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Section B

A big surprise from a challenged lake

■ Port fishing boat hauls in a 34-pound salmon, the likes of which are seldom seen in waters once teeming with lunkers

By **BILL SCHANEN IV**
Ozaukee Press staff

Just when charter captains, fishermen and biologists had all but written off the trophy fish that were once the backbone of a \$4 billion sport fishery, Lake Michigan produced a very big surprise off the shores of Port Washington this week.

Shortly after 5 p.m. Monday, Aug. 8, a customer aboard one of the Foxy Lady charter boats hooked what was obviously a large fish just north of the Port Washington harbor. After a 35-minute fight, he landed a chinook salmon that weighed at least 34 pounds and measured 42 inches, captain Dan Fox of Fox Brothers Charters said.

"I knew it was a big fish, but when we got it on board, I said, 'Wow, this is a really big fish, not just a little big fish,'" Fox said. "It was the biggest one ever for me, and this is my 37th season."

A 34-pound fish is big by any measure, but it's humongous considering that Lake Michigan sport fish, especially the largest of them all — the chinook, or king, salmon — have been shrinking in size over the last decade due to a dwindling food supply.

"Wow, that's a big fish," Brad Eggold, a Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources fishery supervisor, said when he heard about the catch. "I can't remember the last time we had a report of a fish that size."

Fish: Hefty chinook salmon catches anglers, DNR by surprise

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Over about the last 10 years, we've noticed a significant decline in size of sport fish. These days, if you hook a 30-pound chinook, you're lucky."

Researchers attribute the significant decrease in the size of sport fish to a lack of prey, namely the alewife, which is a cruel twist for those whose job it is to keep Lake Michigan's delicate food chain in balance.

A native of the North Atlantic, the alewife invaded the Great Lakes in the 1940s and reproduced at an alarming rate.

Twenty years later, biologists struck back by planting the lakes with a massive number of sport fish that included coho salmon and rainbow and lake trout. But king among the new breeds of sport fish was the chinook, a Pacific salmon species with a voracious appetite for alewife that grew in excess of 40 pounds in its new freshwater habitat. With a reputation as a fierce fighter, the chinook quickly became known as the trophy fish of the Great Lakes.

With hungry predators to keep the alewife population in check and careful monitoring to keep the predator-prey ratio in balance, the Great Lakes ecosystem stabilized and the newly created sport fishing industry thrived — for awhile.

Then, about a decade ago, the fish that evolved from the bane of the lakes into the foundation of the freshwater food pyramid began shrinking in size and number. The alewife essentially disappeared in Lake Huron, and

along with it sport fish.

Although it shares the same body of water with Lake Huron, Lake Michigan has fared better so far. Sport fishing remains strong off southern Lake Michigan harbors such as Port Washington, but there's no denying that the proverbial lunker isn't what it used to be.

"In the 1980s and early 1990s, if you didn't catch at least a 30-pound chinook, you didn't stand a chance of winning a fishing derby," Eggold said.

Fast forward a decade and the largest chinook salmon registered in the Port Washington Lions Club fishing derby last month weighed just 21 pounds.

The 34-pound chinook caught this week dwarfs that fish, but pales in comparison with Wisconsin's record chinook, which was caught Aug. 25, 1983, and weighed 43 pounds, 3 ounces, according to the DNR.

Although that record may never be broken, there are signs of life in Lake Michigan, starting with the alewife population.

"We had a particularly strong alewife class in 2010, which may be responsible for some

phenomenal coho fishing from Sheboygan south this year," Eggold said.

Like their Pacific Ocean cousins, coho salmon have decreased in size in the Great Lakes but are being caught in greater numbers this season, perhaps because of a population increase or feeding patterns that have brought them closer to shore to feast on the spawning alewife population, Eggold said.

But while coho seems to be thriving this summer, chinook remain a bit of a mystery, he said.

"We've really seen the most significant size decrease in the chinook," Eggold said. "Once in a while we see a blip like the 34-pound fish that was caught off Port, but that doesn't mean we're seeing a rebound. We'll have to wait until the end of the season to get a better feel for it."

Science aside, Jim Champeau Sr., an avid fisherman and owner of the Bait Box tackle shop in Port Washington, wouldn't call the chinook caught this week a blip.

"That fish was an absolute tank — a solid 34 pounds, maybe more," he said. "The way



USING TWO HANDS, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, resident Sean Martin held up the 34-pound chinook salmon he caught off Port Washington Monday aboard a Foxy Lady charter fishing boat captained by Dan Fox (left). The trophy fish came as a surprise to both fishermen and experts, who have witnessed the decline in the size of Lake Michigan's sport fish over the last decade. Photo by Jim Champeau Sr.

those fish eat, it would have been 40 pounds or more by the end of summer.

"With the amount of bait fish in the lake this summer, I'm really not that surprised. I think the lake is on the rebound."

Fox and his customer, however, were indeed shocked by the catch.

Sean Martin, a 51-year-old resident of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, had booked an afternoon charter with Fox for him and his three sons. They had caught 12 fish and were preparing to head back to the harbor when the monster chinook struck.

"It was really exciting for him," Fox said. "Heck, it was really exciting for me."

Fox said he weighed the fish on three scales that showed the chinook weighed between 34 and 36 pounds.

Then came the big decision — have the trophy fish mounted and preserved for posterity or prepare it for the dinner table.

"He (Martin) wanted it filleted, so even though it killed me, I cut it up," Fox said. "What can I say, he really likes fish and it was his decision."