

Low water 101

By Gord Ellis

Those two words rarely conjure up good thoughts. If you're a farmer, low water makes it tough to irrigate the crops and keep the cattle quenched. Low water is also bad news for large cities that rely on reservoirs for drinking water. In Northwestern Ontario, low water means rivers are trickier to negotiate and lakes that have large beaches and docks out of the water.

For the past two years, much of Canada, and that includes the right here in Northwest Ontario, has suffered serious drought. These dry spells have happened before of course, but this latest event seems longer and more pronounced than others in recent memory. It may be global warming, or it may just be the ebb and flow of weather, but the bottom line is ... it's very dry.

Forest fire is another major concern when the north is in drought. Last fall, it was so dry in the Northwest that forest fires raged well into the fall. This was highly unusual fire behaviour, and stretched fire crews of the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources to the limit. This past winter remained dry, with low snow levels across the region.

The lack of snow has led to very low water levels this year. Lake Superior, the worlds largest fresh water lake, is nearing an all time low level. This has affected shipping on the *Greatest of lakes* and has even made it tricky for anglers to put some boats in the lake. Lake Superior is so low that some river mouths became inaccessible to migratory fish like rainbow trout and smelt.

While low water has many down sides, for the anglers it can also be positive. In low water years, fish in large river systems like the Albany, tend to become more centralized.

I've found it can also become easier to read where the fish will be in large rivers as pools, runs and back eddies that have been hidden by deep flow become more obvious. One of my favourite rivers to fish in Ontario, the Nipigon, is at a very low level this year. Normally the river is so high that you can't walk along its banks without potentially falling in. This year, the Nipigon is about as low as I've ever seen it. Reefs and sandbars have appeared in spots that normally have four feet of water flowing over them. The river has become a lot less friendly for big boats, but is now the ultimate river for fly fishing. The definition of the pools, and the reduced holding area, means it will be a great fishing year on the river. On large rivers like the Albany I expect low water is offering the same opportunity. It's always an adventure to find where brook trout are hiding, but low water usually means less time spent looking.

On lakes, low water can actually improve the fishing. Once again, it has to do with the limited amount of prime holding water. When certain reefs come out of the water, fish will have to find the next deepest structure to hold and feed. Walleye will accumulate on reefs that are still under the water, and along deeper weed beds. So when a favourite hotspot becomes too shallow to fish, you need only find similar structure close by in slightly deeper water and you are almost certain to get into fish. Often times the first deep reef is loaded. Low water on lakes also allows you to get a really good look at some reefs, shoals and other structure that would normally be underwater. I find it fascinating to examine a classic reef, and try to figure out why fish hold on it. Often there is large boulder, or quick break that is the fish magnet. Being able to look at structure up close really helps me understand why fish are where they are.

Pike are also affected by low water, and will have to move out of the inshore weed beds that become too shallow for them. Low water can mean that open water structure like reefs, shoals and drop offs will become even better spots for trophy pike than normal. Pike set up on these open water zones and ambush the walleye, sucker and herring that have been displaced due to change in habitat. Trolling large spoons or cranks around this open water structure can be a deadly technique when pike are displaced by low water levels.

None of us like low water. It's hard on the environment and an inconvenience to boaters. But if there was ever an opportunity for an anglers to turn lemons into lemonade, low water is it.

Good luck and
stay safe.