

Wild rice is delicious to man, habitat for wildlife

NORTH WORDS

by BLANE KLEMEK



Twenty-three years ago, I canoed the upper Mississippi River for the first time. It was early October on a glorious blue-sky day with brightly colored fall foliage everywhere throughout the adjacent forests. Numerous and nearly impenetrable stands of cattails often blocked passage along the river's channel, requiring me to carefully examine the current's direction to learn which way to go.

Upon emerging from one such vegetation-choked portion of the flowage, I was thrilled to once again see the coursing river channel that promised easy paddling and a much-needed reprieve. Instead of an endless wall of cattails on either side of the channel and within it, I was presented with the sight of tall golden grasses on both sides of the river swaying in the wind like big blue stem on prairie grasslands.

Dipping the paddle into the water to rudder the craft's controlled downstream descent, I peered over my left shoulder into the dense aquatic grassland in time to see the vivid green head of a drake mallard duck craning its neck to get a better look at me. The duck was sitting motionless and appeared poised to vault itself from the surface at any second.

Suddenly, and as spectacular as it was startling, the entire bed of grasses heaved forth a volcano-like explosion of waterfowl erupting into the air in a bewilderingly awesome display of hundreds of beating wings. As visually rich as the scene was, it was as equally audibly rich, if not more so.

Sitting completely immobilized by the sheer beauty of all of those birds as they at last disappeared over the horizon, I was left not only with silence and solitude once more, but also with a deep appreciation for the life-giving water-grass. Indeed, wild rice.

Wild rice is a food like no other. Just recently I spent a day "ricing" on a northern Minnesota lake with three other experienced "ricers." We slipped our two canoes into the water and with one man in each canoe using a push-pole to operate the crafts through lush beds of tall wild rice, while I and another man sat comfortably in the middle of each of our boats using our flails, we proceeded to harvest. By 3:00 we had in our canoes nearly 300 total pounds of the quill-like grains for sacking.



The Ojibwa called the life giving water-grass that migrating puddle ducks depend on for food and cover, "mah-nomen" or "manoomin", which means "good berry." So important was this food source to Minnesota's indigenous people that many settlements were established nearby, which were also fiercely defended. After all, the grains of this grass were delectable and nutritious, but only locally abundant.

Declared as Minnesota's official state grain, the good berry is commonly known today as wild rice. No other state has more wild rice than Minnesota, some 15,000 to 30,000 acres in all. In good years, one acre of wild rice can produce 500 pounds of grain. Native only to North America, wild rice can be found from Manitoba to Florida, but is most plentiful throughout the Great Lakes region. Growing in large stands or beds across a vast array of suitable wetlands, lakes, and rivers, wild rice is important to people and wildlife alike.

In a way, wild rice is really a misnomer. It's not rice at all, but is actually a grass like wheat, barley, and oats. Growing primarily in waters three feet deep or less, wild rice can reach surprisingly tall heights of eight feet and more at maturity. Colored green during the growing season, the plants turn golden as they ripen in late summer and fall with grains of brown gracing the heads. Though wild rice grows year after year in the same locales when conditions are favorable, the plant is an annual, not a perennial. When ripe grains fall off the plants into the water, they sink to the bottom substrate, lie dormant through the winter, and germinate in the spring-time.

Minnesota's Department of Natural Resources, as well as certain American Indian tribes within their respective reservation boundaries, regulates the harvest of wild rice. Season dates typically begin in mid-July and ends in late September with harvesting times set from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. daily.

Other restrictions include not harvesting green rice, watercrafts not exceeding eighteen feet in length and thirty-six inches wide, push poles limited to only those that are forked, and flails (harvesting sticks) no longer than thirty inches, no heavier than a pound, and must be round and made of wood.

Obviously, there is a reason people and wildlife seek out the nourishment of wild rice — it tastes good and is good for you. Wild rice has a delicious, robust nutty flavor, is very high in protein but low in fat, and contains B vitamins, potassium, phosphorus, and anti-oxidants.

Wild rice is an extremely essential wildlife food source that doubly serves as important habitat. Undeniably wild, unquestionably wonderful: wild rice — yet another of Minnesota's many gifts to be thankful for as we get out and enjoy the great outdoors.

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