

GO FISH

CATCH A BIG ONE WITH BARRIER-FREE FISHING

When that monster rose from the deep, Wylie Harvey had realized a dream. It was a scene out of a Hemingway novel, really: man vs. nature. But there he was, in a boat off of Australia's coast, fighting—and winning—a battle with a 1,000-pound black marlin. “That one might have been a record,” says Harvey, the pride trickling through his voice as he recalls that unforgettable moment back in 2001.

Getting to Australia and facing the challenges of the sea had been a childhood dream for the Mississauga, Ontario, native. When he broke his back in a car accident in 1995, he refused to let paraplegia get in the way of his goal. So, with his wheelchair bolted to the floor of the boat, a life vest firmly in place and fishing equipment at his disposal, Harvey made his greatest catch.

Fishing is a passion shared by many. According to the Ministry of Natural Resources, sport fishing in Ontario alone generates over two billion dollars annually for the province and “lures” 1.2 million anglers from all over the world to its 250,000 lakes. No mistake, fishing is one of the great Canadian pastimes.

The spiritual pleasure that comes from being part of the great outdoors, along with the thrill of a “passive” hunt—the adrenaline rush that hits when that line finally tugs—are the main reasons why fishing strikes so many. But frankly, with the right friends and circumstances, it's just a lot of fun.

In recent years, with advances in both awareness and technology, fishing has also become a lot more accessible. Many provincial and federal parks offer barrier-free camping and some even have accessible fishing piers and supply wheelchairs that can roll through sand. There are several private outfitters across North America that provide excursions for people with disabilities as well.

Dan McDowell of Sterling, Alaska, has been offering barrier-free fishing opportunities down the Kenai River since 1983. Providing accessible outdoor opportunities is something close to his heart. “I was born in the Vietnam era,” says McDowell, who is affectionately known as ‘the Last Frontiersman.’ “Lots of friends were injured, and I wanted to create something for them; it meant the world to me.”

With a customized boat equipped to accommodate up to five wheelchairs and six people, McDowell is well prepared to service individuals with most physical disabilities, including both paraplegia and quadriplegia.

The boat has many special features, like wheelchair tie-downs and specially-designed ramps with wheel-gripping material, allowing for easier wheelchair access. Add first aid equipment, radios, a defibrillator and sleeping bags and you have one well-equipped boat. Even the rods and tackle are supplied. “It's dignified and safe,” he says proudly. “I took a design that I'd worked on and had a builder create it to my specs. It can fish inland rivers and also act as a rescue boat. It's the only one like it in Alaska.”

And the Kenai River offers challenging opportunities for serious fishermen. There's a reason they call the river's residents, ‘the king salmon.’ “We get lots of 70-pounders,” says McDowell. “One vet landed an 82-pound salmon—one of the largest I've seen to date.”

McDowell has become something of a legend in Alaska. Fishermen with and without disabilities come to him from all over the United States to meet the challenges offered by the mighty Kenai River. He's trying to create an opportunity for everybody to participate in the outdoor experience. He aims to empower people who think fishing is an activity that might not be available to them to take up the sport. But one doesn't have to go all the way to Alaska to fish. There are outfitters in Canada, too (see sidebar).

There is also specialized gear available. While casting a line may be difficult for some, features like pole holders and electric reels can make the job easier. Then there are customized options. For example, the Tetra Society of North America, which recruits skilled volunteers to customize assistive devices to match a person's needs (whether for work, home or recreation), has developed a fishing rod that is balanced to open at the end of the casting motion. They have also created a rod with a sip-and-puff feature that connects to a reel and battery.



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These are simple, yet ingenious, tools that improve access to the sport.

But having the equipment is one thing; getting the trip together is another. It can be especially difficult for people planning their first one, says Harvey, who recalls that when preparing for his trip to Australia, he sent emails out to about 1,500 outfitters and received only two responses.

He cautions others to ask potential outfitters to send pictures of the boats and equipment they offer, as well as accommodations within the lodge, before booking any travel. The absence of a ramp—or an accessible washroom—can make all the difference in the world when you get there.

To address this problem, Harvey publishes *The Find ‘Em Directory*, through Accessible Canadian Adventures. This is an international compendium of outfitters that offer barrier-free hunting and fishing wilderness excursions for people with disabilities. “It can be frustrating, and you have to organize tons of stuff,” says Harvey. “But it can be done. You need to try it differently, but you can do it. The frustration will be outweighed by the joy of fishing.”

By Carter Hammett



Dan McDowell’s accessible fishing boats feature wheelchair ramps.

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