

OUTDOORS

It's like Hunting under water

By PATRICIA STOCKDILL
Tribune Correspondent

At a distance of 10 feet, the walleye absolutely shimmered — iridescent golden hues seemingly danced and glistened from its scales.

The pursuer lightly fingered the trigger of the pneumatic gun. But like a hunter stalking a trophy buck, he waited. Patience is so important, like the hunter waiting for a clean, close, broadside standing shot.

The pursuer is decked in scuba suit, weight belt, mask, fins, snorkel, air tanks, hood and boots. On land, the gear weighs at least 60 pounds; Underwater, it's virtually weightless.

And he's one of maybe 200 underwater spearfishermen across the entire state of North Dakota.

Randy Kraft, owner of Scuba One in Bismarck, thoroughly enjoys underwater spearfishing. "It's challenging," Kraft says. "You don't see that many fish, and you're certainly not going to get as many as a boat angler."

That's why patience is important. Fish are curious, but they'll spook at movement. An underwater angler must move slowly and be very observant, Kraft said. "It's much like a hunter looking for game and they just aren't there, like most people believe they are."

The biggest challenge, just like for any angler, is locating fish.

And like many hunters, Kraft will pass on many of the fish that he sees. Being underwater magnifies images by 25 percent

and alters angles.

"That's why the big fish get away," Kraft said.

He enjoys the quiet relaxation of underwater fishing, even if it's only for about an hour at a time — most often the water in the Missouri River or Lake Sakakawea is too cold for longer stints. "You're in another world, so to speak."

Two key factors in underwater spearfishing are locating clear water and structure. Finding clear water can be a challenge in itself — often visibility in Sakakawea or parts of the river is 10 to 15 feet at best.

Spear guns generally have 10 foot strings with lock-tight tips and lanyards so the diver won't lose the gun if it's dropped.

But an angler doesn't just decide to get into underwater fishing, buy a gun, a fishing license and go out for an adventure. Underwater anglers must be certified divers — and that means at least 15 hours of classroom and pool time, coupled with four sessions of open water dives. Cost: \$300, including use of gear.

Rental of all the appropriate dive paraphernalia, including tanks and air, is about \$45. Should you seriously opt for underwater fishing and diving, consider a \$1,000 to \$2,000 investment — still significantly cheaper than most seaworthy boats. Guns can list for more than \$200.

While Kraft's largest trophy is probably a big carp, like most anglers, he prefers walleyes or northerns. And what's a big northern like underwater? "That's pretty awe-inspiring," Kraft said.



Randy Kraft is all decked out for a day beneath the waves in search of fish.

By PAT STOCKDILL for the Tribune

Spearfishing a costly sport, easy on lakes

Misconceptions abound in North Dakota

Underwater fishing is one sport that must deal with several common misconceptions, Randy Kraft, owner of Scuba One in Bismarck, said.

Regulated closely by the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, underwater spearfishing, or underwater fishing as it's also called, is only allowed from May 1 through Dec. 31 on the Missouri River past the Corps of Engineers' Downstream Recreation Area below Garrison Dam, Lake Oahe, Lake Sakakawea, the open fishing areas of Lake Audubon, Devils Lake and Spiritwood Lake.

A special daily use permit, limited to 10 underwater fishermen per day, is needed on Spiritwood Lake. All other lakes are closed to underwater fishing.

Underwater fishermen must stay at least 150 feet away from anglers, designated swimming or water ski areas, boat docks and spillways.

Divers must display the red and white International Diver's Flag and when underwater fishing at night, the flag must be lit.

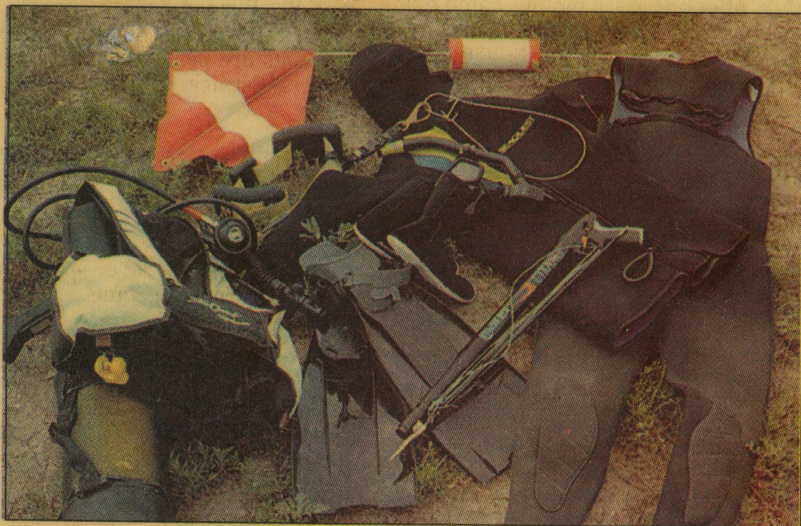
As a matter of safety and courtesy, boaters should stay at least 100 feet from a flag.

Being a relatively small sport on some pretty big bodies of water, underwater fishing has

very little impact — or pressure — on Sakakawea's resources, fisheries division chief Terry Steinwand said. It wasn't until 1986 that game fish became legal fare in the state for underwater anglers.

North Dakota surveyed other states about their underwater fishing and found 31 allow underwater spearfishing in fresh water. Eight states allow underwater spearfishing for game fish, with regulations varying greatly.

Dive flags don't necessarily signal underwater anglers. In fact, Kraft said, in most instances flags designate dive certification classes or recreational divers and not anglers.



Tools for underwater spearfishing include a scuba suit, weight belt, mask, fins, snorkel, air tanks and speargun. On land, the gear weighs at least 60 pounds.