



News Reel

Waterville Area Fisheries newsletter Spring 2023

Above: This Walleye was captured at Madison Lake on April 14th by DNR staff looking for Northern Pike. The fish was released to the lake and awaits a lucky angler on Opening Day!

Soup's Take

Waterville Fisheries hosted the inaugural FISHn (Fisheries Information SHaring network) meeting on February 28 in Mankato. Admittedly, it has been extremely difficult in these busy times to get anglers to attend meetings! DNR staff spent months organizing and trying to get the word out. There were many personal calls, texts, and social media posts inviting anglers and interested public to engage. There were positive stories highlighting the importance of serving one-another in our communities and how that is the pathway toward understanding each other and building relationships. There were also countless conversations building one-on-one relationships to earn trust. This was all not by accident, folks. The goal was to build positive momentum by inviting and involving anglers to engage in a two-way conversation about all aspects of fisheries in south central Minnesota. Well, based on follow-up from attendees the first FISHn meeting was a resounding success!

The DNR gratefully and sincerely thanks each of YOU for showing up and accommodating such a great meeting! As I said at the meeting, we will all be best served by continuing this form of positive relationship and in making

FISHn the foundation toward improving communication now and into the future.

On the topic of communicating and involving anglers in the fisheries conversation. We have attempted over the years in the NewsReel to include stories written by staff with various roles within the DNR. The purpose was to provide information from those that



Above: It was standing room only for the inaugural FISHn meeting held in Mankato on February 28th.

specialize in various aspects of DNR's work. More importantly, to bring awareness of various types of work and engage staff from outside the Waterville Fisheries Office in local outreach to learn and grow together. We are at the next step!

I am extremely excited to report that in this current issue of the NewsReel we have taken collaboration to a new

level. It is an honor to have two articles submitted by non-DNR staff. The first was written by a local avid angler (Jeff Groskruetz) whom has a passion to tell the story of how angling brings people together. The second article was written by Collin Nienhaus. Collin, a science teacher at Maple River Middle School, has a great knowledge of the Blue Earth River and its history to share with you. Both articles present another collaboration between the DNR and anglers to work together to share information. That is what FISHn is all about! If you have ideas for articles, please let us know.

As we enter another fishing season I ask that you be safe, be respectful, get out fishing, take someone who has never been fishing with you, and most importantly appreciate one another and the great Minnesota resources through fishing! Fishing truly is a universal language connecting us to the outdoors and one another!

Please, call or text me with your fishing stories or questions anytime, it's the best part of my day hearing from you!

-Craig Soupier, Waterville Area fisheries supervisor (craig.soupier@state.mn.us; 507-461-9377)

Making Memories

I have many great memories fishing with my grandparents. After a heavy rain, my grandfather would take me searching for nightcrawlers with a flashlight and a bucket. My grandpa picking up a particularly big one saying "This one will catch a big fish". I remember lining up, which seemed like hundreds of anglers in Morristown, MN for bullheads, with a cane pole in hand. Grandpa always using Dacron line attached to a three-way swivel with one line to a bell sinker and the other to a big hook. Grandpa always said you can feel the fish bite easier with this setup and I believed him. Then when we got home it seemed like hours of cleaning all those fish. The trophy of the day was eating grandma's fresh fried fish. I still get a smile thinking about those special days.

Our children grew up in our boat. Even as babies, we had a playpen in the back of the boat. My wife would pin a sheet to half of the top for shade and we would only bring toys along that would float. After fishing we drove around and scooped them up with a net. As they got older, I would let them pick out tackle at the bait shop. Our daughter loved to get pink jigs and tails. I had a tough time with that at first, until she was out fishing me. The memories of a lifetime can be so simple.

I made a game out of teaching our children how to cast a spinning rod and reel. I would set a five-gallon pail in the driveway with a washer attached to their fishing line. They spent hours casting trying to put the washer in the pail. For added incentive, I would pay them a quarter to hit the pail and a dollar when they put it in the bucket. That came to an end when it started costing me a lot of money. They learned fast!

Now as grandparents ourselves, we are taking our granddaughters out on the water. The oldest two are only a few months apart in age - four-years-old this past summer. We thought it would be best to only take one at a time for now. For safety reasons we cast out the bait and let them reel in the fish. We started them fishing for sunnies. Children don't really care how big fish are, just that there is a lot of action. I usually take them out when I believe there will be a hot bite. There is nothing worse than taking small children out and they get bored. They may not want to go again. We were lucky to have several 100 fish days, releasing most

of them back to the water. It's good to teach them the practice of catch and release. The screams of joy could be heard by many fishermen around us. The smiles on their faces said it all. They were having a great time!

We also got our granddaughters involved in cleaning the fish. They would pick them out of the pail and hand them to me, so I could filet them. I believe they should be involved in the whole process. Grandma would involve them in cooking the fish. They love eating fish made with love.



Grandma and granddaughter making memories.

A few suggestions for starting out young children. Go

to a lake close to home, you never know if the trip will last 15 minutes or three hours. Don't stay too long, when they lose interest, it's time to go home. Go where/when they can catch fish, they don't care how big they are. Take snacks and drinks, it will cover the times fish don't cooperate. You are making memories for a lifetime and stories that could be told for generations.

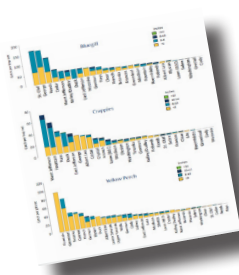
-Jeff A. Groskreutz, *RetroAngler*

2022 Lake Survey Summary

Waterville staff sampled over 22,000 fish during the 2022 lake survey season. That's over 2 miles of fish if you were measuring...and we were.

The longest fish measured was a 43.8-inch Longnose Gar from Lake Mazaska and the heaviest fish was a 13.9-pound Northern Pike from Reeds Lake.

-Sky Wigen, fisheries specialist



Check out all the results from our last 3 years of surveys in our 2023 [Fishing Outlook](#).

Does your catch measure up?

Longest fish by species in 2022:

- Black Crappie: 17.3 inches Duck Lake
- Bluegill: 9.7 inches Lake Mazaska
- Largemouth Bass: 20.2 inches St Olaf Lake
- Northern Pike: 39.5 inches Cedar Lake
- Walleye: 28.3 inches Cedar Lake
- White Bass: 18.6 inches Lake Mazaska
- Yellow Perch: 13.0 inches Gorman Lake

Changing Course: The Blue Earth River

**This article was adapted from "An Altered Prairie Stream: Fish Fauna Changes in Minnesota's Blue Earth River," American Currents (2022).*

The Blue Earth River is the Minnesota River's largest tributary. Under the radar angling opportunities exist for Walleye, Channel Catfish, Common Carp, and species like redhorse suckers. However, the river faces significant water quality problems, including high nutrient levels, erosion, and turbid water. Study of historical references indicates the river was once much cleaner and supported greater fish diversity prior to European settlement.

Clear Water

The French explorer Joseph Nicollet described the Blue Earth River twice in an 1838 expedition. A few miles southwest of modern-day Vernon Center on August 15, 1838, he wrote that the river's "waters are troubled and yellowish, as if yellow clay were in suspension." The river's pathway through the rich, fine clays and silts laid down by the former Glacial Lake Minnesota make it naturally susceptible to carrying sediment. However, a multi-agency report from 2016 estimates the current sediment load to be around double the historical load.

A second description by Nicollet's botanist crewmate Samuel Geyer occurred on September 25, 1838, near Amboy: "The river is about 28 yards wide at the crossing place, & 3 feet deep in an average [sic]. The water is very clear. The bed gravelly & very Swift Current." Nearly all of their other descriptions of Minnesota River basin streams matched this one.

Later, a description was given by the first biologist to study the fish of the Blue Earth River. Ulysses Cox surveyed the stream from 1892-96 for the U.S. Fisheries Commission and wrote the following:

"At Mankato it has a bed which is 200 feet in width, but the stream during the dry season narrows down to a mere brook not more than 10 feet in width on the ripples and having a depth of 6 inches or less. Notwithstanding...at the proper season bass and pike [i.e., smallmouth bass and walleye] fishing is excellent at various places...the water is pure (i.e., clear) but warm."

Cox also noted a "clear" and "quite pure" Minnesota River upstream of Mankato. Here, he stated that the river was less than 40 feet wide for much of the year. Downstream of the city, however, raw sewage was noted to kill off most life during low water periods.

Channel Changes

Like the Minnesota River, the Blue Earth has gotten bigger over the years. This increase in streamflow is attributable to the loss of sponge-like native prairies and wetlands. The conventional goal for stormwater management has been to flush it away as quickly as possible through tile and ditches. Excessive flows result in excessive erosion and wider, shallower streams. These aggraded channels feature fewer deep pools and higher temperatures, both negatives for most fish species.

Lost Fish Species

There have been 73 fish species sampled from the Blue Earth River from Cox's time until present. Of these 73, an estimated 12 species, like Rock Bass and Rainbow Darter, are gone from the river. All are associated with clean water.



Above: A Rock Bass.

The river has also gained two species: Common Carp and Yellow Bass. Cox did not sample carp in the 1890s; in 2017 MPCA electrofishing surveys, Common Carp made up a staggering 56% of the river's fish by weight.

Smallmouth Bass

Historically, the dominant gamefish species of the Blue Earth River was the smallmouth bass. MN DNR biologist Jerome Kuehn conducted a study in 1948 and wrote, "Smallmouth bass fishing is reported to have been excellent prior to 1938-40." This is in agreement with Cox, who in 1896 stated the species was "common . . . many fine specimens are taken with hook and line."

Today, Smallmouth Bass are encountered rarely below Rapidan Dam. This species is a sight-feeder that requires clear water to feed and stable early summer flows to spawn. Unfortunately, the Blue Earth River is probably a long way from being able to support a healthy population again.

Moving Forward

Today's dominant gamefish is the Walleye. It has been able to withstand the changes wrought upon the river. It feeds in darkness, whether that be created by cloudy water or the setting sun. When low flows allow for fishing, it is a great species to target in this stream.

Bringing the river back will require better handling of stormwater storage. On average, Minnesota is receiving more rainfall and more intense storms than in the past. This coupled with a landscape designed to shed rather than retain water will make improving water quality challenging in the years to come.

-Collin Nienhaus, science teacher, Mapleton

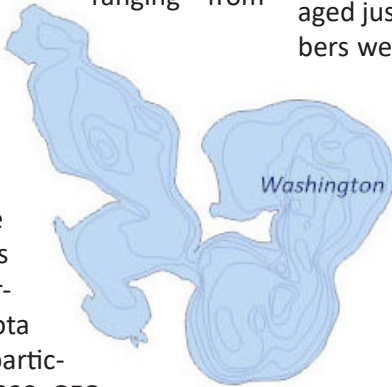
WATERVILLE AREA FEATURES:

Governor's Fishing Opener Lakes

2023 GFO Lakes

Mankato is the host city for the 2023 Governor's Fishing Opener but most of the action will take place in Madison Lake and the lakes that surround the town. The Madison Lake area has a variety of lakes ranging from deep,

stable lakes to small, shallow lakes prone to winterkill. Here we highlight the four main lakes (but don't forget the Minnesota River!) where participants in the 2023 GFO will try their luck.



Washington is a popular lake for both angling and recreation. The Lake Washington fish community is similar to the Madison Lake fish community. Black Crappie catch rates were lower in 2022 than lake average. Black crappie were sampled up to 12.2 inches and averaged just under 9 inches. Bluegill numbers were also low in the 2022 survey but size was exceptional. Bluegill averaged 7.5 inches and fish up to 9.5 inches were sampled. Lake Washington has a 10 fish daily Bluegill limit. Walleye were sampled in good numbers in 2022 and averaged over 18 inches. The longest Walleye sampled was 27.2 inches. Northern Pike

were also sampled in good numbers with fish approaching 40 inches. Over 80% of Northern Pike sampled in 2022 were greater than the 24-inch minimum length limit.



size was good. Northern Pike up to 36 inches were sampled and 70% exceeded the 24-inch minimum length limit. Ballantyne Lake is also home to a large population of Black Crappies with some White Crappies mixed in. Crappies of both species tend to run small, although the potential for a large Black Crappie/White Crappie hybrid exists. Ballantyne Lake features a healthy Largemouth Bass population. Most Largemouth Bass were between 12 inches and 15 inches during the last survey, but fish over 20 inches are present.

Duck Lake

Duck Lake is located just east of Ballantyne Lake and is the smallest of the GFO lakes at only 290 acres. Duck Lake is a typical Bass/Panfish style lake that is not stocked with Walleye (but is stocked with Northern Pike). Duck Lake was surveyed in 2022 and Bluegill,

Black Crappie, and White Crappie were all abundant. However, small fish dominated

the catch of all three species meaning anglers will have to

sort through fish to find a meal. Large Northern Pike are

also present. The Largemouth Bass population in Duck Lake is limited by poor

habitat and low annual recruitment. Duck Lake was home to the

largest Black Crappie sampled by Waterville crews in 2022 - a

17.3-inch giant.

-Waterville Area staff

Madison Lake

Madison Lake is a 1,446-acre lake located in the city of Madison Lake. Most GFO activities will take place at Madison Lake and anglers will find a lake with plentiful panfish and predators alike. Black Crappies were sampled in high numbers in 2022 and ranged from 4.4 to 11.8 inches with an average of 6.7 inches. Bluegill numbers were also good in 2022. Most Bluegills were over 6 inches, but few exceeded 8 inches. Walleye catch was similar to recent surveys. Walleye ranged from 9.6 to 25.9 inches with an average of 19.7 inches. Largemouth Bass are available, and size is good. Northern Pike will be plentiful and over 70% of them were greater than the 24-inch minimum length limit in 2022.

Lake Washington

Lake Washington is a 1,519-acre lake located in Le Sueur County about 7 miles northeast of Mankato. Lake

Ballantyne Lake

Ballantyne Lake is a 350-acre lake located on the west side of Madison Lake. Ballantyne Lake is stocked with Walleye fry in odd years and with surplus fingerling (or older) Walleye as they are available. Despite the efforts, Walleye are rare in Ballantyne Lake with only 4 being sampled in the most recent survey. Northern Pike were sampled in above average numbers in 2019 and

