

CUTBANK THE AGE OF THE EARTH

Words:
Ty Goodwin

ABOVE MACKINAW CITY, the Michigan horizon advances in blues and lavenders. Sky and water. Water and sky. Some evenings, the seam where these meet in the distance can be difficult to discern. We are on Route 2, just crossing the bridge where the Cut River empties into Lake Michigan. It's late and Miles is driving hard, hoping for a quick session on the flats before the light is gone. "If we do a late check-in and don't stop to eat," he says, "I think we can get an hour of fishing in." Below us, the tannic water at the mouth of the Cut looks like blood leaking into a pool.

Previous years have taught us these middle two weeks of June are the sweet spot. By mid-July it's too late and you're better off downstate on the Huron River or maybe the Saginaw. Carp, especially big ones, are known to be difficult, but they can be surprisingly easy here. Great Lakes carp are predatory, willing hunters who move with the confidence of animals that have hundreds of square miles of open frontier at their backs.

Saint Ignace. Pointe Aux Chenes. Gros Cap. Epoufette. Familiar way points appear and disappear in the windshield, their monikers speaking to the 17th century French incursion before the English ran them out. Of course, the French ran people out too and only the Ojibwa could tell you the true names of these places. Ahead I can see peninsulas, dark in the back-light of waning sun and jagged with trees, jutting into the water like old shipwrecks.

The key here is to keep moving. One flat will be empty and another two bays over will be loaded with carp. An area that has carp today may not hold a single fish tomorrow. Last year they weren't on the flats at all, but were instead holed up deep in the marsh of reeds and sedge along the northern shore, lazing in the warmth sucked up by all of that foliage. Two years ago there were only a handful of fish in the bays and we

drove three hours south to Ludington on a hunch that didn't pay off. The carp operate according to a complex formula of timing and water temperature that is mostly beyond us. What I'm saying is that you keep moving until you find them.

The aurora borealis is sometimes visible as far down as Charlevoix, a reminder that you're closer to the North Pole here than the equator. Even in summer the cool wind coming off the water at night reeks of winter and you can never shake the feeling that a storm is coming. Northern Michigan is marked by that peculiar bearing of a landscape hard-bitten by the grind of harsh weather and deep time. These giant glacial basins are where I most feel the age of the earth, more than with oceans or rivers or even mountains. Black mud boils up in my steps when I wade these flats and I wonder what kind of history I'm kicking to the surface.

Miles leans into the steering wheel as if he can defeat the evening by sheer force of will, but the expanse of Lake Michigan on our left grows darker and darker. Through the speakers Lightnin' sings that his baby don't stand no cheatin' and I realize I would be just as happy to sit by the fire ring in front of the motel with a plastic cup full of whiskey. The carp can wait until tomorrow.

Writing about this Michigan, Ernest Hemingway noted, "That's why they build cathedrals to be like this." The land is diminished, certainly, since he roamed and fished this country. Still, the deep woods remain. The black streams remain. The huge lakes remain. The profound sense of vastness—of something set apart—something that turned his mind toward God and cathedrals, remains. Something here moved Hemingway and it has been said the latter part of his life was a long struggle to return. "This," he wrote, "is about the last good country there is left." ☞

◀BELOW▶

During his day off fishing the Susquehanna River in eastern Pennsylvania, guide Ben Rogers releases a carp. There were smallmouth all day on streamers but when a large dark blimp was spotted between a channel and the main river, the carp candy flies came out. Photo: Rob Yaskovic

