According to a Walleyes Unlimited club enthusiast, fishing clubs are one of the best deals for any angler.

Why Join a Fishing Club?

Story and Photos
By Eric Ehrhardt

It's the last Wednesday of the month and, just like this time every month, I'm scrambling to wrap up my work day so I can get to a meeting I can't wait to attend. Unlike some meetings, where duty requires showing up, this gathering is something I anticipate for weeks. What's more, my excitement this day is higher than usual.

Tonight is a meeting of Walleyes Unlimited, a fishing club with an emphasis on walleye—but welcomes anglers of all interests. Tonight's topic is smallmouth bass and the featured speaker is none other than the best smallmouth bass guide on southern Lake Michigan. Smallmouth fishing is something I've been pursuing with deep interest for 10 years, ever since the Bassmasters Classic was held in Chicago in 2000.

Battling through Lake County traffic to arrive a bit early, I find a packed hallway. The talk is loud, the energy high, and lots of hearty belly laughs are being heard. I wave at a club member checking in guests. I'm met with several firm handshakes and hellos as I make my way into the meeting room, where the volume is even louder with talk and numerous gestures indicating the size of recent catches.

What's not to love about a club where everybody goes fishing? Walleyes Unlimited club members regularly invite each other out on the water to share tips and strategies.

Club president Walt Koch (a retired executive and current licensed fishing guide) shakes my hand and asks how the bow hunting is going. Fishing club meetings are about sharing stories of all types of outdoor adventures. I tell him my season is a success already: My oldest son Lucas bagged two deer on the first weekend of his Illinois bowhunting career. Walt's impressed

—"that's fantastic," he grins. Koch grew up downstate doing quite a bit of bird hunting. He still receives his hometown paper and looks forward to pictures of big bucks from around the town where he grew up.

Koch takes the mike up front as Jose Trejo is setting up a camcorder in the center of the room. Trejo has been taping meetings for years so club members can buy a DVD for $5 for future reference. Koch asked people to find their seats and bring the talking down, starting the meeting with club announcements then passing the mike to members coordinating upcoming events.

Bill Banker, outings director, recapped an outing attended by 75 members, and reminded members about an upcoming outing—a weekend fishing trip within a half day drive for most members. On these outings, the focus is helping each other catch fish, share a meal and have a great time. The mike gets passed along for an update on the club banquet and then, a highlight the meeting, the coveted fishing reports.

The club is full of tremendous anglers. Keith Hahn reports on walleye fishing on the Fox Chain O'Lakes. People listen intently as he shares details—not just because this is any ordinary angler speaking, but because Hahn has fished as an amateur on the Professional Walleye Trail and typically out fishes the professionals he is paired with. Hahn's father and son are sitting near the front, making a three-generation angler family in the room.

The mike continues around the room for fishing reports from other club members. The fall fishing is hot and upon us, they report. There are reports from the recent club outing and, because most club members live in northeast Illinois and southeastern Wisconsin, many report on Lake Michigan salmon and perch.

Fishing clubs such as Walleye Unlimited rarely limit their missions to one species. A recent WU trip targeted the spectacular smallmouth fishing on Lake Michigan.

The fishing reports take a good 45 minutes and, as they wrap up, I think to myself what a resource and wealth of information this is. A fisherman can't get this level of detail from the Internet. I also know I can approach any club member with questions of what they did to be so successful. Typically, these one-on-one meetings lead to someone drawing a map, diagramming rigging or an outright invitation to jump in their boat the next weekend.

Want to catch more fish—including bragging-size yellow perch? Fishing club members love to share their techniques and invite you aboard.

Koch takes the mike back, reminds everyone to buy a few raffle tickets—the technique used to help pay for our excellent monthly speakers—and announces a 15-minute break before the guest speaker starts. The crowd stands, conversations about the fishing reports begin and the noise level pulses with enthusiasm.

So unfolds a typical club meeting night for Walleyes Unlimited, a club, like others around the state, dedicated to having fun and helping others learn to fish.

Whether you are an experienced fisherman or a novice, I strongly encourage you to find out if there is a fishing club near you. These organizations truly are the best deal there is in fishing.

Eric Ehrhardt is the Illinois Kids Fishing Clinic director for Walleyes Unlimited. Walleyes Unlimited club meetings take place the second Wednesday of the month in Franklin, Wisconsin and the last Wednesday of the month in Gurnee, Illinois.