

**HENRY
ABBOTT**

FISH STORIES

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Fish Stories

Preface

AN ALLEGED humorist once proposed the query, "Are all fishermen liars, or do only liars go fishing?" This does not seem to me to be funny. It is doubtless true that a cynical attitude of suspicion and doubt is often exhibited on the recital of a fishing exploit. I believe the joke editors of magazines and newspapers are responsible for the spread of the propaganda of ridicule, skepticism and distrust of all fish yarns, regardless of their source. The same fellows have a day of reckoning ahead, for the circulation of that ancient but still overworked mother-in-law joke.

It is quite possible that some amateur fishermen, wishing to pose as experts, are guilty of expanding the size or number of their catch, upon reporting the same. But I cannot conceive of a motive sufficient to induce one skilled in handling the rod to lie about his fish. The truth always sounds better and in the case of a fish story, truth is often stranger than any fish fiction.

In my own experience and observation I have found that the more improbable a fish story sounds the more likely it is to be true. The incredulous attitude of the average auditor, also, is discouraging, and often reacts against himself, as thus some of the very best fish stories are never told. To me, it seems a pity that through these Huns of history many charming and instructive tales of adventure should be lost to literature and to the unoffending part of the public.

The fellows whose exploits are here set down, seldom mention their fishing experiences. They are not boastful, and never exaggerate. They do not speak our language. I have, therefore, undertaken to tell their fish stories for them.

H. A.

BIGE had the oars and was gently and without a splash dipping them into the water, while the boat slowly glided along parallel to the shore of the lake. We had been up around the big island and were crossing the bay at the mouth of Bald Mountain Brook, which is the outlet of the pond of that name, located in a bowl shaped pocket on the shoulder of Bald Mountain three miles away. I was in the stern seat of the boat with a rod and was casting toward the shore, hoping to lure the wily bass from his hiding place under rocky ledge or lily pad, when I discovered another and a rival fisherman.

He was operating with an aeroplane directly over our heads and about two hundred feet above the lake. Slowly sailing in circles, with an occasional lazy flap of wings to maintain his altitude, and at intervals uttering his sharp, piercing, hunting cry, the osprey had a distinct advantage over us, as with his telescopic eye he could penetrate the lake to its bottom and could distinctly see everything animate and inanimate in the water within his hunting circle. He could thus, accurately, locate his prey, while we could not see deeply into the water and were always guessing. We might make a hundred casts in as many places, where no bass had been for hours. So I reeled in my line, laid the rod down in the boat and gave my entire attention to watching the operations of the fish hawk.

For about ten minutes the aeroplane fisher continued to rotate overhead; then I observed that the circles were smaller in diameter, and were descending in corkscrew curves, until from a height of about fifty feet the body of the bird shot straight down and struck the water about twenty-five yards from our boat with the blow of a spile driver's hammer, throwing a fountain of spray high into the air. For a few seconds nothing was visible but troubled waters; then appeared flapping wings and the floundering shining body of a big fish, lashing the water into a foam, through which it was difficult to see whether bird or fish was on top. Suddenly, both disappeared under water. Bige excitedly yelled, "He's got his hooks into a whale of a fish! He'll never let go! He'll be drowned! Gosh!!" Then he

rowed the boat nearer to the place of battle. A few heart beats later, and the fight was again on the surface. Wings flapped mightily, fish wriggled and twisted and again the water was churned into foam. We now plainly saw the two pairs of ice-tongs-talons of the bird, firmly clamped on the body of the pickerel, which exceeded in length (from head to tail) about six inches, the spread of wings from tip to tip. Wings continued to pound air and water but the big fish could not be lifted above the surface. One more desperate pull on the pickerel's fin-shaped oars and the bird went under water for the third time, but with his wicked claws as firmly clamped into the quivering body as ever. Coming to the surface more quickly the next time, the osprey swung his head far back, and with his ugly hook shaped beak struck the fish a mighty blow on the back of the head. The pickerel shivered, stiffened, and lay still.

The fight was over, but the panting hawk still hung on to his victim.

Recovering his breath in a few minutes, the bird spread his wings and with much flapping, laboriously towed the dead fish along on the water across the lake, where he dragged it up on a sand beach. Here he sat for a long time, resting. Then with his hooked beak he carved up that pickerel for his strenuously acquired meal. I have many times seen hawks catch fish, but on all other occasions they have been able to pick up the struggling fish and fly away with it. This fellow hooked onto a fish so big he could not lift it.

FOUR miles up the river and about five miles eastward over Bear Mountain, brought Bige and me to "Hotel Palmer" on the shore of Sargent Pond. One room and bath were available and we took both, the latter in the pond.

We had just enough time to finish supper before dark. The dishes had to be washed by lantern light. In the middle of the night we heard a "Porky" crawling over the roof, dragging his heavy spine covered tail over the boards. It sounded like the scraping of a stiff wire scratch brush. We heard him sniff and knew that he was seeking the food in our pack basket, which his sensitive nose told him was somewhere near. We hoped he would become discouraged and go away, but he continued his explorations over our heads a long time, interfering with our efforts to sleep; so a lantern was lighted and we went out and threw sticks of wood and stones at him.

The porcupine came down that roof in the same manner that he comes down a tree trunk, tail first, but the roof boards were steep and slippery and his toe nails would not stick as they do in the rough bark of a tree, so he came down hurriedly, landing with a thud on a rotten log at the back of the cabin. In the morning we discovered that a lot of porcupine quills were sticking vertically in the log so that a section of it resembled an inverted scrubbing brush.

Hotel Palmer was built several years ago, by George, Dave and Leslie. When the law respecting camps on State lands became effective, it was torn down. But on the occasion of the porcupine incident, it was open for the reception of guests by permission.

After breakfast, we found Dave's boat hidden in the bushes in the specified place. During the day we hunted and got several partridges which we proposed to roast later. That evening after supper, while Bige was cutting some firewood, I took the boat and my rod and went out on the pond to get some trout for breakfast.

It was just as the sun was dropping below the western hills, and there was a gorgeous golden glow in the sky. The breeze had dropped to a gentle zephyr that hardly caused a ripple on the surface of the water, so I allowed the boat to slowly drift while I was casting. A tree had fallen into the pond, and sitting in its branches near the tree top, close to the water and about fifty feet from the shore, I discovered a coon. He, also, was fishing, and I was curious to learn just how he operated.

I soon found that the coon was not without curiosity since he, just as eagerly, was watching my operations. As the boat slowly approached the treetop his sharp, beady eyes followed the movement of my flies as the rod whipped back and forth. It occurred to me that he might be seriously considering the advisability of adopting a fly rod for use in his fishing business.

Just as the boat passed the treetop and but a few feet from it, a good sized trout appeared at the surface and with a swirl and slap of his tail grabbed one of my flies and made off with it toward the bottom. Instantly the coon became very excited. His body appeared tense; his ring-banded tail swished from side to side; his feet nervously stepped up and down on the tree branch, like a crouching cat who sees a mouse approaching, and his snapping eyes followed the movement of my line as it sawed through the water while the fish rushed about, up and down, under the boat and back again. And when the trout made a jump above the surface and shook himself, the coon seemed to fairly dance with joy. Presently, the fish, now completely exhausted, appeared at the surface lying on his side, while I was reeling in the line; when the coon slipped into the water, grabbed the fish in his mouth and swam ashore. Climbing up the bank he turned, grinned at me and went into the bushes with my trout, now his trout, in his mouth and about three feet of leader trailing behind.

BILL stood four feet three inches in his stockings, and if Bill had ever been on a scale, he would have tipped it at seven pounds and six ounces. Bill's body was about the size of a white leghorn hen. He was mostly legs and neck.

Abe Lincoln once expressed the opinion that "a man's legs should be long enough to reach the ground." Bill was a wader by inclination and of necessity. Long legs were, therefore, required in his business, and having begun life with a pair of long legs, Bill's body was mounted, so to speak, on stilts, high in the air, and he found it necessary to grow a long neck so that when he presented his bill it might reach to the ground. This long neck was ordinarily carried gracefully looped back above his body in the form of a letter S. On the rare occasions when Bill straightened this crooked neck of his, it shot out with the speed of an electric spark, and he never was known to miss the object aimed at.

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