

Northern Double Header

“Eventually, all things merge into one; and a river runs through it.”
—Norman MacLean, *“A River Runs Through It”*

By Kurt Buss

Photo by Steve Buss, Caroline Pond

Growing up on a mill pond in a small town, in the days before computers, certainly had its opportunities. That’s an understatement. Learning to swim off a dam with calm, deep water above and violent, swirling water below the spillways, known as “slashes,” was nothing like learning in a swimming pool at a park. In the winter, when the ice froze to at least 4” thick you could hike, skate and, eventually, snowmobile upriver to the extent of your ankle strength or gas tank. But best of all was fishing. Especially for northerns. From a rowboat.

The Embarrass River has three branches, two of which come together in the small farm town of Caroline (pop 250), in Shawano County. The dam, which once ran logs and turned a gristmill, creates the pond. And the pond is where the northerns are. Especially where the Middle Branch enters the top of the pond, and cuts a deep pool into what’s simply referred to as the First Bend.

That’s where I was when I caught the biggest northern of my life, with my dad and younger brother, who caught the biggest northern of his life, at the same time. It was interesting. I’m glad Pops was there.

We were in a 12’ aluminum MirroCraft rowboat which had three bench seats, but was still small and light enough that my dad could put it on top of our Plymouth 4-door when we went camping. That way we could also pull our 16’ Mallard camper trailer. Those were the days. Conspicuous consumption had reached rural America.

So, we got a motor too. A 1964 Johnson 5.5 hp Seahorse.

Not the old classic, pea green units with the round metal engine cover, like the one my grandpa had in his basement. This was the modern line, with a sleek, white fiberglass cowling and embossed logos and lettering in orange and black. It also used an external 5-gallon gas tank, which was a big step up from the pea greens with the little 1-gallon tank on the top of the motor. You’d make a rainbow sheen from the gasoline on the water’s surface when you had to refill those on the river.

On that Sunday morning, May 12th, 1974, we were quiet and tied off with two anchors holding us steady into the current, in the shallows of the pool. Usually, Sunday meant church. You could fish afterwards. But the urge to be here early that morning was strong. The river was high and the water was cold. And northerns gotta eat.

The sun was still rising when we had our bait in the water: A ticked-off minnow on a treble hook, with a 12” wire leader tied to 6# mono hanging from the biggest red and white bobber in the tackle box. My brother and I had simple spin cast reels and 6’ poles. My dad’s rig was a little bigger, but he brought it along as a backup. Two people fishing alongside a current out of a rowboat with live bait and big bobbies is plenty. Pops was not there to fish. Once we all got settled he would just fold his hands under his arms and smile, listening to the birds. There were lots of birds. The grandest was the great blue heron, and they were common to see on this part of the river. In the cattails, on the small island behind us, were redwing blackbirds, squawking and looking for breakfast. Ducks were ubiquitous; mostly mallards but some wood ducks. And, on a



Photo by Steve Buss, Caroline Pond Dam

good day, a kingfisher.

There were plenty of other visitors to this hole. Land creatures on the bank. If you were lucky, you could witness a family of racoons start their day. They have amazing manual dexterity. Watching them catch and eat crayfish is a memorable riverside experience. Seeing the little ones learn to swim. Wash up, and then they're gone. I've seen mink scoot across the same bank on later trips to this spot. (They're mean little bastards.) It wasn't unusual to hear a beaver tail splat on the surface somewhere upriver. And, of course, there were always deer.

But it was fish we were after. And we were in a good spot. We caught and released a few smaller "jacks," that would get out of the water and tail dance when you brought them in. Always fighting. Minnow eaters. That kept the adrenaline up. Quieted the birds. Silence. The rising sun bounced off the river's surface, and the bobber was hard to see. Or maybe it was underwater.

"You've got something going!" dad said, pointing at my bobber. It had just popped up and was moving with more strength than many minnows could muster. Then it went under and the line drew tight. "Set the hook!" he shouted, and I did. Fish on. Now what?

"Reel in," my dad said to my brother, wanting to give me free reign to bring in my fish without tangling his line if my fish wanted to run, which it did. But as my brother was bringing in his line the tip of his pole dipped so he reacted, and now he had a fish on. Pops was doing his best to keep our poles from crossing.



The author, right, age 13, and his brother, Eric, age 7, with their double header of northern caught with their dad on Caroline Pond in 1974.

It was apparent pretty quickly that I had the bigger fish on line, because of

the pull and the run my fish was taking, which was deep and away downstream. My brother's fish was happy to zip around this hole, disturbing the birds and creating a lot of confusion in our little rowboat that had been resting comfortably a few minutes ago. Now it was mayhem. The blackbirds squawked and the boat was rocking.

I kept the rod tip up and was able to turn the fish, and

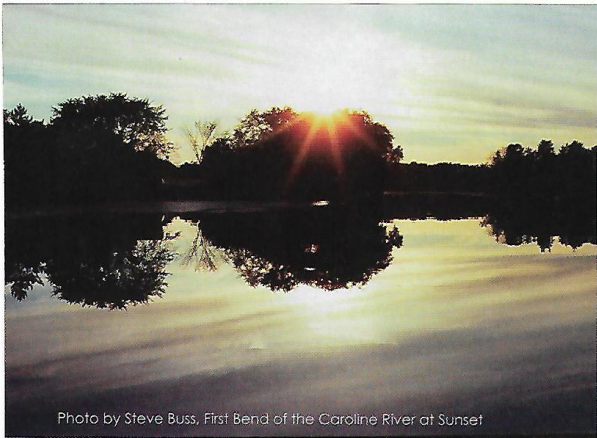


Photo by Steve Buss, First Bend of the Caroline River at Sunset

slowly it came toward us. My brother's fish was running amok, but in a different part of the pool. I brought my fish up to the boat side; but it looked at me and turned. "Hang on! Keep the tip up!" my dad shouted. So, I did. The next time the fish came up it lingered on the surface, and Pops scooped it tail-first and lifted it into the boat. Almost. When the fish was pulled from the water and hung in the net, it twisted and wriggled and slashed its jaws; and then it bit through the net, flopping in the bottom of the boat. Dad and I looked at each other. My brother was still fighting his fish. Our net was no longer useful, being strung in between an angry northern and a simple spin-cast reel on a 6' pole. "Keep an eye on that," dad said, looking at the fish flopping in the boat. Then he

turned his attention to my brother's struggle. His fish was a little crazy.

It was running pretty hard, and the closer it got to the boat the more it fought. It tangled the anchor lines, front and back, but Pops got it freed up. In the course of the battle, the motor got knocked out of the tilt position and lowered the propeller shaft into the water. The fish wrapped around that. My fish was flopping around at my feet, hook in its mouth and a net for a necklace. My brother was standing up and trying not to rock the boat; and Pops was just trying to get the other fish in. This was becoming personal.

Eventually, we won. Both fish were landed, de-hooked and put on the stringer. It was a wonderful feeling. We just looked at each other and smiled. A moment stamped in memory. We wrapped up the gear, brought in the anchors, the bait bucket and our catch, then fired up the motor and headed downriver, for the victorious ride home. Wind in our faces. Feeling blessed. This was its own church.

My brother and I cleaned and ate our fish for Sunday supper. My parents and sister ate their chicken, not knowing what they were missing.



Kurt Buss is a freelance writer who grew up on a river in northcentral Wisconsin long before the internet was born. He recently returned with his 24-year-old son to hunt for big northern. Kurt moved to Colorado via Alaska over 30 years ago, to hunt smaller fish. For more info, please visit www.KurtBussColoradoFreelanceWriter.com

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