

DNR 2018 Fishing Opener Outlook for Northwest Region

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Anglers are reminded that the statewide Muskellunge season opens on June 2nd and the statewide minimum length limit is 54 inches.

Yellow Perch numbers in Cass Lake are a bit below the long-term average, though sizes have improved slightly over recent years. Still, anglers will likely have to do a little sorting along the way to find keeper-sized Yellow Perch this year.

The newly established zebra mussel population is expanding and it is now common to find them throughout the lake. Starry Stonewort is also present. Remember to inspect your boat hull and anchor for unwanted hitchhikers and drain all of your water and keep your boat plugs out before leaving the access.

Upper Red Lake: The fishing outlook for Upper Red Lake is excellent. On waters under the jurisdiction of the State of Minnesota (the eastern 48,000 acres of Upper Red Lake), licensed anglers will be allowed a daily and possession limit of four Walleye, with one fish larger than 17 inches allowed in possession. These regulations are the same as last summer and take advantage of the abundance of fish in the 16- to 18-inch range in the lake at this time. Given the prospects for

a later-than-average spring, Walleye catch rates during early season should be high. As usual, there are good numbers of fish from 14 to 18 inches so finding keeper-sized fish this year should not be a problem. Be prepared to accurately measure your catch by having the proper tools in your boat as there are good numbers of fish in the population right around 17 inches. The mouth of the Tamarac River is a very popular early season fishing location. However, early in the season there is good fishing around the entire shoreline break so consider spreading out to get away from the crowds. Moving around is also a good way to find fish from a wider size range.

Anglers interested in catching large Northern Pike are probably already familiar with Upper Red Lake. Northern Pike size structure is impressive, and although angler catch rates may be low at times, the incentive is the potential to catch a trophy. Anglers should be aware of the special regulation for Northern Pike: all fish from 26 to 44 inches must be immediately released, and only one fish greater than 44 inches is allowed in possession. Anglers should be prepared to safely handle these large fish so they can survive the release process and live to

fight another day. There are outstanding numbers of 36- to 40-inch fish in the population right now.

Black Crappie numbers are similar to historical levels outside of the “Crappie Boom” in the early 2000s. Still, catching a few bonus fish to supplement the bag is a real possibility for anglers that know where to look. Early season will be best as fish will scatter after the spawn and be difficult to target. These fish are the result of recent hatches from 2010 to 2013 and are typically 10 to 13 inches, though there have been a few reports of fish 14 to 15 inches as well.

Anglers should also be prepared to encounter a variety of DNR and Beltrami County staff while fishing or accessing Upper Red Lake. In addition to requests by fisheries creel survey clerks and conservation officers, staff from the various invasive species programs may be doing inspections and providing educational information. Red Lake was recently designated as an infested water as Starry Stonewort was discovered in 2016. With spiny water fleas established in Rainy Lake, the Rainy River, and Lake of the Woods, Upper Red Lake and other nearby waters are also

at risk for direct transfer of this aquatic nuisance species by anglers. Anglers leaving any lake should remember that they are required by law to drain all water from boats, live wells, and bait wells and ensure the effective removal of all aquatic plants and/or other invasive species from their boat, trailer, and other equipment.

Leech Lake: The 2018 fishing outlook on Leech Lake is looking promising, similar to the past few years. Walleye numbers are above the management goals that were set in the current management plan and recent low Yellow Perch numbers are on the rebound.

Catch rates of adult Walleye (10.1 fish/net) are just above the management goal of 7 to 10 fish/net with Walleye ranging from 6 to 27 inches in the most recent fall survey. The current 20-26” protected slot limit with a 4 fish possession limit and one over 26.0” allowed in possession has worked to protect spawning fish but will be evaluated in 2018 to determine if it is currently protecting too many larger fish. Watch for signs at public accesses and information on opportunities for the public to provide comments on

potential Walleye regulation proposals.

Northern Pike catch rates were down from previous surveys with 3.8 fish/net in the fall sample. Catch rates have historically ranged from 4 to 6 fish per net and the lower management goal is at least 4.2 fish/net. New Northern Pike zone regulations will be in place by the 2018 open water opener and should benefit the Northern Pike population on Leech Lake.

Yellow Perch numbers in the 2017 fall survey rebounded from the all-time low in 2016. Sizes of Yellow Perch captured in the nets ranged from 5 to 13 inches with an average length of 8 inches. The Yellow Perch population in Leech Lake is showing a balanced population with 40% of the perch sampled being 8 inches or larger.

Muskellunge from Leech Lake are collected and spawned as part of the statewide broodstock program every four years. Fish that were ripe when caught in 2017 were stripped of their spawn and the eggs were fertilized. These fertilized eggs were distributed throughout the state to ensure an adequate gene pool for stocked muskellunge lakes. A portion of

the muskellunge fingerlings that were produced from the Leech Lake fish are returned to Leech Lake.

A strong concern on Leech Lake is the impacts that zebra mussels will have in the future. Immature zebra mussel larvae, called veligers, were found in 2016. After an extensive search of the lake in 2017 there was only one boat that was found to have any adult zebra mussels. Once the veligers are found it generally takes a few years before the adult zebra mussel population begins to dramatically increase. There are currently no known methods to control or reduce numbers of zebra mussels once they are found in natural systems. Aquatic invasive species (AIS) like zebra mussels are moved from infested to non-infested waters by anglers, boaters, and lake shore owners and can adversely impact lakes and fish populations. To avoid spreading AIS, lake users are required to remove all aquatic plants or animals from their watercraft and drain all water from their boat before leaving the access. Additional information on all of these topics can be found on the DNR website (www.dnr.state.mn.us) or by contacting the Walker Area Fisheries office.

For pure fishing fun, go after panfish

You won’t find a listing for Minnesota’s most harvested variety of fish in a zoological reference book. It doesn’t have a fancy two-part Latin name. And a 2- or 3-pounder is worthy of admiration.

Yet for all that it lacks, the lowly panfish remains Minnesota’s most popular fish, with an estimated 9.7 million pounds harvested in 2013 – more than twice the take of *Sander vitreus*, our official state fish, the walleye.

Panfish, of course, isn’t really a particular species of fish, but a generic term that encompasses several species including bluegills, crappies, sunfish, rock bass, pumpkinseed and perch. The term made its debut in print with the first American cookbook in 1796. What all these species have in common is that they’re generally small enough to fit easily in a frying pan; some are even kind of pan-shaped.

“They’re good in the pan,” said Tim Ohmann, a fisheries specialist with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources’ Fishing in the Neighborhood (FiN) program,

which provides close-to-home angling opportunities for kids and their families. “Panfish are a tasty treat dredged in some flour and seasonings, then given a little swim in hot oil.”

Panfish also are a healthy food choice. Because they’re lower in the food chain and tend to be smaller, they’re less likely to be the subject of consumption advisories than larger predator fish.

The culinary virtues of panfish account for only part of their popularity, though. Another selling point is that you don’t have to go far to find a body of water with good panfish action.

“They’re ubiquitous,” Ohmann said. “You can go to just about any lake around and find panfish, especially in the metro region. And the season is open year-round.”

To increase the chances of catching larger panfish, Ohmann suggests consulting the fisheries surveys included as part of LakeFinder (www.mndnr.gov/fishmn) on the DNR website; look for lakes with a good percentage of fish in the 6- to 8-inch range. After ice-out, panfish move into shallow water, which is warmer, to eat and spawn. Later in the season they can be found loitering around the weed edge, or near docks. As temperatures warm, the fish are more likely to bite and easier to catch.

“They’re poikilothermic – that’s a \$10 word for being cold-blooded,” Ohmann said “Their body temperature varies with their surroundings, so they get more active and hungry when the water is warmer.”

The relative ease with which panfish can be caught is another selling point. You don’t need a lot of expensive equipment. A cane pole or a cheap rod and reel set up with a bobber and a worm for bait will do the trick.

Panfish also can be caught using crickets, bugs, small leeches, crankbaits, little jigs and by flyfishing. You don’t need a fancy boat, either. Fishing from shore or a fishing pier works fine.

“The equipment is about as basic as you can get,” Ohmann said. “If you put something in front of them, they’re going to bite on it. They’re not too finicky.”

Their catchability and widespread existence make panfish an ideal target when introducing kids to angling. For a novice angler, nothing beats the excitement of seeing a bobber go under and feeling a tug and tingle in the line. Panfish may be small but they can be aggressive and quick, providing good action for their size. And because they’re schooling fish, if you get one bite, you’re likely to get a bunch.

“They’re competitive feeders,” Ohmann said. “It’s every fish for himself, and if one goes after bait, more will follow. They’re even kleptomaniacs – one fish will try to steal food or bait from another.”

Because of the popularity of panfish, the DNR supplements natural reproduction in some heavily fished areas such as the metro region. The FiN program puts about 25,000 bluegills into 66 small lakes around the Twin Cities each year.

To provide a higher quality angling experience, the program also has experimented with taking fish out of lakes with an over-abundance of small bluegills in the spring, putting them into rearing ponds over the summer, then moving them into FiN-managed lakes without a history of winterkill in the late fall. The result is bigger bluegills – a three- to five-fold increase.

“I suppose any angler worth their salt likes to brag occasionally about what a walleye warrior they are,” Ohmann said. “But when it comes to pure fishing enjoyment, it’s hard to beat panfish. They put the fun in fishing.”

Where and When to Find Panfish

If you were a panfish, where would you be? Would you hang out in open water where there's not much food or protection? No. Sunfish like to be near hiding spots, also called "cover" or "structure."



In summer, panfish may be found:

- Under and around docks and piers
- Around submerged trees, stumps and brush piles
- Among the aquatic plants
- Under the shade of overhanging trees

When to fish
You can fish almost anytime, but there are times that may be better than others. Test out these old fishing "rules of thumb" for yourself:

- Morning and evening better than midday.
- Changing weather conditions better than steady weather.
- Calm conditions better than windy conditions.
- Overcast (cloudy) days better than bright, sunny days.

Never fish when lightning is near!

Did you know?
Many anglers believe that the phase of the moon has a lot to do with when fish bite. Some say that fish bite better around the time of a full moon or new moon.



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