Duluth Area 2015 Fishing Report

St. Louis River Estuary
Although annual fisheries indexing of the estuary has not been completed since 2010, previous sampling efforts documented strong year-classes from 2001, 2003, 2005 and 2006. Additionally, anglers have reported another strong year-class emerging, which should be in the 13 to 15 inch range. There is also a good chance of landing a high-quality walleye from the strong 1997 and 1998 year-classes, which are still well represented in the system. Water clarity has declined over the last two years due to wetter conditions moving more bog-stained water from the watershed into the estuary. The darker water has resulted in the decline of aquatic vegetation, which seems to have increased the catchability of walleye compared to the clear water conditions observed during the recent drought. As usual, high quality fishing opportunities are available for other desirable species such as muskellunge, northern pike, smallmouth bass, black crappie and channel catfish. New for 2015 is a catch-and-release season for sturgeon that runs from March 1 – April 14, 2015 and June 16, 2015 – April 14, 2016.

Island Reservoir
Strong 2007, 2008 and 2009 walleye year-classes will result in good angling success. However, growth rates continue to be slow and size structure is poor, which means that fish less than 13 inches long will dominate the catch. A muskellunge assessment conducted in 2012 revealed a healthy population with many fish in the 45-50 inch class, including some fish over 50 inches. Angling for smallmouth bass and black crappie continues to improve.

Fish Lake Reservoir
Anglers should be aware that a special fishing regulation was implemented on Fish Lake Reservoir on December, 1 2012. All walleye less than 13” or larger than 17” must be immediately released, except one over 26” is allowed in possession. The possession limit has been reduced to three walleye. This regulation is intended to protect walleye spawning stock by reducing fishing mortality. MN DNR Fisheries is continuing to investigate potential factors contributing to the walleye decline with further monitoring and research. Angling for other desirable species such as black crappie and bluegill remains strong.

Fishing Opener Outlook for Finland Management Area
Finland Fisheries Management Area has numerous lakes with good walleye populations and a variety of sizes. However, early season walleye fishing can be challenging. Typically, the shallower, darker, and riverine lakes in the area provide the best walleye fishing early in the season. As water temperature increases in late May/early June the deeper, colder, and clearer lakes become more productive for walleye angling. Northern pike are abundant in many Finland Area lakes and generally provide for good angling action throughout the year. Lakes to consider for opener in the Finland Area include: Four Mile, Greenwood, and the McDougal Chain of Lakes.

Four Mile Lake: is 593 acres and has a maximum depth of 19.5 feet. There is a back-in concrete ramp, with a small dock at the public access on the north end of the lake. The U.S. Forest Service also maintains a four site campground (no fee) at this location with fire grate, picnic table and outhouse. Four Mile Lake has strong natural reproduction and the walleye numbers are well above average for the lake class. Northern pike, black crappie, and yellow perch are also present.

Greenwood Lake is 1329 acres and has a maximum depth of 7 feet. It is shallow with heavily bog stained water and the many boulders that can make boating hazardous. Access is a concrete ramp on the southwest end of the lake, off of Lake County Road #2. The walleye population in Greenwood Lake is above average for the lake class and anglers report good numbers of fish but the walleyes tend to run small. Northern pike numbers are average for the lake class.

McDougal Chain of Lakes: offers three lakes in one stop. A large USFS campground is located on North McDougal Lake along with a boat launch (concrete ramp) and ample parking. Middle McDougal and South McDougal lakes are accessed by traveling upstream (up to a moderate sized boat depending on water conditions) through an inlet on North McDougal. All of the lakes in the McDougal Lakes chain have dark brown bog stained water which can make fishing productive during the day, but can conceal the large underwater boulders. The walleye populations in these lakes are self-sustaining with average to above average numbers of walleye for their lake class. Northern pike, bluegill, and yellow perch can also be found in all three lakes.

Anglers that prefer a remote wilderness fishing experience might try the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW) lakes of Isabella, Kawishiwi, Bog, Perent, and Quadga Lakes. All these lakes are good bets early in the season and are also located near the edge of the BWCAW making a day trip feasible. Island and Isabella Rivers may also provide good river fishing within the BWCAW. Anglers seeking a wilderness fishing experience outside the BWCAW might try the Timber-Frear Loop. The Timber-Frear is a 15-mile loop of backcountry lakes (Whitefish, Elbow, Finger, Timber, Frear, and Lost Lake) that offers a wilderness type of canoe trip without wilderness regulation or the need for a permit. The walleye populations in these lakes are well above average for their lake class. Northern pike are also present in most of these lakes.
For anglers that may prefer to seek trout on opener the Finland Fisheries Management Area has numerous stream-trout lakes. Water temperatures in the area’s stream-trout lakes should be ideal and trout should be actively feeding. Lakes such as Hogback, Echo, and Hare Lakes have boats accesses suitable for small boats and canoes. While, lakes such as Divide, Sonju, and Section Eight require anglers to carry-in boats or canoes a short distance. Remote lake such as Eikela, Steer, Trappers, and Goldeneye Lakes will require a longer carry and best suited for canoe or float tube fishing. Anglers with ATVs can access Bean Lake near Silver Bay and Beaver Hut Lake near Babbitt.

Grand Marais - Ice-out dates in Cook County should be about normal in 2015, but water temps can still be cold. As result, the best walleye fishing will likely be found in the shallower lakes in the area that will warm more quickly. In several area lakes, strong year classes in 2010 and 2009 should drive some good fishing for small-to-medium sized walleye in 2013. Fishing on stream trout lakes in the area should be good in cold opening day water, and those lakes will provide another alternative, if walleye fishing is slow. Northern pike should also be active on opening day in shallow lakes and bays, so anglers who can be flexible in their plans should find some good fishing.

2015 Fishing Outlook for Aitkin Area

Big Sandy should also provide good opportunities for anglers to catch fish within the harvest slot of 14 to 18 inches and possibly a chance for the one over 26 inches allowed by the current regulation. Other area lakes, such as Esquagamah, Farm Island, Hill, Round (west of Palisade), and Round (near Garrison) Lakes, should also provide good opportunities for walleye anglers during the 2015 fishing season. Another option is the Mississippi River, which has a diverse fish community where anglers can target walleye, channel catfish, northern pike, smallmouth bass, suckers, and muskellunge. Muskie anglers may also want to visit Cedar or Mille Lacs Lakes, which have a more mature fish population that can reward persistence with a trophy sized fish. There are also a wide variety of other lakes across the county with good largemouth bass populations and opportunities to catch quality sized fish. The Aitkin area also boosts numerous lakes of different sizes with abundant populations of harvestable black crappie and bluegill. Northern pike are also a staple for anglers looking for a meal of fish. While the abundance of pike and bluegills has increased in many lakes in recent years, the size structure has also diminished over that same time. Anglers are encouraged to keep smaller sized fish (under 22”) and release larger fish to help preserve the quality of these resources for years to come. Once a population suffers from poor size structure, often due to over harvest, it is a long and difficult process to reverse the trend. We also ask anglers to do their part in preventing the spread of aquatic invasive species by remembering to clean-drain-dry each time you leave a lake. But the most important thing we ask is that everyone stay safe and have fun during the upcoming season – Wear your PFDS!

General Predictions for the International Falls Area
Fishing openers in the International Falls area are usually cold affairs and it is not unusual to find walleye that are still spawning. As a result, some anglers are successful by targeting spawning locations (rocky shorelines with clean gravel and cobble exposed to the prevailing winds). Locations with current (think rivers, inlets, and narrows) or physical features that block upstream migration of spawning fish (for example, dams and waterfalls) are also good for walleye this time of year. The Rainy River is well-known for its walleye fishing during the early spring season which closes on April 14th. Most anglers turn their attention to other waters when the regular season opens in mid-May. However, in a year like this with a normal or late spring, plenty of hungry walleye will still be available in the Rainy River on the May opener and you won’t have to fight the crowds.

All of the large border lakes contain populations of large, even trophy sized northern pike. The big pike can be elusive during summer months as they feed on cisco in the deep, cool water of these large lakes. During spring the big fish are spawning in shallow bays with aquatic vegetation and a lucky angler might find one hanging around these locations on the opener before warm summer temperatures send them back to deep water.

Many Area lakes saw good production of black crappie, bluegill and smallmouth bass in 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2010 which will provide alternative angling opportunities if the walleye don’t cooperate on opening day.

**Rainy Lake**

Local anglers know the best and most consistent walleye-angling success on Rainy Lake occurs during the summer when fish can be found on the mid-lake reefs. Rainy is a large, deep lake that warms up slowly. As a result, early season angling success sometimes lags behind the typical Minnesota Lake. However, that also means that when many lakes are experiencing the “dog days” of summer, walleye angling success really heats up on Rainy Lake!

The abundance of walleye over 17 inches has steadily increased during the past 30 years, meaning anglers are catching more quality sized fish. Fish over 17 inches in length have been protected by a slot limit since 1994 and now make up a significant portion of the angler’s catch.

Black crappie abundance fluctuates on Rainy Lake as on other Minnesota lakes. Most anglers begin their search for crappie in Black Bay. Good natural reproduction of black crappie in 2003, 2005, and 2006 will provide opportunities to catch black crappie measuring 11 to 15 inches long. Memorial Day weekend is usually the best time of year to try for the large crappies that Rainy Lake is famous for, but some anglers have success all summer long. Black Bay is a vast body of water with miles of productive habitat and shorelines, so you may have to cover some ground to find success. While you are searching, you might catch some nice walleye and northern pike too!

Rainy Lake continues to produce large, even trophy sized northern pike. Pike exceeding 40 inches in length are reported every year. Because Rainy Lake is on the Minnesota-Ontario border, the northern pike angling season is open year-round. This provides an early spring fishing opportunity before the regular walleye season opens. Look for big pike in shallow water in the spring of the year, but move to deeper water as the season progresses. Many walleye anglers fishing the reefs for walleye in mid-summer experience the thrill of an encounter with these large northern pike.

Rainy Lake consistently provides excellent smallmouth bass fishing. Fish from 12 to 18 inches long are commonly reported in DNR sampling and angler surveys. Smallmouth bass fishing is
usually best in the latter part of June, but good anglers catch trophy sized smallmouth bass all year long. Smallmouth bass fishing season is open continuously on Rainy Lake.

**Kabetogama Lake**

Kabetogama Lake usually becomes ice free about a week before Rainy Lake and warms quicker since it is smaller and not as deep. The earlier warm-up often results in good early season success for walleye anglers on Kabetogama. Much of the shoreline provides excellent walleye spawning habitat, so anglers don’t have to go far to find spawning concentrations of fish.

Anglers are reminded that Kabetogama and the other lakes within the Namakan Reservoir have an experimental regulation which requires the release of all walleye from 17 to 28 inches. One walleye over 28 inches long is allowed in a possession limit of six walleye and sauger combined, with no more than four walleye.

Sauger abundance on Kabetogama declined in the mid-2000’s, but stabilized in recent years due to consistent recruitment. A strong year-class of sauger produced in 2007 are of a size that most anglers will find acceptable. Sauger provide a nice bonus for walleye anglers who can keep two sauger in addition to the four walleye allowed in their daily bag limit.

Kabetogama Lake has a high-quality population of northern pike. The catch rate of 2.3 per net is above the long-term average for Kabetogama and higher than catches on similar lakes. Fish up to 46 inches long were sampled in DNR test nets, showing the trophy potential of this fishery. Yellow perch abundance stands at an all-time high on Kabetogama. A string of strong year-classes were produced from 2005 through 2009, leading to the current high abundance levels. Fish up to 12 inches long were sampled in our nets, a size which should be very acceptable to anglers. Smallmouth bass abundance has been increasing in the last several years and quality sized fish are present.

**Pelican Lake**

Pelican Lake near Orr is a relatively large (nearly 11,000 acre) lake with a diverse fishery that provides opportunities to catch northern pike, bass (largemouth and smallmouth), walleye, black crappie, and bluegill. Special regulations for northern pike and bass were first implemented in 1998. The northern pike regulation protects all fish from 24 to 36 inches and the bass regulation protects fish from 14 to 20 inches. A fish population assessment completed in 2012 indicates the fish community has responded well to these regulations, with increased size observed for both northern pike and bass. In addition, abundance of black crappie, bluegill, yellow perch, and walleye has generally increased. Walleye abundance was the highest ever observed on Pelican Lake in 2012 and the average weight of 2.4 pounds will make many Minnesota anglers smile. Black crappie abundance was in the top 25% for similar lakes and fish up to 13 inches were present in test nets. Bluegill abundance was average for lakes of this type and quality sized fish are available. Natural reproduction of bluegill, black crappie and bass was exceptionally strong in 2010, which promises good fishing opportunities on Pelican Lake in the years ahead.

**Brainerd Area Fishing Prognostication**

With over 400 lakes and several rivers and streams, the Brainerd lakes area boasts some of the most diverse fishing opportunities in the state. Much of the attention is focused on walleye fishing on the larger lakes in the area such as Gull, Pelican, Whitefish, North Long, and Round lakes where walleye fry stocking has produced good year classes of walleyes. Recent
assessments show many of these fish are 14”-20” and should provide good angling opportunities. Anglers looking for more scenic lakes on the opener may want to try Washburn or Big Thunder. Both have had strong walleye year classes in recent years. Many of these lakes also have nice northern pike populations. Of particular interest to anglers are the lakes with special regulations for northern pike, including Round (30” minimum size limit), East and West Rabbit, and Upper and Lower Mission (24”-36” protected slot limit).

While walleye and northern pike receive the bulk of angler’s attention, bass anglers will find numerous lakes with quality bass populations. The Gull and Whitefish chains attract numerous tournament anglers, but smaller lakes with high numbers of bass and the capacity to produce trophies over 20” are plentiful throughout the area.

A popular destination for trout anglers is the Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area near Crosby which has several mine pit lakes that are stocked with rainbow and brook trout. Angling is generally very good early in the season on these lakes. Fish can be caught from shore as well as from a boat. Trout can also be found in small natural lakes managed for stream trout in northern Crow Wing and southern Cass Counties. While most of the fish that are caught will be less than 12”, trout up to 5 lbs are present and may provide a pleasant surprise for some lucky anglers.

For anglers looking for a more rustic experience or to avoid the opening day crowds, there are several streams and rivers that can provide good angling opportunities. The Mississippi, Crow Wing, and Pine rivers all have good populations of bass and walleye and Stoney Brook offers the trout angler an opportunity to catch some very nice size trout. Anglers are reminded that a catch and release regulation for brook trout is in effect on Stoney Brook.

Grand Rapids

Traditional opener lakes for walleye in the Grand Rapids area include Bowstring, Split Hand, Swan, Round, and the Winnibigoshish/Cut Foot Sioux system. These lakes are large and productive. They are relatively shallow and tend to warm fast, often resulting in great early season action. The current fish population status is very good in all of these lakes. Anglers are reminded that the Winnibigoshish/Cut Foot walleye regulation is new for this year: all from 18-23 inches must be immediately released with one over 23 inches allowed in possession.

Anglers interested in northern pike will find many good options in the Grand Rapids area. Anglers looking for fast action and the chance to keep an expanded bag limit should consider Round, Sand, and Bowstring lakes. These lakes have an abundance of smaller pike and anglers can possess up to nine pike under 22 inches, while pike 22-36 inches must be immediately released. Lunker pike can be found in several area lakes including Swan, Trout, and Pokegama. Although these lakes do not have special pike regulations, anglers are encouraged to protect the resource by releasing pike over 22 inches. Spider, Coon-Sandwich, and North Star are other good lakes for catching a large pike. These lakes have a special regulation requiring the release of pike from 24-36 inches.

Anglers looking for a break from walleye or pike fishing will find excellent panfishing in the Grand Rapids area. Several area lakes will provide good bluegill and crappie action early in the season. Popular spring panfish locations include Split Hand, Bass, Graves,
and Dixon lakes. These lakes are known for big panfish and have a special 5 fish bag limit for bluegill. Split Hand also has a 5 fish bag limit for crappie.

Several lakes in the area are infested with invasive species including Eurasian milfoil, curly leaf pondweed, and faucet snails. Zebra mussels were recently found in Winnibigoshish. Anglers are reminded to drain their boats, live wells, and bait buckets and to transport their boat with the drain plug removed. The transportation of invasive species is illegal and anglers are encouraged to thoroughly wash their equipment before moving it into another lake.

_Tower Area Fishing Opener_

**Lake Vermilion**

Lake Vermilion is the site of the Governor's Fishing Opener and will offer a great opening day experience. With numerous public launch locations, anglers have a choice of where to access this lake that stretches between the towns of Cook and Tower.

Survey data showed continued strong net catches with lots of walleye up to 18 inches long due to strong year classes in 2007, 2010, and 2011. All walleye from 18 to 26 inches must be immediately released on Lake Vermilion due to a special regulation that includes a four walleye bag limit with only one fish over 26 inches allowed in possession. Walleye from strong year classes in 2002 and 2003 year classes are still present throughout the lake. These nine and ten year old fish are approaching four pounds or better. Anglers looking for a trophy picture may want to concentrate their fishing on the west end of the lake, where the big fish are most abundant.

If you are looking for something a little different, early season cool water temperatures make for excellent northern pike fishing. Lake Vermilion has a low density pike population but presents a good chance to catch a pike over 30 inches. The special regulation on northern pike requires all fish from 24 to 36 inches be released, only one allowed over 36 inches.

**Garden-Farm-South Farm Lakes**

Garden, Farm, and South Farm Lakes make up the reservoir that is formed by the dam at the outfall of Garden Lake. The 2,500 acre reservoir is located a few miles east of Winton. There are public boat ramps located on both Garden and Farm Lakes. South Farm is within the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness and there is 25-hp maximum on outboard motors. South Farm is accessed through the connecting channel from Farm Lake.

Special regulations on the reservoir require that all walleye from 17 to 26 inches be immediately released and only one walleye over 26 inches is allowed in possession. All northern pike from 24 to 36 inches must be released with only one allowed over 36 inches. These regulations in place since 2003 have resulted in both fisheries having a wide range of ages and sizes. Walleye catch in the 2012 surveys on these lakes were some of the highest seen, ranging from 3 to 10 per gill net. Anglers looking for fish under 18 inches can find good numbers on Garden and South Farm. Farm Lake walleye abundance was high across all size ranges up to 24
inches. Other species worth targeting in the reservoir are northern pike and smallmouth bass. Both species are found in lower numbers but at rewarding sizes.

**Whitewater Lake**

Whitewater Lake is a 1,212 acre reservoir located one mile west of Hoyt Lakes. The public access is located in the municipal campground on the east end of the lake. Two fishing piers, a picnic area, and restroom facilities are also available at this location.

The lake supports an abundant population of walleye. Walleye averaged 15 inches long based on Fisheries survey results. Whitewater has one of the most diverse fish populations in the area. In addition to northern pike, an angler may catch sunfish, crappie, yellow perch, largemouth bass, rock bass, three kinds of bullhead, or channel catfish.

**Lake Superior:** Anglers have already begun to target Kamloops rainbow trout on the shores of Lake Superior and anglers also kept a few coho salmon. Ice anglers enjoyed another rare season on the lake, but the ice and snow cover are already gone and the Spring trout runs are likely to happen in mid-April to mid-May, as usual, unless the weather turns bad. Lack of snow cover and rainfall has resulted in low flows in smaller North Shore streams, which hinders good fishing. As the water warms in late April and May boaters will venture onto the big lake to catch coho and chinook salmon and lake trout. Expect salmon and lake trout fishing to track closely with the warmer water as it moves from Duluth toward Grand Marais into the summer months. Salmon fishing success will probably be noticeably better than last year but not as impressive as in 2012 and 2013. Lake Trout fishing will probably be about average again this year, so you can anticipate catching fish, maybe even several fish or some big ones, if you put in the time. New this year are two regulation changes; spawn bags made from Lake Superior trout eggs are now legal, and transportation rules have changed for trout and salmon on Lake Superior. See the 2015 Minnesota Fishing Regulations booklet for more details.