

## **The Encounter**

I was nearing the end of my second dive of the year, coming up on 46 minutes in 51 degree water. My body was feeling the effects of using muscles that had been all-too-idle for most of the previous year—age, injuries, and surgery had been dragging me down, but this day I was celebrating my refusal to surrender to it all. Despite the exhilaration of a day well spent, the cold was seeping in through my wet suit and I was ready to crawl out into the sun.

Then he swam up.

I assume he was a he. One largemouth bass looks pretty much like any other, but this one lacked the swelling belly suggestive of a female ready to spawn. He was big, a bit longer than a foot, with a grayish-green back, silvery belly, and prominent black midline extending from the gills to the black-trimmed tail fin. He stared at me with two-tone eyes—each a yellowish ring surrounding a black iris.

His behavior suggested a male disinclined to suffer fools like me. He swam up, literally getting in my face—or more accurately, my mask—and opened his mouth wide in what seemed a threat

display. He turned sideways to me, flaring his fins, then he calmly swam away to a spot where the wall of rocks that demarcated the entry area leveled out, and waited.

But not for long. I sat there, inhaling the remaining air in my tank and sending the exhaust bubbling up through the couple of feet of water that separated me from the 70-degree April temperatures and sunshine other people were enjoying. The bass came back at me like a torpedo, repeating the gaping mouth gesture that I'm sure would normally intimidate his finned neighbors. He'd stare me down, then swim back to the spot he seems to have claimed as a nest, and build up toward another charge.

He came back—five more times—to resume the challenge, but I didn't dash away like the sunfish he normally contended with. Instead, I giddily recording the incident with an underwater camera. But the needle on my submersible pressure gauge soon slipped too deeply into the red. My air was being exhausted more quickly than his zeal for the attack.

As much as I wanted to stay, here he was master. It was time for me to cede the field.