



Photos & Story by David Lasker

A BIG FISH in Muskoka's BIG PONDS

Brian Gardy, the Tiger Woods of pro sport fishing in the Muskoka region's picturesque lakes, is the go-to guy for fishing charters.

Charter fishing guide Brian Gardy stands at the bow of his 20-foot Triton TR20X bass boat with one foot in the pedal tray, operating the front-mounted trolling motor while his hands are busy casting with his seven-foot-long fishing rod. The two clients who have hired him for the trip carefully emulate his movements.

The electric trolling motor enables them to zero in on the fish silently and slowly, cruising Lake Rosseau at a scant two miles per hour. The 225-horsepower Yamaha SHO (super-high output) outboard motor hanging off the back of the boat chugs at low speed; the power that whisked them quickly from the hotel isn't needed in these quiet waters.

Gardy offers half- or full-day tours on Lakes Couchiching, Joseph, Muskoka, Rosseau, Simcoe, Sparrow, Vernon, Lake of Bays, Fairy Lake, Peninsula Lake, Georgian Bay, and, as his website states, all surrounding area lakes. "The guests will call and I'll pick them up right at the dock. It's a luxury for them; they don't have to meet at a boat ramp somewhere. We supply all the tackle, rods and reels, so when clients step on the boat, all they're bringing is sunscreen and a sweater."

Born and raised in Orillia, Gardy started fishing as a three-year-old at his grandmother's cottage on Skeleton Lake. "I'd get up in the morning and sit on the dock until noon. I would never catch a thing because the water was only three feet deep, but I didn't know that. I enjoyed it anyway."

Depending on location and time during the season, guests will fish for small- and large-mouth bass or lake trout instead of Northern pike. Are any of them as tasty as pickerel? It's a moot question, because Gardy's fishing tours, like his tournaments, are catch-and-release. If left in the fish's mouth, the hook doesn't do long-term damage; it will rust away in a few weeks. "If guests want to keep a few of their fish, I'll allow that, but I'm not out there to fill everybody's limit. I like to see the fish live for the guests' children to catch when they grow up."

If a guest catches a particularly impressive fish and wants to pose for a selfie with it when they return to shore, the fish can swim around at the back of the boat's live well, where oxygenated lake water constantly circulates. He even provides for those craving a trophy for their basement rec room. Gardy has them send a picture of their live catch to a taxidermist, who will make a fibreglass replica.



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His clientele range from newbies to veteran anglers, who often find it worthwhile to hire a guide to avoid wasting precious time on the water. "I'll take you out to where I know there are fish," Gardy said. "You won't drive around the lake looking at random."

It's not just fish who are the attraction; for celeb hunters, Gardy points out the cottages and helipads of movie stars, hockey players and other notable residents along the route. And in leaf-peeper season, fall foliage is a big draw. (Gardy guides until the lakes ice up in late November).

Gardy is also a competitive angler, with an impressive record: During the 2018 season, he won first prize among the 88 teams in Gravenhurst's Lake Muskoka Pike Open. Two weeks later, he came in first among the 63 teams in the Huntsville Pike Challenge, and in late August he was third among 218 entrants in the Competitive Sport Fishing League's Bassmania Series Fall Classic Western Tour.

Our interview took place at Kelseys Original Roadhouse in Orillia, one of his competition sponsors, whose logo decals, in saturated, eye-popping colours, stand out against the

backdrop of his jacket, baseball cap and black vinyl-wrapped boat hull.

Competitive fishing burns through cash for contest entry fees, gasoline and hotels, he explains. "Kelsey's Restaurant and Montana's Cookhouse have sponsored me for the past five years, and Creecher Design has been wrapping my boat. Without their help, I wouldn't be able to do what I'm doing." His other sponsors include barbecues (Napoleon), sunglasses (Maui Jim), fishing rods (Daiwa), and tackle (Duo Realis and Sunline America Vok).

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I've done tournament fishing for 20 years. You travel from lake to lake. The winner is whoever comes in with the biggest five fish for their weight."

That's where the boat's 76-mph top speed, thanks to that powerful motor, comes in. "In fishing tournaments, you start at 7 or 8 a.m. and you're done by 3 p.m. You have to manage your time all day long to be on time for the weigh-in. You're penalized half a pound for every minute you're late. So, when you're running from spot to spot, you want to run as fast as you can."

Away from guiding, which he's done for 10 years, and the pro competitions, he owns a logistics company, brokering freight throughout North America for Florida-based transportation-services firm Landstar Ranger.

Today, he's passing on the passion for the sport to the next generation. He's teaching his boys, aged three and eight, to fish. "They're right into it," he says, grinning with fatherly pride, as he manoeuvres the boat's prow delicately around a family of loons, barely disturbing them.

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