

DNR 2018 Fishing Opener Outlook for Northwest Region

Ice-out across Northwest Minnesota will be much later than normal this spring. With the opener falling on May 12 this year there is a strong probability that there will be ice on some of the larger lakes on the opener. Drought conditions during much of 2017 in northwest Minnesota resulted in low lake and river levels across the region heading into winter. Lake levels are not expected to rebound

appreciably this spring. Water temperatures will be very cold for the opener. Fish spawning activity is expected to be behind normal. Traditional walleye opener lakes that tend to have earlier ice out dates with large expanses of shallow water and those with streams and rivers flowing through them will be the best bets for the opener. Anglers fishing lakes that are prone to winterkill on severe

winters should check with local DNR Fisheries offices to make sure their lakes did not succumb to winterkill.

Walleye populations in our natural walleye lakes and many of our stocked lakes have excellent abundance and fish of a variety of sizes. Various strong year-classes of walleye are common across most of our natural walleye lakes and stocking efforts have contributed to good success on others. Walleye from good year-classes produced from 2013-2016 (14-18 inches) will comprise the bread and butter fish from most of our primary walleye lakes. There are also many lakes with walleye from the strong 2011 year class which will provide opportunities to catch quality sized walleye from 18-22 inches. Walleye Anglers can expect excellent walleye fishing on our large walleye lakes, particularly on Leech, Upper Red, Lake of the Woods and Cass lakes. The Walleye population on Leech remains strong and anglers can expect abundant walleye from 12-26 inches. Walleye numbers in Upper Red remain high. Multiple strong year-classes have produced many fish in the 12-18 inch size range. Protected slot limits remain in effect on Leech, Upper Red, Lake of the Woods and several secondary basins in the Region. Walleye abundance remains strong on Cass Lake. Walleye and Sauger abundance in Lake of the Woods are well above average with excellent size distributions. The Northwest Region also boasts arguably the best trophy Northern Pike lakes in the State of Minnesota: Lake of the Woods and Upper Red Lake. While the opening weekend is not typically prime time for big pike, anglers should not rule out an encounter with one of these brutes. Anglers are reminded that special regulations are in place to protect large pike on both of these waters and about 50 other lakes in the region.

New statewide Northern Pike regulations will be in effect for all waters except the above-referenced special regulation lakes. The new Northern Pike regulations are based on management "Zones" that have been tailored to the specific population characteristics of each zone. Much of Northwest Minnesota lies in the "North-Central Zone" which has the following regulations:

- Daily and possession limit of 10 pike
- Not more than 2 pike may be over 26 inches
- All pike from 22-26 inches must be released immediately

Each year, public accesses need a considerable amount of work to repair ice heave damage and to ensure accesses are in order for the opener. With late ice-out across the region our Parks and Trails staff will have limited time to fix-up the ramps and get the loading docks installed before the May 12 opener. Anglers are reminded to help prevent the spread of invasive species by inspecting their boats for invasive plants and animal, draining all water from their bilges and livewells and remembering to pull their drain plug before traveling down the road.

Here is a general opener forecast by management area, a few noteworthy lakes that could provide some exceptional fishing, and an overview of the status of the large walleye lakes.

Baudette

Rainy River: Each spring, Walleye migrate from Lake of the Woods to the Rainy River to spawn. Many of those fish are still in the river when the Walleye season opens in May. This can lead to some great fishing opportunities for anglers. And, although hundreds of anglers flock to Lake of the Woods for the annual Walleye opener, not many people fish on the Rainy River at that time of the year. The Rainy River and its tributaries are also home to a high quality Northern Pike population. Northern Pike fishing can be very good in spring and early summer. Besides great fishing, the Rainy River corridor can also offer some protection from the cold winds that often occur during the early part of the Walleye season. There are several public

boat ramps located along the Rainy River, and there is a public fishing pier located on Baudette Bay in the City of Baudette.

Lake Bronson: Located in northwestern Minnesota, Lake Bronson is 335-acre reservoir on the South Branch of the Two Rivers. Lake Bronson is located entirely within Lake Bronson State Park and is the only fishing lake in Kittson County. Two fishing piers are available within the park along with a concrete landing on the northwest end of the lake and a canoe access on the upstream end of the lake. As Lake Bronson lies within a state park, vehicle permits are required and can be acquired at the front gate. Lake Bronson offers some great fishing opportunities for several different species. Good numbers of quality-sized Walleye, Black Crappie, Northern Pike, and Yellow Perch provide inhabit Lake Bronson. In addition, a low-density population of Largemouth Bass can be found in the lake. Largemouth Bass opens on May 12 as catch and release only, with the opportunity to keep bass starting May 26.

Bemidji

General Outlook for Bemidji Area: Spring of 2018 is shaping up to be a later than usual spring. Exceptionally late ice out can delay walleye spawning, so some seasonal stream closures may be in place in the Bemidji Area. Late ice out can also delay spring maintenance work on boat landings subjected to winter ice damage. DNR Parks and Trails crews will be working to repair damaged boat ramps and installing launching docks ahead of the fishing opener rush.

Lake Bemidji, Beltrami County (6500 acres): Lake Bemidji is a relatively large natural Walleye Lake located directly adjacent to the City of Bemidji. There are numerous boat landing options including City Parks, Township landings and a DNR administered landing on the Northwest end of the lake. Lake Bemidji is primarily managed for Walleye, but no supplemental stocking is required. The population is closely monitored with frequent Fisheries Surveys to monitor the mature adult spawning population and with annual assessments of walleye spawning success.

The population is thriving with the most recent survey in 2017 measuring near 20 Walleye per gill net set. The dominant size group was 14-15 inches with solid representation through the 20 inch group. Annual assessments for young-of-the-year Walleye and the age distribution from the gill-net sample show some contribution from every year-class with normal variability in abundance. Other important fish species that contribute to the Lake Bemidji Fishery are Northern Pike, Muskellunge and Yellow Perch.

Lake Plantaganette, Hubbard County (2500 acres): Lake Plantaganette is another excellent destination Walleye lake in the Bemidji Fisheries management area. Two boat landing locations are available, with a Township landing on the North end and the primary DNR landing on the South end. Standard lake survey catch rates for Walleye are consistently high, with the most recent survey in 2017 resulting in 12.8 Walleye per gill-net set. Natural reproduction contributes to this population in non-stocked years, but age distribution shows improved contribution in alternate years from supplemental fry stocking. Like Lake Bemidji, Plantaganette is another one of the premier Walleye lakes in the Bemidji management area that has also been managed for Muskellunge since the 1980's. The track record of successful management for these two species for nearly four decades should eliminate concerns about negative effects of Muskellunge on a Walleye fishery. Other species commonly sought are Northern Pike, and Yellow Perch. Northern Pike abundance is low, which results in fast growth and quality size pike. Plantaganette is also known for quality size Perch with individuals over 10 inches fairly common.

Detroit Lakes

General Outlook for the Detroit Lakes Area: As of early April, things are shaping up for a late spring. Some concentration of the snow pack on area lakes has occurred but little actual melting. The snow cover and weather in the end of March and early April is critical in determining the amount of winterkill some of

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