



# SEEKING CISCO

HEAD TO  
TRAVERSE CITY'S  
FRESHWATER BAYS,  
WHERE THESE BIG  
FISH ARE PLENTIFUL  
AND...BINGO! ONE'S  
ALREADY BITING.

TEXT AND PHOTOS  
BY DAN SHEPLER

Mornings this time of year are special. That stillness as the world slowly wakes up, before the hustle of the tourist season begins. The sun, rising earlier and earlier each day, taking its sweet time to get high in the sky.

Mornings so perfect should only be spent with one activity—one that blends the awe-inspiring nature of Northern Michigan and a therapy session on the water.

I call up my favorite local fishing guide to find out what is happening on Grand Traverse Bay right now and to see what the availability is to get on the water. In the Grand Traverse area there are few guides more accomplished and knowledgeable than Ben Wolfe of Sport Fish Michigan. Ben tells me that a Great Lakes native, the cisco, had experienced near extinction, but is back on the rise and thriving. Not only are the fish numbers on the climb, but also the average size of the fish in both bays—East and West—are significantly larger than ciscos found in other areas in the region. Intrigued? Scour the internet for this beautiful, metallic fish that you would expect to find in the ocean.

A few days later, I meet Ben bright and early at an East Bay boat launch. Thrilled to be getting out on the water, I begin to experience the jitters as we zip to a spot Ben knows. He pulls out a few rods and we start to fish. Even if we never catch a thing, just being out here is worth the experience. Immersing in the calmness and colors on the water, knowing that you're out living while most are on shore, sound asleep. Being on the water for a sunrise is one of the most therapeutic events you can experience.

Within a few minutes of fishing, I hear Ben say "Oop! Just had a bite!" It bites again; this time finding itself hooked on the end of the line. Ciscos don't pull especially hard, but the fight is just good ol' fashion fun. Their scales shine and shimmer when the sun hits them just right, while their underbelly is white as snow. I snap a couple photos of the catch and sip my coffee with a smile. The cisco continue to bite and we find ourselves catching one after another for the next couple of hours. In almost disbelief about how good the action is, I ask Ben if this is normal. He kind of chuckles and says, "This is a little slow...you should

have been here yesterday." He continues to explain that the cisco fishery is perfect for those who just want to have fun, catch fish, and take some delicious fillets home. Likewise, an excellent opportunity for parents to bring their kids to experience consistent action and find enjoyment in the sport.

We start to make our way back to the docks. Ben puts all of the rods and rest of the gear back in their proper places, getting the boat immaculately organized faster than I can put my camera equipment away. He fires up the engine and we glide across the bay. I look around at the beautiful green shoreline, taking it in one last time as the morning's highlights come back to mind. Not often is it noon and you can already, with confidence, call it a day. Now time for some lunch! Fresh fish sounds good.

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## GEAR UP!

**BEN WOLFE OF SPORT FISH MICHIGAN SHARES HIS MUST-HAVES.**

**RODS** Spinning or bait casting rod (depending upon preference) between 6.5 to 7 ft. long with medium strength power and a fast tip. This allows the angler to work the bait effectively and performs better than a slower action rod.

**LINE** Braided line anywhere from 10-14 pound test with a 6-8 ft. fluorocarbon leader. This is a recipe for not only strength but also sensitivity to feel bites at a distance. The zero stretch nature of braided line allows for better hooksets at distance, while the smaller diameter will cut through the water column more efficiently, allowing the lure to sink faster. The fluorocarbon leader is a must. Water clarity in the early spring can be over 70 ft. on Grand Traverse Bay!


**CLOTHING** Water temperatures are cool in the late spring and early summer, so dressing for the water temperature is always a better idea than dressing for the ambient, on-land temperature. Anglers often overlook the fact that any wind coming off water in the upper 30s to lower 50s will feel much cooler than the air temperature off the land. Layering as well as a quality jacket that will cut the wind can be crucial. I love the Under Armour ColdGear series of clothing for its lightweight feel, and superior ability to keep core body temperatures warm. High-quality polarized sunglasses are also a must-have. We use Costa Del Mar for their premium polarized glass to not only be able to see into the water effectively, but also to help protect our eyes from any hooks that might be flying around.



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—Dan Shepler



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## PRO TIPS FOR CISCO

**CATCH ONE IF YOU CAN. THE GOOD NEWS IS, YOU CAN.**

**LOOK FOR FISH** around flats and points anywhere from 15 ft. to 50 ft. Steep drops can be good at times, but a slower more gradual drop can congregate large numbers of ciscos.

**WE GENERALLY CAST** blade baits for aggressive strikes. To fish the blade bait, cast it out parallel to the break line, or slightly quartering it. Let it sink all the way down to the bottom, and hop retrieve it in a yo-yo fashion. Hop it, let it sink back down to the bottom. Hop it and let it sink. If ciscos are nearby, it usually doesn't take very long before one grabs it as you lift the rod tip. It's crucial to let it sink back down to the bottom on a semi-slack line. This allows the bait to fall properly, but also alerts us to any bites as it falls. Don't be surprised if a passing lake trout or whitefish gobbles up your lure too. Vertical jigging blade baits and spoons can also work incredibly well. For this, a jigging spoon ranging from a half ounce up to an ounce will work well. Dropped below the boat, and jigged with a 12-18 inch popping motion of the rod, ciscos love this presentation, and so do lake trout and whitefish!

**MAKE SURE YOUR BOAT** and all of the safety equipment is up to date and in good working order before you head out for a day. With recreational boat traffic at a minimum this time of year, flagging down another vessel to help may not always be an option. So make sure you have the required safety equipment on board, a marine radio and a fully-charged cell phone.

**WITH COLD WATER TEMPERATURES** in the spring, make sure you tell somebody what your plan is for the day. When and where you are going, as well as when you plan to return.

**CISCOS ARE A GREAT** way to enjoy a day on the water, and with aggressive bites and great eats, they are a favorite this time of year. Get out and be safe, so you can, most importantly, have fun.