

Sailing Regatta Celebrates 47 Years

For open-water anglers on Leech Lake, the oft-present breeze on this huge expanse of water can be a good thing.

Walleye chop.



And, in recent years, with the return of the lake as a premier walleye fishery, it's not unusual to see fishing boats dot Walker Bay and well beyond, bobbing in a maze of wakes created by fishing boats big and small.

And sailboats. Don't forget the sailboats.

Interestingly, for about as long as anyone can remember, the two watercraft – fishing boats and sailboats – have coexisted on the 110,000-acre lake near Walker in north-central Minnesota.

Fishing and, in turn, fishing boats have always been a natural fit on Leech, a fishing success story again with the return of walleyes a decade after they had all but disappeared.

But there may not be a better truly natural fit on the breezy, big water here than sailboats – after all, a little wind is all that's needed to make them go.



Along with the sailing success story that is the Leech Lake Regatta.

The Regatta will celebrate its 47th year Aug. 10-13, 2018. Prior to that, Lake of the Woods – also a hugely popular walleye fishery – was where the sailboating community congregated each summer. A big part of that community was – and still is –

based in the Twin Cities. And, according to Regatta lore, at least one Lake of the Woods regatta-goer, while driving by Leech Lake every year en route to far-northwestern Minnesota, wondered why there was no regatta and very few sailboats on a body of water that screamed of sailing.

Now, the only screaming would come if there was no Leech Lake Regatta.



“It’s a destination sailing spot. It’s a big lake, big water, unpredictable weather,” said Norm Schultz, co-chair of the 2017 Regatta and a race participant since 1986. “A lot of that (popularity) has to do with the fact that most of these sailors are used to smaller inland Twin Cities lakes. This is a once-a-year deal for them. They’re used to the tradition. A lot of them schedule it a year out. You see a lot of the same faces and boats. And the older ones pass it (the tradition) on to their families.”

Yes, a true Minnesota tradition – and of the non-motorized variety.

“It’s really caught on as a sailing destination,” Mitch Loomis, owner of Shores of Leech Lake – the Regatta host since 1994 – told *Minnesota Traditions*, which celebrates these traditions and the resources that make them Minnesota institutions. (For more, go to <http://www.minnesotatraditions.com>.)

“It’s not (iconic sailing destination Lake) Minnetonka. But it’s a sailboat community.”



Much has changed on the lakes landscape in the years since the Regatta started. More and more lake homes crowd the lakeshore, boats continue to get bigger and more powerful, and aquatic invasive species have joined the fray, too. But the Leech-Regatta relationship has seemingly remained unscathed, harkening back to a simpler time when a breeze and the open water epitomized Minnesota lake country.

“It’s still a fantastic resource,” Loomis said of Leech. “And I’m not just talking about Regatta weekend. I get comments all the time how many sailboats are on the lake. And most of that can be attributed to the Regatta. Water quality is still good. And I’ve heard that Leech is at historic highs as far as the game-fish populations go. Eurasian milfoil hasn’t caught on and zebra mussels haven’t caught on. They’re here. But so far, they really haven’t caught on.

“Knock on wood ... Thank God.”

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