

Fishing in Minnesota's Northwest Region . . .

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more value to the gene pool than it does as a fillet. Generally, a 25-inch long Walleye is about 10 to 15 years old, and a 30-inch Walleye is over 20 years old.

Overall Sauger abundance increased to the highest level since 2010 due to strong year classes produced in 2011,

2014, and 2015. Sauger length ranged from 6-18 inches with good numbers in the 12-15 inch range.

Anglers should be aware of special fishing regulations on Lake of the Woods. These regulations are designed to maintain a quality fishery and fishing experience. The combined Walleye-Sauger limit is six, but no more than four

of those fish may be Walleye. All Walleye between 19.5 and 28 inches in length must be immediately released, and only one Walleye longer than 28 inches may be possessed.

Northern Pike are frequently overlooked by many anglers on Lake of the Woods. Both Lake of the Woods and the Rainy River support populations of trophy pike, with individuals over 40 inches long. The Northern Pike season is open continuously on Lake of the Woods and the Rainy River. The period immediately after ice-out is an excellent time to participate in this fishery. Anglers who would like to target Northern Pike should focus their efforts near spawning sites. Major spawning sites are Bostic Creek, Zippel Bay, and the Warroad River in addition to the Rainy River proper. Northern Pike are also managed by special regulation. The possession limit is three. All Northern Pike from 30 to 40 inches long must be released immediately. An angler may possess one Northern Pike over 40 inches long.

Lake Sturgeon are another species that anglers may encounter, particularly if fishing the lower reaches of the Rainy River or Fourmile Bay. Sturgeon are highly vulnerable to over-harvest, so the regulations governing the harvest of these fish are fairly restrictive. Anglers that have purchased a Lake Sturgeon Harvest Tag may harvest one Lake Sturgeon per calendar year. The harvest season runs from April 24 to May 7, and from July 1 to September 30. Anglers may catch and release fish for sturgeon from May 8 to May 15, and from October 1 through the following April 23. The Lake Sturgeon season is closed from May 16 to June 30, so anglers cannot fish for sturgeon during this period. Only Lake Sturgeon from 45 to 50 inches long, or over 75 inches long, may be harvested.

Anglers should also be aware that Lake Sturgeon regulations are much more restrictive in Ontario. Sturgeon are classified as "Threatened" and the fishing season

is closed. You may not harvest, or fish for, sturgeon on the Ontario portions of Lake of the Woods and the Rainy River. If you are fishing for Lake Sturgeon, know which side of the border you are on.

Spiny water flea, an invasive species, was discovered in Lake of the Woods in 2007, so Lake of the Woods and the Rainy River have been designated as infested waters. With this infestation, anglers have an obligation to prevent the spread of this invading species to other water bodies. Spiny water fleas are predators that will compete with young Walleye, Sauger and Yellow Perch for food resources. They are a highly undesirable species in any water body. Anglers must make sure they do not transport any lake water in their boats. Bilges, live wells and bait wells must all be drained at boat landings, and boat has to be trailered with all of the plugs out. Also, spiny water flea tends to wrap around fishing line and anchor rope, so anglers must clean their fishing equipment when leaving the lake or river. Check the DNR web site for more specific information of how to prevent the spread of spiny water flea.

Cass Lake: Cass Lake, and connected waters, are typically a good choice for early season Walleye fishing, particularly in years when ice out is later, like things are shaping up for this year. During these late years, fishing near the Mississippi or Turtle River mouths can be very productive – particularly in the early morning or evening. The inlets and outlets of the connected waters are also popular. The Walleye population is healthy and comprised of good numbers of fish distributed among many different size and age classes. Angler catch rates should be good, with an abundance of fish from the strong 2013 year-class that are in the 17- to 19-inch range. There are also a number of fish in the low- to mid-twenties. Although night fishing has been popular on Cass Lake for a number of years the water, which was already clear, has gotten even clearer from the recent zebra mussel invasion. As a result, fishing when there is a chop on the water or during low light periods tends to most productive.

The Northern Pike popu-

lation is at average levels of abundance with good numbers of fish between 22 and 30 inches. Cass Lake generally produces a few trophy Northern Pike each year as well. Cass is also well known as a premier native Muskellunge lake and anglers catch a wide size range of fish, with some topping 50 inches. Anglers are reminded that the statewide Muskellunge season opens on June 1st and the statewide minimum length limit is 54 inches.

Yellow Perch numbers in Cass Lake are similar to the long-term average, and growth rates have improved. As a result, there is excellent opportunity to find some quality sized Yellow Perch. Fishing this past winter was above average and this is expected to continue into the open-water season.

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 20 inches allowed in possession. These regulations are intended to take advantage of the abundance of fish in the 17- to 20-inch range in the lake and reduce the mature female population to what we consider the "optimal" level. 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 and a few more fish in the low twenties have been caught over the past year. Be prepared to accurately measure your catch by having the proper tools in your boat. 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.

Anglers interested in catch-

ing 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 and the number of fish over 40 inches in the most recent assessment improved as well.

Anglers should 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 Zebra Mussel veligers (i.e., larvae) were recently discovered. No adults have been found at this point, but it is believed to be a reproducing population. Also, 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 2019 fishing outlook on Leech Lake looks promising, similar to the past few years. Walleye numbers are above several current management goals. The 2018 catch rates of Walleye (10.2 fish/net) was just above the management goal of 7 to 10 fish/net with fish ranging from 7 to 27 inches

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