

Hitachi ZW80 compact wheel loader right at home in 'Pure Michigan'

For as long as Petoskey, Michigan, native Robert Drost can remember, families have been making their way north to his little corner of “Pure Michigan.” And who can blame them? The woods, inland lakes, ski hills, streams and Lake Michigan shoreline in and around Petoskey form what is arguably America’s greatest blend of nature.

One thing Drost has noticed changing over the years is the accommodations weekenders, vacationers and retirees expect along the Upper West Coast of Michigan.

They simply demand the best — and Drost Landscape delivers. The company has been recognized eight times by the Michigan Nursery and Landscape Association, winning awards in such categories as residential installation, residential design and installation, residential design/build and residential management.

As a young man growing up in the area, Drost worked on the small farms that then dominated the region. “Landscaping? I didn’t even know what that word meant,” he says. “Seriously, I don’t think many people up here did.” They do now.

“These people come up here to enjoy the lakes and the fresh air, and they will put more money into their homes here than they do downstate,” Drost says. “They trust us, and we don’t take that lightly.”



Drost Landscape has come to rely on good partners to take care of a demanding, high-end customer base in Northern Michigan. Dustin Drost, left, and Robert Drost, center, work with Bill McDaniel of Grand Equipment, the local authorized Hitachi Wheel Loaders dealer.

Drost demands the highest standards

To deliver the best means being the best and having the best, says the passionate and highly charismatic Drost. The landscaping industry can run the gamut in terms of quality, expertise and performance, but Drost Landscape is a professional organization in the most complete, thorough and strictest definition of the term.

The team grows into the hundreds during peak season, but Drost retains a core full-time staff year-round that includes highly trained and experienced designers, project managers and division managers. Drost credits much of the daily organizational success to Dale Drier, who came aboard in 1997 when the company was about six years old. Now the general manager, Drier is himself a designer who quickly adopted the Drost vision — a mix of traditional service and progressive culture.

“They say no one man does a team make, and that’s really what you see here,” says Drost, known to most people as Bob. “This place is like the hand. You’ve got people who are thumbs, people who are pinkies, people who are index fingers — they all have different attributes. I realized a long time ago it’s not about me; it’s about us. As a team, we can conquer things, and we do. My biggest contribution is a little out-of-the-box thinking.”



Snow may still be on the ground, but this Drost Landscape crew is hard at work preparing a landscaping project for a new home development. Equipped with a fork carriage, the new Hitachi ZW80 wheel loader easily handles a large rock to be incorporated into the project.

And, it must be noted, that though he does not operate the equipment, he loves being around it. “I love seeing it, I love learning about it, and I love buying it.” Among the most recent acquisitions is a Hitachi ZW80 compact wheel loader, delivered by Bill McDaniel of Grand Equipment Company, the local authorized Hitachi Wheel Loader dealer, based in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Hitachi loader earns rave reviews

Replacing a competitive model, the new ZW80 is part of a construction fleet of more than 30 excavators, skid-steer loaders, compact track loaders and wheel loaders. Drost Landscape also owns and operates fleets of trucks, as well as specialized equipment germane to company divisions such as tree service and maintenance.

Starting in 1991 with a skid-steer, dump truck and “four guys and myself,” Drost says it’s easy to remain humble. “I remember when we got three pieces of equipment and I thought, there, one for every crew, perfect. And now we run 19 jobs at a time.”

It hasn’t taken long for Drost Landscape equipment operators to take note of the 1.2-cubic-yard addition to the loader fleet. “Completely unsolicited, one of the guys said to me just the other day, ‘That new Hitachi is the best loader you’ve got, boss,’” says Drost, whose son Dustin had a similar conversation with the



Landscaping in the winter? Petoskey-based Drost Landscape keeps staff busy year-round with its varied professional landscaping services, ranging from design and construction to tree service and snow removal.

same person. “That operator has grown up around machinery,” says Dustin, a project manager, “and he’s kinda picky, to be honest.”

That operator, Paul Robiadek, works on a crew under supervisor D.J. Hall. Despite it still being the heart of winter, they were busy constructing an outdoor showpiece at a new home near Charlevoix. As well as snow removal, Drost Landscape had about a half-dozen active jobs going in the dead of winter – and that, says Dustin, has been the way for Drost Landscape for the past decade, if not longer.

Robiadek raves about the design of the ZW80. He notes the modern exterior sloping and pillarless cab design with floor-to-ceiling glass provide clear visibility all around the machine, “and with a smaller counterweight, you don’t have to worry as much about turning around and hitting something. When you’re in a tight area such as this, you can see all around you and make sure you’re clear.”

At this jobsite, the ZW80 was maximizing its 63 hp of engine output and 8,280 pounds of breakout force to load, move and dump snow, dirt and building materials, as well as to load trucks, which it can still comfortably do at its compact size.

Most impressively, Robiadek swapped out the loader bucket for a fork carriage to move huge rocks to be used in the designed landscape – rocks that average



Equipped with a standard 1.2-cubic-yard bucket, the new Hitachi ZW80 wheel loader quickly earned the respect of operators like Drost Landscape's Paul Robiadek for its visibility, speed, power and strength.

roughly 72 inches by 16 inches by 6 inches apiece and were in some cases being moved two at a time. "All those rocks you see stacked here? I had no problem getting all of them down here from the road, through the trees. The rear tires on that Hitachi loader never came off the ground once," Robiadek says. "It's by far one of the best smaller machines I've ever operated." His supervisor and seasoned watcher Hall confirmed the dual rock lifting claim was no exaggeration.

Weighing in at a standard 12,220 pounds, the Hitachi ZW80 is rated to lift and carry loads of up to 3,587 pounds.

A quick loader that is also a quick learn

Dustin Drost, whose brother Travis also works for the company, says the feedback he has received on the ZW80 matches his own experiences. "One thing all the guys have noticed is the power that these loaders have. It's amazing," Dustin says. "When you are going a longer distance down the road and are in rabbit mode, it's impressive just how fast this Hitachi loader goes. Compared to other makes of that size of machine that always seem so slow moving, this one really gets up and goes. Even in turtle mode, it's quick."

The ZW80 is capable of speeds up to 21.1 mph. "Everyone who operates it is so taken by that," Dustin says. "And that's something I noticed right away myself. The first time I operated it, I thought it was moving in rabbit, and I looked down and it was in turtle. Right then and there, I was like, 'Holy moly.' Very impressive!"



Before the new Hitachi ZW80 wheel loader arrived in Petoskey, Michigan, the Drost Landscape team was already comfortable with the productivity of equipment supplied by Bill McDaniel of Grand Equipment. One of two KCM legacy wheel loaders already in the fleet, this smaller 30ZV reliably handles various tasks, including snow removal, says operator Dustin Drost.

Aesthetically, the ZW80 is a winner, too. "I like the Hitachi color a lot," Dustin says. "That Hitachi Orange is really, really nice, because it stands out on site. Yellow often blends in with the sun whereas the orange just pops more."

On any given day, the nature of the landscaping business is that several different operators may be on a loader, and they find it simple but highly productive," Dustin says.

Welcome to the family

Robert Drost admits that when McDaniel calls from Grand Equipment, the conversation often goes just about anywhere. Good friends are like that.

The trust that homeowners in and around Petoskey have placed in Drost Landscape is exactly the type of trust he appreciates in the people he does business with. That's certainly the case with McDaniel and Grand Equipment. "Whatever machine they're selling, Bill will bring it up just to see if we like it, but it never seems to leave," Drost says.

It seems that Petoskey's first Hitachi ZW80 will be keeping busy for some time. ■