

For a fish with some fight, try the speedy white bass

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Dan Morey with a silver bass caught in Chautauqua Lake in June 2012. Contributed photo ERIE TIMES-NEWS

There are certain fishing memories that bring out a warm and fuzzy nostalgia in even the most hardened of anglers.

Macho muskie hunters will blubber in their beer while reminiscing about the first bluegill they caught with Dad. Grizzled catfish aficionados get misty when they remember Grandpa and his homemade bullhead bait.

For me, the memory most likely to arouse fishing sentiment is set on the shore of Lake Erie, in front of the family cottage. On summer evenings, as I waited with my brothers and cousins for some semi-responsible adult to get a bonfire going, I'd watch the water for signs of our favorite fish -- the speedy and ravenous silver bass.

All was calm. Waves lapped gently against the beach. Then, without warning, fish havoc -- unlike anything I'd seen outside of "Piranha" movies -- broke loose. A roiling, frothing frenzy erupted as a school of silver bass ripped through a cloud of unsuspecting minnows. It was pure carnage, and we loved it.

My big brother Bubby taught us how to catch them. Though Bubby is an expert fisherman, he knew better than to bore kids with complicated angling jargon.

"Just throw something shiny out there," he said. "They'll drill it."

I cast a spoon into the commotion and sure enough, boom. Minutes later, I had an angry, spastic silver bass flopping at my feet. Their dorsal fins are spiny, and after handling 15 or 20 of them, my hands looked like bloody pincushions. Not that I cared; I was having too much fun.

Over the years, I sort of forgot about the spunky silver bass, or white bass, as it's more commonly known. It was only while wading in Chautauqua Lake recently that I was reminded of just how much fun they are to chase and catch.

I'd been fishing for largemouth in the shallow weeds when I noticed a familiar agitation offshore. Some hungry silver bass were slashing up the water and terrified shiners leapt into the air trying to escape. I launched a spinnerbait over the churning battlefield. As I pulled it through the heart of the storm, I felt a couple of ticks and then a hard thwack. I set the hook and wrestled in the first sizable silver bass I'd caught in years.

Over the next hour or so, until the school moved on, I hooked silver bass after silver bass, each one putting up a better brawl than the undersized largemouth I'd been catching.

"Why don't I do this more often?" I wondered.

Silver bass are not ambush predators. They school in open water and chase baitfish. If you see seagulls diving for minnows, there's a good chance silver bass are in the vicinity.

When they're feeding, they're easy to catch -- just throw out something shiny and hold on.

Good places to fish for white (silver) bass in Pennsylvania: 1. Lake Erie: one of the largest white bass populations in the United States. 2. Conneaut Lake: known for producing whopper white bass. The state record (3 pounds 15.7 ounces) was caught here in 2002 by Robert Hornstrom of Meadville. In fact, so were the two record fish that preceded Hornstrom's. 3. Allegheny Reservoir 4. Presque Isle Bay 5. Any of the Three Rivers (Ohio, Monongahela, Allegheny) 6. Pymatuning Lake 7. Shenango Lake