News Reel

Waterville Area Fisheries newsletter Spring 2021 issue

Soup's Take

Why we don't stock crappies

Some fish species can't reproduce and need to be stocked. These most commonly include walleye and muskellunge in Southern Minnesota, but also northern pike in some situations.

The great thing about most lakes in Southern Minnesota is that common game fish species can naturally reproduce and sustain the fish population. That means stockings of most fish species only needs to be completed after winterkill events to re-establish brood fish (spawning adults). The brood fish including northern pike, crappie, bluegill, and largemouth bass take care of the re-establishing the fish populations naturally and there is typically little other stocking needed.

Stocking helps...

Northern pike are likely the most difficult to maintain given the lack of spawning habitat in most area lakes, which is why we have a unique within the state of Minnesota production program at Waterville State Fish Hatchery. However, crappie, sunfishes, and largemouth bass each flourish in area lakes and can sustain the populations naturally.

...But nature is better

Crappie in particular are a cyclical fish species. This means that populations rise and fall dramatically over time. These rises and falls in populations are the result, usually, of environmental conditions that align to favor crappie. The cyclical nature of crappie results in very large year classes (fish produced from a specific years spawn) being established, and then as that year-class achieves a size targeted by anglers the year class is harvested down while natural mortality also plays a factor, and the numbers slowly decline. This process repeats at the next time conditions are favorable. The bottom line is, it only takes a few crappie adults present in the lake to reproduce naturally.

So besides assuring the stocking of brood fish following winterkills, there really isn't anything more that can or needs to be done to manage crappies. Same goes for bluegill and bass, we only need to stock a low number of brood fish following winterkill and the species really take care of themselves.

Habitat, habitat, habitat

The most critical component of crappie, bluegill, and bass is maintaining good habitat within lakes. Unfortunately, many Lake Associations and Sportsman's Clubs have the perception that crappie, bluegill and bass need supplemental stocking to maintain the populations. This simply is not the case. Stocking of these fish species is wholly unwarranted and would not change the course of fish populations.

A better use of funding would be maintaining and improving in-lake and riparian habitat as well as developing programs to introduce kids to the sport of fishing.

-Craig Soupir, area supervisor
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ABOVE: The Waterville State Fish Hatchery ponds are among the first open water in the area each spring and attract a variety of waterfowl. While the birds are not always good for the water quality, they are a welcome site after a long winter.

New BLG reg @ Mazaska

Anglers headed to Shieldsville this spring need to remember there is a new Bluegill regulation in effect on Lake Mazaska. The new regulation is:

5 fish daily limit

The regulation is intended to protect declining numbers of bluegill and maintain the quality size of bluegill Mazaska is known for.

The new regulation was implemented after an in-depth public input process where approximately 80% of anglers interviewed were in favor of reductions in order to improve bluegill angling.

Signs will be posted at both public boat launches reminding anglers of the new regulation.

Anglers and boaters should also know the DNR owned public boat launch on HWY 21 will be closed this spring during road construction. Timing and duration are unknown at this time.

ABOVE: Example of special regulation sign posted at Lake Mazaska.

Creel results

A year-long angler creel survey was recently completed at Washington Lake and Lake Tetonka. During this creel survey anglers were asked a series of questions regarding what they caught, demographics, and satisfaction and expectations.

The creel survey ran from December, 2019 though November 2020. The schedule also included a short break in March and April during stay-at-home orders.

Creel surveys provide managers with information about anglers and what they catch. It is important anglers remember every day is a new day and the survey has no "memory" of who has been interviewed. Every time you are interviewed you are a "new" angler. Please provide info each time you are interviewed. Thank you.

-Brandon Eder, assistant area supervisor

Washington Lake

- 888 interviews
- 77,000 hours of pressure
- Bluegill most targeted species (32%)
- 23,000 bluegill harvested; average length = 8 in.
- 74% of bluegill harvested during open water
- 2,000 walleye harvested; average length = 15.7 in.
- 6,000 crappies harvested; average length = 10 in.
- 45% of crappie harvested in winter

Lake Tetonka

- 796 interviews
- 59,000 hours of pressure
- Walleye most targeted species (44%)
- 2,000 walleye harvested; average length = 13.5 in.
- 55% of walleye harvested during winter
- 3,600 bluegill harvested; average length = 7.3 in.
- 86% of bluegill harvested during open water
- 1,700 crappies harvested; average length = 10 in.
- 75% of crappie harvested in winter
- Percent of anglers from out-of-state: 4.5

A creel clerk measures a bluegill at the boat ramp.

Winterkills Happen, Naturally.

Historically, shallower lakes in southern MN went through winterkill and even drought/desiccation cycles. These are natural cycles!

Those cycles are the best thing for the health of a shallow lake. Natural events affect water quality, aquatic plant abundance and diversity, aquatic invertebrates, and the rest of the food chain that fish rely on.

Reset button

Winterkills eradicate fish and reset the populations, and that means we can better control the fish population in a lake following a winterkill. The high amount of nutrients in our lakes means lakes quickly re-populate so long as they are stocked with the proper species. Following winterkill, often lakes that did winterkill provide the best fisheries for the following 3 to 4 years.

As an example, in a shallow lake we rehabilitated and stocked with northern pike in April, those pike had achieved 24 inches in length by that same year in August. That is phenomenal growth!

To take that a step further, lower water levels encountered during a drought period are very good at rejuvenating a lake. The exposure of sediment on a lake bed can sometimes take 8 inches of muck and consolidate it down to 1 to 2 inches. When the lake refills those consolidated sediments are less likely to become suspended into the water column and the lake generally clears up, allowing aquatic plants to expand/diversify, and those plants serve as a buffer to protect the water clarity/quality, as well as provide habitat.

Let Nature Work

Shallow lakes are dynamic, and historically, the dynamic nature of shallow lakes has been what makes them higher quality. When we try to over-manage lakes with higher than normal water levels, drainage, and aeration systems we take some of 'natural' out of a lake and that has consequences on the entire system.

-Craig Soupir, area supervisor

ABOVE: A dissolved oxygen meter in action. The meter is reading 8.56 milligrams of oxygen per liter of water - a comfortable level for all local fish species.

Opener is coming...

Walleye

Lakes connected to the Cannon River produced good numbers of walleye in gill net surveys. Upper Sakatah, Lower Sakatah, and Cannon Lake all had good walleye numbers and size. Numbers were lower on Lake Tetonka but a creel survey showed strong walleye fishing during 2020. Plus, Tetonka's connection to Upper and Lower Sakatah means walleye are always nearby.

Ice anglers found many willing walleye on local lakes such as Lake Elysian and

Walleye time is here again!

Lake Crystal. Both lakes figure to be excellent choices for opening weekend - and beyond.

Northern Pike

Lura lake boasted record numbers of northern pike in the 2020 survey. Over 30 northern pike per gillnet were sampled in gill nets. Most fish in Lura were under the 24 inch minimum length limit but legal fish were present as well. Big fish are caught every year in the Waterville Area. Lunker hunters may want to try Lake Tetonka, Clear Lake (Waseca), or Steele Lake.

Reminder, Waterville area lakes are part of the new Southern Zone, which means anglers can only keep two northern pike that must be at least 24 inches long. St. Olaf Lake near New Richland has a 30 inch minimum.

Largemouth Bass

Largemouth bass sampling was limited in 2020. However, 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 Frances. Lakes with low to medium densities of bass such as Cedar, East Jefferson, and Duck often offer the best crack at fish topping the 20 inch mark. Anglers must release all bass from May 15th until May 28th.

Clear Lake in Waseca is catch and release only for all bass.

Everything else

Some anglers take exception to the term"opener" while pointing out (correctly) that many fish species have been open for weeks. Or, never closed.

Trout season for streams opens on April 17th. Stream anglers will have three options again this year. Both the trout ponds at St. Peter and Wolf Creek in Austin will be stocked with rainbow trout. Rice Creek, near Dundas, offers a strong population of beautiful brook trout.

Don't forget bluegills and crappies. Early May can be some of the best fishing for both species which are often found in shallow water this time of year.

Muskellunge season opens on June 5th.

Opener can also be a great time for crappie and bluegill while everyone else focuses on walleye.

Good luck to all anglers in 2021 and don't forget opening day is May 15th. Not May 8th!

-Brandon Eder, assistant area supervisor

2020 Lake Survey Summary

Waterville staff sampled 6,583 fish during the 2020 survey season (gill nets only). End-to-end those fish would stretch over 1 mile!

Composition by species:

- Yellow Perch - 21%
- Black Crappie - 20%
- Black Bullhead - 8%
- Freshwater Drum - 7%
- Northern Pike - 6%
- Walleye - 6%
- White Bass - 6%
- Bluegill - 4%

-Sky Wigen, fisheries specialist

Tale of the Tape

Longest fish measured, by species:

- Black Crappie: 14.6" Lura Lake
- Bluegill: 10.1" Roberds Lake
- Largemouth Bass: 20.9" Lura Lake
- Northern Pike: 38.5" Lura Lake
- Walleye: 27.7" Tetonka Lake
- White Bass: 17.8" Roberds Lake
- Yellow Perch: 11.2" Cannon Lake
- Muskellunge: 50.5" Roberds Lake
- Channel Cat: 35.0" Tetonka Lake

Jottings...

- Trout Opener is streams is **April 17th**.
- Work is being done at the St. Peter trout ponds. Use caution.
- General Fishing Opener is **May 15th**.
- Walleye eggs will be taken in 2021!
- Creel survey in progress at Shields Lake and Clear Lake (Waseca).
- Proposing new bluegill regs at Madison, Washington, and Shields. Comment online.

WATERVILLE AREA FEATURES:

Minnesota River

Untapped resource

Rivers are some of the most under-used fisheries in the Midwest because they are, by nature, intimidating water bodies. Access is often difficult, currents are unpredictable, and muddy water hides hazards such as rocks or trees lurking below the surface. However, anglers willing to explore these meandering water bodies find that, with a little research and caution, rivers often offer fantastic fishing opportunities.

The Waterville Area is home to many rivers, such as the Cannon River, the Le Sueur River, and the Blue Earth River, all teaming with fish. We are also lucky to have a portion of the Minnesota River in our backyard. The Minnesota River begins at Big Stone Lake and ends at Fort Snelling State Park – a 318 mile journey. Along the way, the river flows through a valley carved approximately 10,000 years ago, over riffles, around sweeping bends, and past small towns and cities. Tributaries joining the Minnesota River range from prairie creeks to trout streams. And through it all are fish – lots of fish, from familiar faces like the walleye to strange, prehistoric creatures like the paddlefish, shovelnose sturgeon, and longnose gar.

Loads of Opportunity

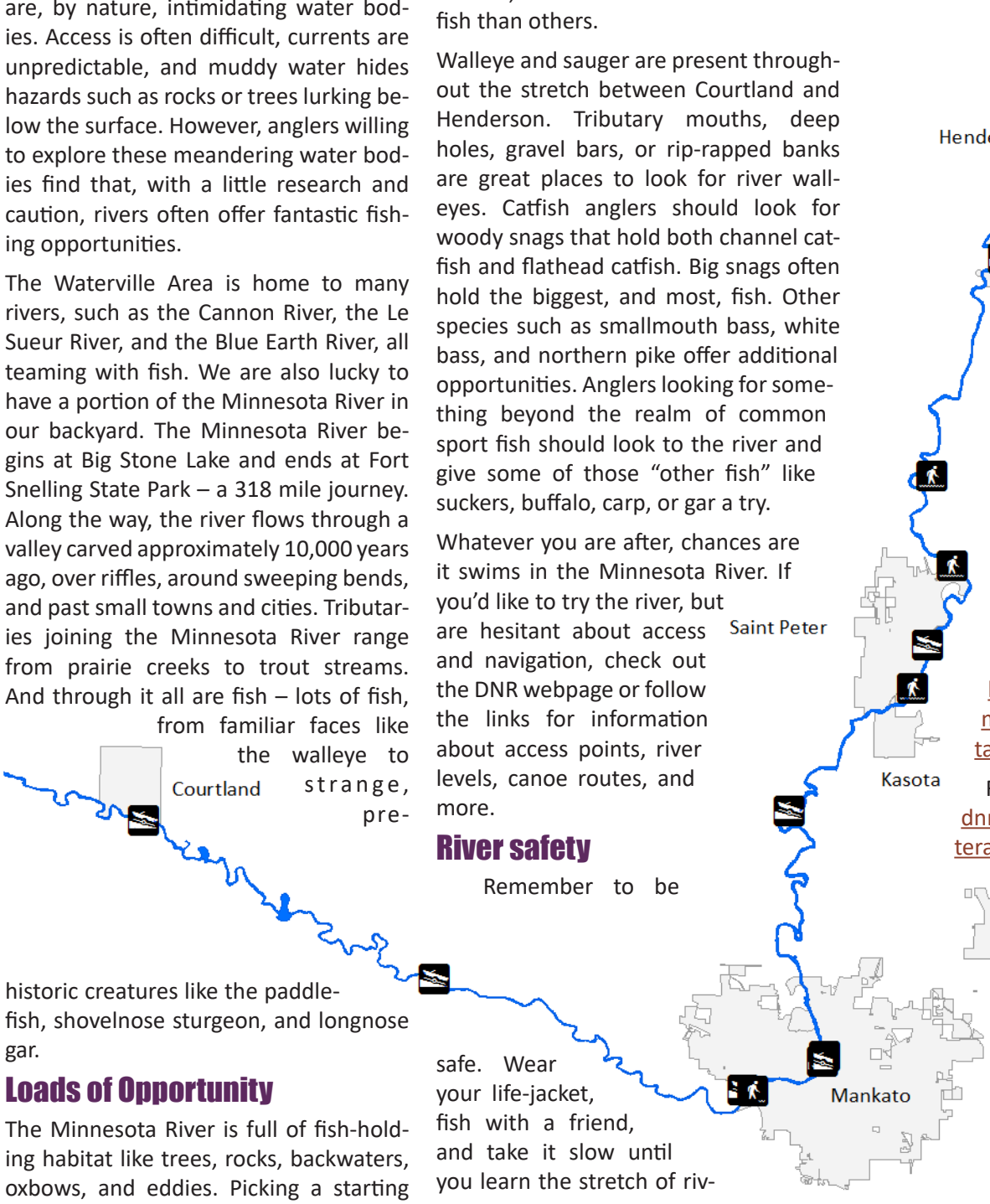
The Minnesota River is full of fish-holding habitat like trees, rocks, backwaters, oxbows, and eddies. Picking a starting point can be overwhelming on new water and every bend in the river is like moving to a new lake. However, just as in lakes, certain areas of rivers hold more fish than others.

Walleye and sauger are present throughout the stretch between Courtland and Henderson. Tributary mouths, deep holes, gravel bars, or rip-rapped banks are great places to look for river walleyes. Catfish anglers should look for woody snags that hold both channel catfish and flathead catfish. Big snags often hold the biggest, and most, fish. Other species such as smallmouth bass, white bass, and northern pike offer additional opportunities. Anglers looking for something beyond the realm of common sport fish should look to the river and give some of those "other fish" like suckers, buffalo, carp, or gar a try.

Whatever you are after, chances are it swims in the Minnesota River. If you'd like to try the river, but are hesitant about access and navigation, check out the DNR webpage or follow the links for information about access points, river levels, canoe routes, and more.

River safety

Remember to be safe. Wear your life-jacket, fish with a friend, and take it slow until you learn the stretch of river you are navigating. It's always a good idea to travel and fish upstream from where you accessed the river – that way if anything were to happen you will float back towards your vehicle, rather than away from it.



The Minnesota River is listed as infested and contains zebra mussels and invasive carp. Remember to help prevent the spread of invasive species by properly cleaning, draining, and drying your equipment and NEVER move fish from one waterbody to another.

Minnesota River info: https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/watertrails/minnesotariver/index.html

River levels: https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/watertrails/interactive_map/index.html

Canoe routes and access points: http://files.dnr.state.mn.us/maps/canoe_routes/minnesota3.pdf and http://files.dnr.state.mn.us/maps/canoe_routes/minnesota4.pdf

-Tony Sindt, Minnesota River specialist

To submit topic ideas contact Brandon Eder at brandon.eder@state.mn.us or call 507-497-1823.

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