

News Reel

Waterville Area Fisheries Newsletter

Spring 2019

Albert Lea to host Governor

Southern MN Opener

Albert Lea area lakes will host the 72nd annual Minnesota Governor's Fishing Opener for the first time this spring. The Governor's Fishing Opener has been a spring tradition since 1948. The last Governor's Fishing Opener held south of the twin cities metro area was in 1998. That year, Arne Carlson chased Walleye on the Mississippi River, near Red Wing.

Opener Facts

- Opening day is May 11th.
- Season opener for Walleye, Sauger, Northern Pike, and Trout (in lakes).
- Opening day for catch and release of Largemouth Bass and Smallmouth Bass.
- An estimated 500,000 anglers will fish on opening day.
- May 12th is Mother's Day, so take mom fishing. She won't need a license!
- First Governor's Opener was 1948... But, the Governor may or may not have even been there.
- 1974 Governor's Opener was held on French Lake.

Open House

The Waterville State Fish Hatchery will hold an Open House on Thursday, May 9th from 1 pm until 4 pm. We invite all to attend. Waterville Hatchery and Area staff will be giving tours of the hatchery and there will be exhibits explaining sampling gear, work boats, management techniques, a live fish display and much more including activities for the kids. We will have snacks and refreshments on hand. The hatchery is located 2 miles west of Waterville on County Road 14.

Albert Lea events

Friday:

- "Hooked on Broadway", downtown Albert Lea from 4:30 pm to 10:30 pm.
- Picnic and dance, downtown Albert Lea from 4:30 pm to 10:30 pm.

Saturday:

- Opening Ceremonies and Launch, Edgewater Park – Fountain Lake @ 8 a.m.
- Blue Zones Walk/Run, Fountain Lake @ 9 a.m.

ABOVE: Walleye fry hatch from eggs. Waterville produces about 43 million Walleye fry each spring. Fry are stocked throughout southern MN.

Life jacket reminders

We get a few calls every year regarding life jacket requirements. The [Boating Guide](#) explains life jacket requirements, but some folks still want clarification. Here is an attempt to clarify some of the most common questions we get.

- Life jackets **must** be accessible in an emergency. This means they can't be stored under an anchor or locked in a storage compartment.
- If you are driving or riding on a personal watercraft you **must** wear an appropriate life jacket.
- **Most** inflatable life jackets **must** be worn.
- Inflatable life jackets are only approved for persons **age 16 and over**.
- Kids **under 10** years of age **must** wear a life jacket at all times.
- Throwable floatation aides **must** be immediately available. In the open, not in a container. These are for throwing, not wearing, and will likely save someone else's life, not yours. That's why you need one even if you are the only person in the boat.
- Life jackets come in different sizes. Make sure yours fits properly.
- Life jackets with rips, tears, waterlogged, or broken buckles **must** be replaced.
- The label **must** say "U.S. Coast Guard approved".
- Read the label.

Of course, the best practice is to **WEAR IT** at all times.

<https://files.dnr.state.mn.us/rlp/regulations/boatwater/boatingguide.pdf>



Governor Dayton (behind windshield with his hand raised) and media at Green Lake during the 2018 Governor's Fishing Opener.

Outlook bright for angling in 2019

Lakes managed by the DNR Waterville Area Fisheries range from deep, stable lakes to prairie potholes - and provide a true variety of fishing opportunity for anglers.

Waterville Fisheries staff follow strategic lake management plans, conducting rotating lake surveys to monitor fish populations in Le Sueur, Blue Earth, Faribault, Waseca, Steele, Dodge, Freeborn, Mower, and Rice counties in southern Minnesota.

Below are some good spots to begin your search for fish in 2019. More detailed data can be found on our [2019 Fishing Outlook](#) available online or by request.

Walleye

Walleye are king in most of Minnesota and the Waterville Area is no different. Top bets for Walleye in 2019 include the usual lakes like Madison, Washington, and the Minnesota River. The Waterville area is also home to many boom/bust Walleye fisheries that are currently booming – check out Elysian or Crystal for Walleye sized just right for the frying pan. In search of something bigger than a meal? Madison, Bass, and East Jefferson boast populations with Walleye over 24 inches. Fountain Lake, in Albert Lea, has a relatively small walleye population, but if you can find fish odds are good they will be big.

Northern Pike

Northern Pike are maintained in many Waterville Area lakes by stocking and numbers are usually low because of limited habitat and low natural reproduction. However, low numbers of Northern Pike usually means bigger Northern Pike. Waterville Area lakes are part of the new Southern Zone. Anglers can only keep 2 Northern Pike that must be at least 24 inches long. Finding a 24 inch Northern Pike shouldn't be much of a problem, especially at lakes like Fountain or the German/Jefferson chain of lakes. Duck Lake also has the potential to kick out fish 30 inches and longer, as do Lura, Hunt, and Clear (near Waseca) to name just a few. St. Olaf Lake near New Richland has a 30 inch minimum size limit that will remain in effect.

Bluegill

Most lakes in the Waterville Area have Bluegills, but the best Bluegill lakes are the lakes with the best habitat. Anglers looking for Bluegills should first look for habitat, namely vegetation. Lakes with good vegetation such as Francis, St. Olaf, and the German/Jefferson chain are consistent Bluegill producers. Big Bluegills are often found in lakes with lower Bluegill numbers. Waterville area lakes capable of producing large Bluegills include German, and Roberds. Large Bluegills are hard to find anywhere in the state and deserve special attention,

and protection. Please practice selective harvest of large Bluegills – those large fish can be especially vulnerable in the spring and are not easily replaced.

Crappie

Anglers have plenty of choices for crappies in the Waterville Area. Crappies in the area are generally of the black variety, but some lakes in the area also have white crappies. The German/Jefferson chain of lakes has a healthy population of eater sized crappies. Clear Lake, in Waseca, has historically been known for abundant, but small crappies. However, crappie sizes have improved greatly on Clear Lake making it worth a trip. Large crappies, those fish over 12 inches in length, don't always show up in survey nets but rest assured, they are out there. Some lakes where large crappies were surveyed include Lura, Elysian, and Roberds.

Largemouth Bass

The Waterville Area is full of quality Largemouth Bass lakes. For fast action anglers should check out lakes with high bass numbers such as Reeds or Francis. Lakes with low to medium densities of bass such as Lura, East Jefferson, and Shields often offer the best crack at fish topping the 20 inch mark.

<https://files.dnr.state.mn.us/areas/fisheries/waterville/ice-outlook.pdf>

Lakes, management differ south to north

Minnesota's lakes, and our approach to fish management, changes a lot from north to south. Lakes in northern parts of the state are deeper, clearer, and generally have more complex habitat features. Many of these characteristics are controlled by the fact that watersheds and riparian areas in northern Minnesota are in a natural state and have not been significantly altered. The natural water filters, so to speak, are still in place.

Watersheds in the north are in a natural state, while watersheds in the south are significantly altered.

In general, lakes in the northern parts of the state are considered more stable and experience nominal changes from year to year. Fisheries management approaches can follow a more consistent pattern, and monitoring long term trends becomes very important to assure management actions are effective.

Shallow south

Lakes in the southern parts of the state are shallower, often turbid, contain more simple habitat features, and can be ex-

tremely dynamic. During a windy day in a shallow lake the wind energy can actually reach the bottom of lakes causing nutrient laden sediments to become re-suspended into the water column by wave action. This wind effect can drive an endless 'nutrient



Water clarity is the most obvious difference between northern lakes and southern lakes. Above: Sugar Lake in Itasca County. Below: West Jefferson Lake in Le Sueur County.



and sediment pump' that can accommodate algae blooms and decrease water clarity.

Reset Button

Natural events such as winterkill and drought historically were reset buttons

relied upon in the south to rejuvenate shallow lakes. Winterkill removed rough fish that destroy plants, while drought cycles exposed volatile sediments and consolidated them, making sediments less prone to re-suspend during windy days.

Plants also bring life back to lakes following winterkill and droughts. This blanket of plants creates a barrier to sediment and nutrients, keeping the water clearer for longer, and improving fish and wildlife habitat.

Managers Adapt

These dynamics of shallow lakes means habitat conditions change from year-to-year, and often even day-to-day. Therefore, in the south moreso than in the north, fisheries management approaches need to maintain flexibility, must be more reliant on continuous stocking efforts, and follow a management approach that is more rapidly responsive because conditions are ever changing.

More to come

The differences in watersheds, lakes, and fish management north to south are important concepts for anglers and landowners to understand. We will explore these topics in greater detail in future editions of News Reel.

-Craig Soupir, area supervisor

Using genetics to assess Pike regulations and stocking

Northern Pike limits were changed at the beginning of the 2018 fishing season. To evaluate new regulations we age the fish we collect in our standard summer sampling. We are able to tell how old Northern Pike are by looking at the number of lines on a bone called the cleithra.

Genetic questions

Unfortunately northern pike are very difficult to age. To help us with this problem we started taking scale samples from fish we spawn in the hatchery each spring. The scales are sent to a geneticist who is able to read the DNA and put that information into a database.

In 2019 we will begin collecting scales

and cleithra from every Northern Pike sampled at several area lakes during surveys. The scales will be sent for genetic testing to determine if and when the fish was stocked.



A large Northern Pike from French Lake.

Genetic answers

The geneticist is able to tell stocked fish from non-stocked fish because they know the DNA signatures of the parents. Using this information we hope we will be able to age Northern Pike more accurately.

Knowing the age of the fish will allow us to evaluate the new regulation by estimating age, growth, mortality and recruitment of Northern Pike in area lakes.

In the Waterville area we stock about 85% of our managed lakes with Northern Pike. Using genetics we will also be able to evaluate the stocking we do, and focus our efforts in places they are needed.

For example, if our genetic testing comes back and shows we have very few fish in a lake that were stocked we may be able to decrease or quit stocking that lake and focus more resources on a lake with no natural reproduction.

-Tyler Fellows, specialist

Bluegill management

Thin the herd?

Managers around the state are beginning to take a closer look at how Bluegill are managed in Minnesota. We will examine this issue in future editions of News Reel, but let's break it down quickly here.

Quick Points

- Anglers are not satisfied with Bluegill size.
- Bluegill limits were liberalized in the 1950s.
- Bluegill size declines began around the time limits were liberalized.
- **Thinning the herd is not Bluegill management;** anglers do not keep the right sized fish for this to be effective.
- Anglers only keep the biggest fish in

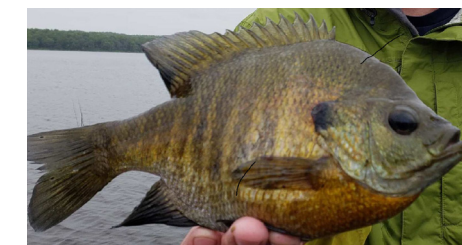
a lake. Harvest doesn't keep numbers down; it keeps size down.

- Harvest of large male Bluegills allows smaller, more numerous males to spawn.
- When male Bluegills don't have to grow large to spawn, they don't.

Angler harvest does not keep Bluegill numbers down, it only keeps Bluegill size down.

- More, smaller males spawning increases the population density. More fish means more small fish.
- Lakes with restrictive limits (5 or 10 fish) have seen improvements in Bluegill average size and maximum size.

- Releasing large male Bluegills is important to maintain quality Bluegill size.
- Keep medium sized fish; measure your fish!



Releasing large Bluegills helps maintain quality fishing.

Look for more Bluegill information in the May/June issue of the Minnesota Conservation Volunteer. Remember, Bluegill are not an infinite resource. So, enjoy a meal of medium sized fish and release the big ones.

WATERVILLE AREA FEATURES:

Fountain Lake in Albert Lea

Albert Lea is known as “Land Between the Lakes”. On the southeast side of Albert Lea sits Albert Lea Lake and on the north-west side is Fountain Lake. Fountain Lake is actually a reservoir created by a dam near downtown. Fountain Lake is only 521 acres in size, but feels bigger since it is divided into three main bays, Dane’s Bay, Edgewater Bay, and Bancroft Bay. Bancroft Bay is very shallow and difficult to access with a large boat, but is very popular with canoeists and kayakers and usually has excellent water clarity.

Stocked Fish

The Waterville Area DNR office manages Fountain Lake primarily for Walleye, Northern Pike, and Channel Catfish. Walleye fry are stocked during odd-numbered years and following winter-kill events. Northern Pike fry are stocked in even-numbered years unless there is a winterkill in which case the priority is to stock Walleye fry no matter the year. There

are also good populations of Bluegill, Black Crappie, and Largemouth Bass present.

Big fish

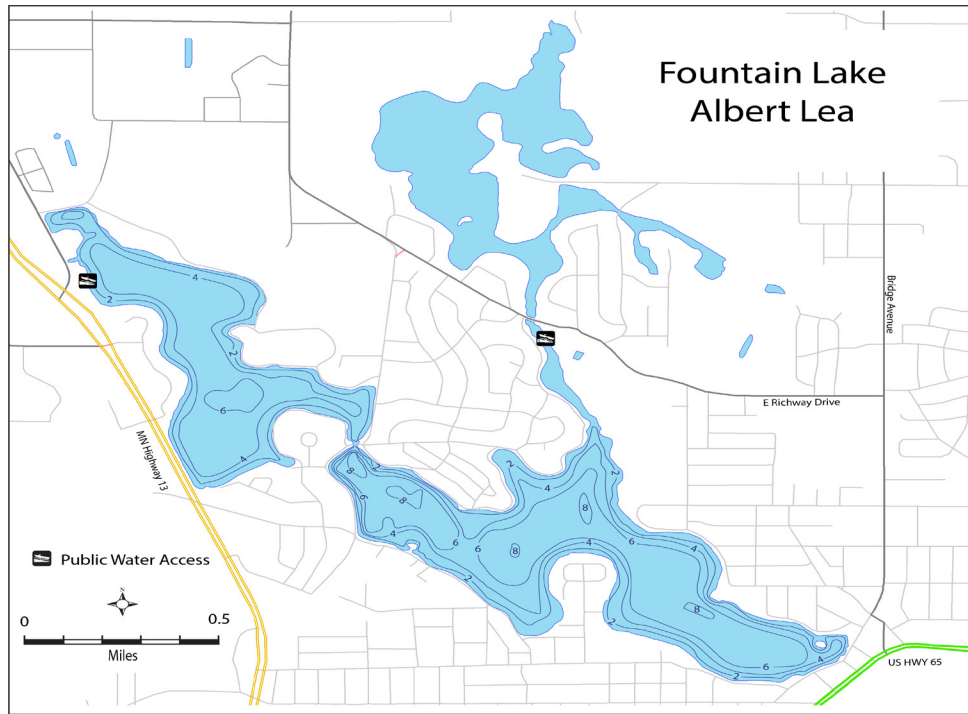
Preliminary data from the 2018 survey show strong numbers of Northern Pike,

inches in length and fish as big as 36 inches were sampled (also remember: Northern Pike must be at least 24 inches to harvest). Bluegills averaged 6.5 inches and ranged up to 8.5 inches while Black Crappies averaged 8.5 inches and ranged up to 12 inches.

Catfish

Fountain Lake also boasts a unique Channel Catfish opportunity. Channel Catfish exist in many rivers and streams in southern Minnesota, but not in most lakes. Channel Catfish up to 30 inches can be found in Fountain Lake and the average Channel Catfish was over 22 inches long.

Fountain Lake is surrounded by the city of Albert Lea and contains numerous parks, a swimming beach, multiple watercraft accesses, and even a waterski show team. For more information check out Fountain Lake on the DNR Lake Finder



Walleye, Black Crappie, and Bluegills in the lake. Walleye up to 26 inches were sampled and the average length was almost 21 inches (remember: only 1 Walleye over 20 inches is allowed). Northern Pike averaged 27

website.

<https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/lakefind/lake.html?id=24001800>

Shore fishing spots plentiful in Albert Lea

One advantage to fishing lakes located in urban areas is the many opportunities for shore fishing. Most Minnesota lakes are ringed with homes or cabins and Fountain Lake is no different. However, tucked among the homes and businesses of the city are parks, paths, bridges and other hide-aways perfect for casting a line. As a bonus, most of the shoreline of Foun-

tain Lake is steep and quickly drops into relatively deep water. This means you don't need to cast a country mile to reach fish.

Look for shore fishing opportunities at Edgewater Park, Pioneer Park, Lincoln Park, or Brookside Park. Shore fishing can also be found on Albert Lea Lake in the channel near Frank Hall Park or at the outlet of the Shell Rock River. Also, don't forget you can

fish without a license in Minnesota State Parks, so bring the rod and tackle box if you are camping at Myre-Big Island State Park.

For information on shore fishing opportunities in other parts of the Waterville area contact the Waterville Fisheries office or check out the Recreation Compass online. <https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/maps/compass/index.html>

To receive your complimentary copy of **NEWS REEL** or to submit topic ideas, contact Brandon Eder, newsletter editor, at brandon.eder@state.mn.us or call 507-362-4223 ext. 225.

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