

Fishing



For People of All Abilities

by Julie Wiest

What could be more relaxing and enjoyable than being outside, gazing at the water and clear sky, breathing the fresh air, and watching the fish bite? And what could be more satisfying than staying out there for hours and finally catching the fish that make it all worthwhile? For some people with limb loss, the answers are “nothing.” Just being out in nature and doing something they love is incredibly therapeutic and pleasurable. After an amputation, fishing is easy to get back into or to pick up for the first time, and there are many organizations and a lot of adaptive equipment to help. It can be fun for all ages and for people with all kinds of abilities.

Accessible fishing piers and docks are available for people with disabilities in many states and are usually equipped with ramps, rails and close parking. These are great for those who use wheelchairs or those who cannot walk long distances, but many amputees who use prostheses can use any pier or dock. Charter fishing boats that are equipped to accommodate people who have disabilities are available in some areas.

Some people require adaptive fishing equipment, and fishing rods, reels and other components can be adapted to suit individual needs. Fishing rods can be mounted onto a wheelchair with special devices or secured on a sling or shoulder strap attached snugly to the angler’s body. Special reels and rods suit various needs, and some will automatically cast a fishing line.

Bass Pro Shops in Springfield, Missouri, is the second largest tourist attraction (after Mount Rushmore) in the Midwest, according to iCan! Online. About the size of seven football fields and attracting approximately 4 million people every year, it is a hunting and fishing store that stocks adaptive

equipment. It has elevators and accessible bathrooms that can accommodate people of varying abilities, and it also sponsors events for hunters and anglers with disabilities. For more information, visit www.basspro.com or call 800/BASS-PRO.

Another way to find and order adaptive equipment for fishing is through **Access to Recreation, Inc.’s** free catalog that can be ordered by calling 800/634-4351 or by writing to the company at 8 Sandra Court, Newbury Park, CA 91320-4302.

Wilderness Inquiry (WI) is a non-profit organization that is committed to including all people in outdoor activities, no matter what their age, race or physical ability. WI is best known for its multi-day



wilderness activities, but it also conducts community events, research, training, equipment design, trail and field assessments and policy development. Its staff are, not only skilled wilderness guides, but also committed to creating the best outdoors experience for all participants, which sometimes means adapting activities to accommodate various abilities. A service of WI, **Access Outdoors** is a resource that connects people with disabilities to organizations that help make

*Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency
Public Fishing Pier, Oak Ridge, Tennessee*

different types of outdoor activities more accessible. It also provides consultation and assessments to organizations that wish to make their facilities or programs more accessible. For more information about WI, visit www.wildernessinquiry.org or call 800/728-0719. For more information about Access Outdoors or to find an organization that can help you, visit www.accessoutdoors.org

Fishing Has No Boundaries, Inc. (FHNB) is a nonprofit organization operated by volunteers that is dedicated to assisting anglers with disabilities in the United States. The organization works to provide unlimited access to people with any type of disability through specialized adaptive devices, dock loading systems and boat adaptations. FHNB creates awareness about fishing opportunities for people who have disabilities and how enjoyable and fulfilling they can be. It offers memberships, accepts sponsorships and hopes to establish at least one chapter in every state. Chapter event information can be found on FHNB's Web site (www.fhnbinc.org). For more information, call 800/243-3462 or write to P.O. Box 175, Hayward, WI 54843.

The Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) Sports and Recreation Program founded the **PVA National Bass Trail**, which is sanctioned by the **Bass Anglers Sportsmen Society (B.A.S.S.)**. The trail gives anglers with disabilities the opportunity to fish for recreation or competition. Whether fishing from a boat or the shore, anglers with disabilities are paired with able-bodied volunteers, who offer as much assistance as needed.

Awards and prizes are awarded for the

total weight of the fish. Visit the PVA Web site (www.pva.org) to find out more, to find an event close to you, or to obtain registration forms.

Amputation Creates No Disability

"I've been fishing all my life," says Tom Ellis, a man who proves that an angler does not need two arms to fish. Ellis' left arm was amputated when he was 5 days old because the umbilical cord wrapped around his arm so tightly when he was born that it cut off the blood supply, and gangrene set in. Because he lost his arm when he was so young, Ellis never missed it and lives just fine without it. In fact, he leads a busier life than most able-bodied people. Using a special rig he made that holds the rod with a belt and harness that hook to the reel, he catches all kinds of fish. "It replaces the left hand," Ellis says about the rig. "It's not as comfortable, but it gets the job done."

Ellis owns two boats – one in Orlando, Florida, and one in Key West, Florida – from which he fishes with his son, Berk, and Captain Bill Oliver. The trio recently joined the pro division of the Southern Kingfish Association (SKA) and are currently in third place. Ellis is also the 2001 National One-Arm Champion in the above-elbow one-arm division of the National Amputee Golf Association's annual golf tournament. As if all that didn't keep him busy, Ellis is the owner of T & B Equipment Co., based in Ashland, Virginia, a business he started 27 years ago that builds temporary scaffolds and bleachers at major sporting events nationwide. He proves that having only one arm is merely an inconvenience, not a disability.

Fishing is First Priority

Ed Garrett started fishing when he was 8 or 9 years old, and even losing his legs above the knees has not stopped him. He lost his first leg in 1997 and the second in 2000 because of complications caused by diabetes. After the first amputation, he says that he did not have much trouble



Tom Ellis

getting around with a prosthesis. But, after the second one, his heart could not handle the strain of using two prostheses. "It took all mobility away from me," Garrett says about the second amputation. However, he has learned to cope. He has a wheelchair and two electric scooters; he uses one around town and one in the yard. "I do just about anything I want to do," Garrett says.

Garrett has always loved fishing, and he says the peace, quiet and solitude are what he enjoys most. After his amputations, he learned how to launch his boat a little differently, and he can even drive his Blazer – equipped with hand controls – to the lake and go fishing by himself. Garrett also enjoys fishing with friends, and he frequently fishes in South Dakota and Wyoming, in addition to Nebraska, his home. He has never fished competitively before, but he says he has thought about it and may do it one day.

Garrett also does a lot of yard work and has adapted his lawn mower with hand controls. In addition to his own lawn, he mows five others on his block that belong to widowed women, who can use the help. Garrett does all this when he is not working at the switch manufacturing company where he is employed. His love for fishing comes first, though, and his employer understands. "It depends on the fishing and the weather when I go to work," he says with a laugh. ■