



Focus on Aitkin Area

# Fisheries



DEPARTMENT OF  
NATURAL RESOURCES

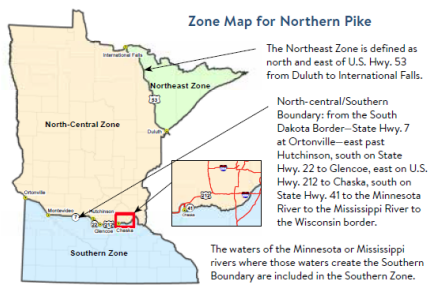
A NEWSLETTER OF THE MINNESOTA DNR AITKIN AREA FISHERIES OFFICE

JANUARY, 2018

## New Pike Regulations...starting in March

By Rick Bruesewitz

If you haven't already heard, the statewide pike regulations are changing on March 1 (or for our area, next opener). These new regulations are specific to three new zones across the state. The Southern, North-Central, and Northeast parts of Minnesota will now each have a different regulation.



As you can see by the map, the Aitkin area is entirely within the North-Central Zone, where the regulation will be as follows:

### Starting March 1, 2018.

- **Angling:** The limit is 10, with no more than 2 over 26", and all from 22-26" must be immediately released.
- **Dark-house spearing:** The limit is 10, with only 1 between 22-26" or only 2 over 26".

Additionally, the special regulations at Long Lake (1-89) and Sissabagamah Lake (1-129)

have been removed. This means you will need to follow the new zone regulation for these waters starting next spring.

The regulations at Sissabagama were one of the longest on the books, starting in 1991. While the old regulation (20-30" protected slot) did increase the number of fish from 20-30 inches, it was also at a cost of a significant amount of harvest lost to anglers and spears. The new zone regulation, with its 22-26" protected slot should work similarly to maintain a decent number of medium size fish, but will also allow for greater harvest opportunities for those nicer sized keepers, starting at 26". Plus the limit is 10, so if you want a bunch of smaller fish (under 22") to pickle, they are there for the taking! Additionally, for you spears, there will be allowed a "grace" fish allowed in the slot, but it will be at a cost of one of those over 26 inches.

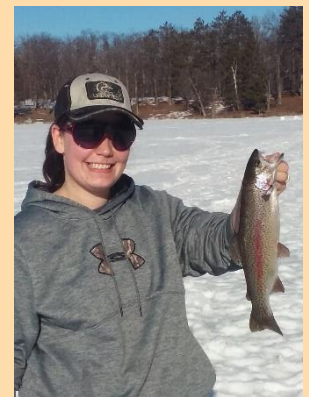
In the meantime, for this current winter fishery the limit is still three fish, and the special regs on Long and Sissabagamah still apply. You'll have to wait until this year's opener to take advantage of the new rules.

This and all future issues will be posted on the Aitkin Fisheries website at: [DNR FISHERIES LINK](#). I look forward to your feedback and suggested topics for future issues. You can contact our office by email at <mailto:aitkin.fisheries@state.mn.us>.

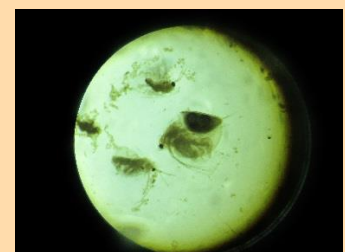
### TINY TIDBITS

*A happy angler with a nice Rainbow Trout on an Aitkin Area Lake. While by no means "Tiny" this Rainbow has grown big eating "Tiny" organisms called zooplankton.*

*Specifically, a common diet item for them are Water Fleas (Daphnia spp.)! These tiny creatures, while related to their invasive cousin (Spiny Water Fleas) are extremely important as food for a variety of fish.*



**Did you know that...** The combined weight of Daphnia and all the rest of the zooplankton likely exceed the weight of all your favorite fish in that same lake?



*Photo micrograph of Daphnia spp. from the stomach of a Rainbow Trout caught last winter in an Aitkin area lake.*

By Kris Nissen

Hi, my name is Kris Nissen, I have been a Fisheries Technician at Aitkin for eleven years. While most of our field work is during the open water seasons, we occasionally need to work on the



**Popular portable "buddy" style propane heater used for ice fishing.**

ice. Between work and my own personal ice fishing with a portable flip over style fish house I like to stay mobile. I also like staying warm.

Doing so in sub-zero temperatures can be a trick, but I have found

that propane "buddy" or "sunflower" style heaters work really well to keep you comfortable. However, I do get really grumpy after a long walk or snowmobile ride to my fishing spot and find that my "buddy" heater doesn't want to work!

One of the most important tips to keeping your "buddy" style heater working is to keep the ignitor area and ceramic plates dry. If your heater falls off your sled into the snow, or if spray from your snowmobile accumulates on your heater you might be rather cold until you can get it dried out.

You can also give your heater a little tune up with some simple cleaning and maintenance. I learned how to do this from a You Tube video from the manufacturer of my "buddy" style heater.



**Pilot flame should be blue and sharp, indicating the pilot thermal couple is clean and operating properly. [Click here to link to a You Tube video on maintenance.](#)**

1. Clean the grates and intake vents by vacuuming or by blowing with a compressed air computer duster.

2. Inspect the pilot flame. It should be blue and sharp. If the pilot flame is yellow, you should clean the pilot tube. Carefully remove the metal grate in front of the heater to gain access to the pilot tube. Take a cotton swab and remove some cotton from the end so it will fit in the pilot tube. Dip the altered cotton swab in isopropyl alcohol, then thoroughly clean the pilot tube with the cotton swab. Using the extension on a compressed air computer duster, blow out the pilot tube.

3. Reinstall the grate and give it a try.

I sure hope some of these tips help to keep your heater working and you fishing in comfort.

# 2017-18 Ice fishing Outlook for the Aitkin Area



By Alisha Hallam

**G**rab your gear and get out there! Hard water fishing in the Aitkin Area has begun and ice on our area lakes came and went and then came again early this season. Ice is never 100% safe, and the ever-changing weather had made for some very unpredictable ice conditions through most of December. With the long recent cold snap, ice thickness should be good enough to wet a line on most lakes in the area, but please be aware that the ice is never the same across one body of water and you should always check as you go.

During the winter, walleyes can be found on your typical open-water structures including reefs, points, bars, and saddles. Points tend to be one of the better structures in the winter especially late winter when located near windswept shoreline rubble, as the walleyes will be staging for ice out near spawning habitat. Reefs will have some walleye hanging around, but large complex humps with shallow flats for feeding will usually be much more productive than smaller, more isolated humps. Some lakes in the area with decent walleye populations include Farm Island, Hill, Big Sandy, Minnewawa, Waukenabo, Esquagamah, Round (West of Palisade), Round (North of Garrison) and Cedar Lakes.

Crappies in the winter can often be found in the vegetation or in deeper pockets of confined open water. It doesn't hurt to start and stop your search for slabs in the vegetation - . Big Sandy, Waukenabo, Flemming, Dam, Ripple, and Hanging Kettle are just a few of the lakes in Aitkin County with healthy crappie populations. Check out the article about crappies on the next page.

Whether you are catching them on your favorite rod, enjoying the show through your spear hole, or watching for a flag to fly, fishing for northern pike in the winter can be a lot of fun. Some lakes with good populations around the area are French, Sugar, Esquagamah, and Flemming. Big Sandy, Cedar, and Big Pine are a few of the lakes that can produce some large memorable pike, but you'll have to be pretty patient.

Trout fishing in the winter can be very exciting! Their season begins January 13 and runs thru April 1, 2018. Trout are a cold-water fish and

thrive under the ice. Although they tend to be more active in shallow waters in the winter, trout will utilize different depths so be sure to fish the entire water column. Baits or lures typical for crappie, bluegill and walleye work well for trout too. Blue, Taylor, and Loon are all decent lakes. Since Taylor and Loon are "designated trout lakes", they do have more restrictions such as no live minnows and one line only, so check out the [Regulation Synopsis](#) for all the details (Stream Trout Regs start on Pg 23).

Also, don't forget there are special regulations on a number of area lakes, including Big Sandy and connecting waters, Farm Island, Long (near Glen) and Sissabagamah Lakes. Remember CPR (Catch/Photo/Release) for those big ones you catch! Once a population suffers from poor size structure, which is often due to over harvest, it is a long and difficult process to reverse the trend. With recycling of these large fish, the next time you or your kids are out in the same area you'll have another chance at catching a trophy, which may be even bigger the second time around.

The most important thing we ask is that everyone stay safe and have fun during this hard-water season – Check out our ice safety article for some suggested precautions and other advice!

From all of us at the Aitkin Fisheries Office, Good luck and have a great year of fishing!



**Fisheries Specialist Alisha Hallam (right) and our Office and Administrative Specialist Lisa Sanderson with some fruits of their mid-winter recreation.**



# Ice Safety

Many factors other than thickness can cause ice to be unsafe.

White ice or "snow ice" is only about half as strong as new clear ice. Double these thickness guidelines when traveling on white ice.

## Under 4" - STAY OFF

4" - Ice fishing or other activities on foot

5" - 7" - Snowmobile or ATV

8" - 12" - Car or small pickup

12" - 15" - Medium truck



## What to do if you fall through:

- **First, do your best not to panic.** This will be very hard but VERY important, take a few moments to get your breathing under control.
- **Do not remove your winter clothing.** Heavy clothes, especially a snowmobile suit, won't drag you down, but instead can trap air to provide warmth and flotation.
- **Turn toward the way you came from.**
- **Place your hands and arms on the unbroken surface.** Use ice picks to secure yourself, if you have them.
- **Kick your feet and pull yourself with your ice picks back onto the solid ice.**
- **Lie flat on the ice once you are out and roll away from the hole.**
- **Get to a warm, dry, sheltered area and re-warm yourself immediately.** Having dry clothes with can help prevent more serious hypothermia. In moderate to severe cases you must seek medical attention. The shock of chilled blood rushing back from your extremities may cause ventricular fibrillation leading to a heart attack and death!



[Man pulling himself to safety with ice picks](#) [Click to watch video](#)

## Helping someone else who has fallen through the ice:

- **First, call 911 for help.**
- **Do not run up to the edge of the hole.**
- **Shout to the victim to encourage them to fight to survive and reassure them that help is on the way.**
- **If you can safely reach the victim from shore, extend an object such as a rope to the victim.** If the person starts to pull you in, release your grip on the object and start over.
- **Toss one end of a rope or something that will float to the victim.** Have them tie the rope around themselves before they are too weakened by the cold to grasp it.
- **Find a light boat to push across the ice ahead of you.** Push it to the edge of the hole, get into the boat and pull the victim in over the bow. It's not a bad idea to attach some rope to the boat, so others can help pull you and the victim to safety.
- **A non-professional shouldn't go out on the ice to perform a rescue unless all other basic rescue techniques have been ruled out.**
- **If it is too dangerous, wait for help** and keep reassuring the victim that help is on the way and urge them to fight to survive. Rescue attempts by untrained rescuers sometimes result in two deaths.

## Guidelines for traveling on ice:



- **Do some research!** Check for known thin ice areas with a local resort or bait shop.
- **Test the thickness.** Do this yourself at least every 150 feet using an ice chisel, ice auger or even a cordless 1/4 inch drill with a long bit.
- **Escape before it sinks, not after!** If in a vehicle, be prepared to leave it in a hurry-- keep windows down and have a simple emergency plan of action you have discussed with your passengers.
- **Wear a life vest under your winter gear.**  
Or wear one of the new flotation snowmobile suits.

**CAUTION: Do NOT wear a flotation device when traveling across the ice in an enclosed vehicle!**

- **Avoid Alcohol!**  
Even "just a couple of beers" are enough to cause a careless error in judgment that could cost you your life. Also, alcohol actually makes you colder rather than warming you up.
- **Don't "overdrive" your snowmobile's headlight.**  
At even 30 miles per hour, it can take a much longer distance to stop on ice than your headlight shines. Many fatal snowmobile through-the-ice accidents occur because the machine was traveling too fast for the operator to stop when the when the headlamp illuminated the hole in the ice.



# Black Crappie

(*Pomoxis nigromaculatus*)

By Greg Berg

**C**rappies are King in Aitkin County!

Luckily for us a large majority of the lakes in our area are considered bass/panfish lakes, an environment where crappies thrive. Here is a little information about this highly sought panfish species that I hope you find interesting.

## Crappie Biology

Black crappies are members of the sunfish family, which also includes bluegill, rock bass, and large and smallmouth bass. Seasonally, crappies have fairly predictable patterns, such as moving into shallow bays as the water warms in spring to feed on minnows, newly emerging insects and other prey, or when they move into the deep basins as winter approaches. Young crappies typically eat small aquatic invertebrates, and while adults can continue to feed on tiny morsels like zooplankton and insects they usually prefer a lot of small fish.

Once water temperatures warm to 60-65 degrees F crappies will seek areas to spawn. These locations are usually associated with emergent vegetation, a hard bottom and in depths from about one to six feet. Males build and guard nests, often in loose colonies, and then await females to complete the spawning ritual. Female crappie are mostly mature by age three and are quite prolific; a large female may produce well over 100,000 eggs, which she will likely deposit into several different males' nests. The males will then guard the nests until the hatched young begin to feed and disperse.

Crappie have some similarities to walleye. Both species travel in open water in schools, they feed more heavily in low light conditions (especially at dawn and dusk), their bite can be influenced by abundant prey, and they often exhibit strong and weak year class strengths resulting in boom and bust fishing cycles. When a strong year-class is predominant in a lake, crappies often appear to be all of the same size. When these fish grow large, the lake can gain a reputation as a crappie hot spot, but then quickly fade into mediocrity as the fish grow old and die or are harvested by anglers. This often then leaves only the next strong year class, which is usually much smaller at the time. Within a few years, this second year class grows to catchable sizes, thus repeating the crappie boom.



*Coarse woody habitat (fallen trees) surrounded by bulrushes makes for exceptionally good spawning and nursery habitat*

## Crappie Angling

Crappies tend to linger around shorelines and drop-offs throughout early summer and tend to be found on mid-lake structure or sunken islands during late summer and early fall. As mentioned earlier, when water temperatures cool and we head into the winter months, crappies tend to seek deeper basins in lakes, and depending on the lake can often be found suspended in these areas throughout the winter. When this happens, crappies can become extremely vulnerable to angling.

Modern anglers are very efficient at catching and harvesting crappies and when they find them, they are often capable of harvesting the majority of the keeper sized fish from some small lakes in a single winter season. High definition lake contour maps, powerful sonars with incredible technology, comfortable portable and permanent fish houses, snowmobiles and 4 wheelers capable of navigating deep snow and slush, and social media to convey "Hot Bite" info are just a few of the tools today's anglers have at their fingertips.



*Happy ice anglers with some nice crappie on a warm winter day.*

## Crappie Management

With all of this fishing pressure and advances in angler technology it's sometimes a wonder that any crappies are left in our lakes. Luckily environmental and geographic conditions have a way of balancing things out over time. For example, while one lake may experience heavy pressure in one year when conditions are good, due to poor ice conditions, heavy snow/slush or extreme cold anglers may be kept away for the next 2 years, essentially protecting fish during those periods and allowing a recovery. Luckily, we live in an area with many lakes with good crappie populations and so fishing effort does get spread out from season to season, setting up that exact scenario. Also, although in many lakes crappies may be in traditional spots such as the deep basins, certainly not all of them use that habitat so there is usually plenty of space not being fished that can offer them some refuge from the hordes of anglers.

Maintaining habitat is also key to quality crappie fisheries. Without good spawning grounds crappie populations would not be able to consistently recruit new year classes to the fishery eventually reducing the population and opportunities for anglers. Emergent vegetation such as hardstem bullrush is key for crappie spawning habitat and shoreline property owners are asked to practice good stewardship and follow DNR permitting guidelines when considering removal of aquatic plants. Coarse woody habitat (fallen trees etc.) is also used in a similar manner and so should be left in place if at all possible. If that tree falls in an area you need to keep free of trees, consider moving it to an alternate location rather than removing it.

Another tool for managing crappies that has been used in Minnesota is regulation. Typically, reduced bag limits or minimum size restrictions are used to moderate consistent, repeated heavy fishing pressure on quality systems. These regulations are designed to limit harvest and maintain or increase quality sized fish in these systems. At this time, there are no special or experimental regulations in Aitkin County.

All things considered, opportunities are plentiful for anglers to catch crappies year round in Aitkin County. You will find lakes with high numbers of small to medium sized fish, and if you do your homework you will also find lakes with lower densities that are capable of producing some real quality sized fish too.

Good luck with your crappie fishing!!