but overall it will be much easier.