DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

LAKE OF THE WOODS and RAINY RIVER INFORMATION

Lake of the Woods is a border water, shared with the Canadian provinces of Manitoba and Ontario. The Minnesota portion of Lake of the Woods has several regulations that differ from the general statewide regulations. Please take the time to familiarize yourself with these differences to avoid inadvertently violating any regulations. Make sure that you note the effective dates of the various regulations outlined in this summary.

Minnesota Waters Fishing Regulation Summary

Walleye and Sauger

Lake of the Woods

(May 10, 2025 – April 14, 2026)

The Walleye/Sauger aggregate limit is six (no more than four can be Walleye). **Walleye** from 19.5 through 28 inches must be immediately released. Only one **Walleye** over 28 inches total length may be possessed.

Rainy River and Four Mile Bay

(May 10, 2025 – February 28, 2026)

Same as Lake of the Woods

(March 1, 2026 – April 14, 2026)

Catch and release fishing is allowed during this time period. All Walleye and Sauger must be returned to the water immediately.

Northern Pike

All Northern Pike from 30 through 40 inches must be released immediately, and only one Northern Pike over 40 inches may be possessed. The possession limit for Northern Pike is three.

There is no closed season for Northern Pike on Lake of the Woods or the Rainy River.

Yellow Perch

The bag limit is 20 Yellow Perch per day, with 40 in possession.

There is no closed season for Yellow Perch.

Lake Sturgeon

Lake Sturgeon cannot be harvested from Oct. 1, 2025 through Apr. 23, 2026. Catch and release fishing is allowed during this time period.

See the "Canada-Minnesota" Border Waters section of the fishing regulation booklet for more details about Lake Sturgeon fishing regulations.

For a more thorough listing of all regulations that apply to the Lake of the Woods area, please see the "Canada-Minnesota" Border Waters section in the 2025 Minnesota Fishing Regulations (pp. 67-70).

Fish and Game Violations

If you witness a violation, please report it. Don't let poachers steal your fish and wildlife. If you see someone violating a hunting or angling law, or hear about a violation, call the toll-free 24-hour TIP (Turn In Poachers) hotline at ***1-800-652-9093***

Creel Survey

Creel Survey is the tool used to estimate the number and pounds of fish anglers harvest from a water body. The value of a creel survey is twofold for Lake of the Woods. First, since a harvest threshold (a safe level of harvest that is based on the physical characteristics of the lake) has been determined for Lake of the Woods, creel survey gives insight into where harvest is relative to the threshold. Secondly, creel survey provides the ability to see what the consequences of management actions are on anglers and how anglers use the fishery. The most recent management action that has been undertaken on Lake of the Woods is the implementation of a reduced limit and the protected slot (for Walleye). This action was undertaken to reduce Walleye harvest below the target. In other water bodies, creel surveys may be used to gauge the effectiveness of regulations designed to improve the size structure or overall abundance of a fish population.

Summer creel surveys were conducted annually on Lake of the Woods from 1981 through 2007, and winter surveys were conducted most years between 1989 and 2006. Annual creel surveys on Lake of the Woods were discontinued after 2007 due to the funding shortfalls affecting the Fisheries Section. With the passage of the fishing license fee increase in 2013, funding again became available to conduct creel surveys on Lake of the Woods. The current plan is to conduct a winter creel survey during this winter (2025-26). Recently, creel surveys were conducted during the winter of 2023-24 and 2024-25 the summer of 2022 and 2023.

The winter creel survey is conducted by two creel survey clerks. Both clerks count the number of vehicles exiting the lake at predetermined access points and conduct interviews of angling parties that have completed their fishing trip. You will be asked questions about your fishing experience, including when you started fishing, how many fish you have released and how many you kept. You may also be asked to estimate the lengths of any fish you released, and the clerk may measure lengths of your harvested fish. **Please do your part for fisheries management and cooperate with the survey**.

Creel Survey Results are available for the surveys that were conducted during the winter of 2024-25, and from the summer of 2023 on Lake of the Woods.

The winter creel survey of 2024-25 started mid-December and ended to mid-March. Angler pressure was 2 million angler hours (includes both day and overnight trips). Since 2000, fishing pressure has exceeded one million angler hours with a steady increase until the last few winters. It should be noted that the current method used includes overnight trips, so fishing pressure and catch rates are no longer comparable to historical estimates.

Approximately 150,000 pounds of Sauger were harvested last winter, which is well below the six-year average of 235,000 pounds. Walleye harvest was approximately 175,000 pounds above the six-year average of 161,000 pounds. A smaller harvest component of the winter fishery is Yellow Perch that resulted in 39,000 pounds, which is double the six-year average of 18,000 pounds.

Fishing activity during the summer of 2023 was below the six-year average on Lake of the Woods (670,000 angler hours). From the opening of Walleye season in May, until the end of September, anglers spent over 600,000 angler hours fishing on the lake. Walleye harvest was 175,000 pounds, and 45,000 pounds of Sauger, were harvested last summer. Walleye harvest was below the recent average (2018-2023) of 210,000 pounds. Summer Sauger harvest was lower than the past three survey's average of 60,000 pounds. Summer creel surveys are planned for the summers of 2026 and 2027.

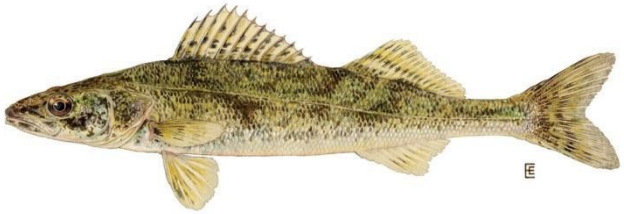
Lake of the Woods Fish Population Surveys and Status

What makes a healthy fish population? The number of year classes that are present is a major indicator of the health of a fish population. A year class is simply a group of fish that are of the same age; they were "produced" in the same year. *A population of fish with a large number of year classes is considered healthier than a population of the same species, living in similar habitat, with fewer year classes*.

So why is a population with many year classes healthier? There are several reasons. First, the presence of many year classes is an indicator of relatively low mortality. When a greater number of fish survive from one year to the next, they have a good chance to grow old and stay in the population longer. Second, a large number of year classes suggest the environment is suitable for that species. A suitable environment allows a species to successfully reproduce annually, rather than infrequently only when environmental conditions are highly favorable. Research has shown that large, old fish contribute more offspring to a fish population than small fish, especially during years when weather is not optimal for reproduction. In a fish population with many year classes, there are multitudes of young fish that will produce large numbers of eggs. These eggs tend to survive when conditions are ideal but may not in years when conditions are not as favorable. Along with these small fish, there are large old fish that produce high quality eggs that will survive in less ideal conditions.

How is the health of the fish population monitored? The largest lakes in Minnesota are sampled every year, in order to closely monitor their fish populations. Lake of the Woods is one of the ten lakes included in this Large Lake Sampling Program. These lakes are at least 15,000 acres in size, and typically support the best Walleye fisheries in the state.

Anglers fish the Minnesota portion of Lake of the Woods for a variety of species, including Walleye, Sauger, Yellow Perch, Northern Pike and Lake Sturgeon. Due to the cultural and economic importance of Walleye and Sauger, a great deal of population monitoring effort is focused on them.



In the spring, at the end of April, **spawning Walleye electrofishing** is conducted at the Long Sault Rapids, near Birchdale, MN. This assessment monitors the size structure of the mature (spawning fish) segment of the Walleye population. Electrofishing is a non-lethal technique, in which electric current is applied to the water. Fish exposed to the current are stunned and float to the surface, where they can be picked up with a net. The length and sex of captured fish are recorded, and the fish are released unharmed.

The most recent samples depict a Walleye population that has changed a great deal since the first electrofishing survey was conducted in 1982. One of the highlights is that the current spawning population has more large fish in it. In 1982, the most common length of female Walleye sampled was about 17 inches. Recently, that has increased to about 26 inches. During that same period, the relative abundance of male Walleye sampled has declined quite a bit, which is of concern. In addition, earlier ice-out dates have led to a longer spring open-water fishery resulting in increasing fishing

pressure. Trends in male abundance and increasing pressure led to the recent management decision of going to a catch-and-release season from March 1st to April 14th.

Smaller (younger) Walleye (from 8 to about 22 inches long) are sampled during **fall gill net sampling**. During the first three weeks of September gill nets are set at 16 sites around the Minnesota portion of Lake of the Woods. Biologists record the sex, stage of maturity, length and weight of each fish caught in the gill nets. Otoliths ("ear bone" structures used to determine the age of fish) are removed from a sample of the fish.

By sampling annually, and comparing the data to past years, changes in fish populations (age distribution and age of sexual maturity) can be described and monitored. Abundance is estimated from the average number of fish caught per gill net. More fish in the gill net suggests there are more fish in the lake. Fall gill net data also allows biologists to determine how many year classes of a fish species are in the lake, and the relative strength of those year classes.

The most important fish species on Lake of the Woods are managed with a **harvest threshold** as a major management component. The harvest threshold is based on several physical and chemical lake characteristics and is simply the estimated poundage of fish that can safely be harvested in a year, on average. The harvest measured through creel survey is averaged across several years because environmental conditions can have a significant effect on angling success in any particular year.

Walleye forecast. Walleye catches in 2025 sampling averaged 15.5 Walleye per gill net. This level of abundance is below the historic average of 16.6. Figure 1 is from a series of 52 net sites that have the longest history of being surveyed. All these nets are located close to shore, in less than 25-feet of water. In 2002, we added 12 nets that surveyed the offshore (33 to 37 foot deep water) portions of Lake of the Woods.

The off-shore nets can, at times, paint a very different picture of the Walleye population than the near-shore nets. For instance, in 2015 the Walleye catch rate in the off-shore nets was almost twice as high as it was in the near-shore nets In 2025, off-shore catch rates (19.8) were higher than the near-shore (14.9). Another difference between the near-shore and off-shore nets is that there tend to be more "large" Walleye in the off-shore nets.

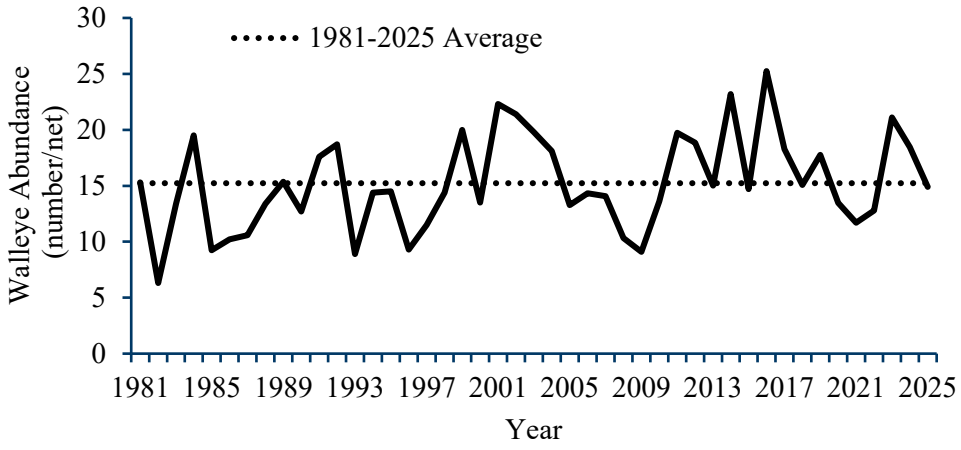


Figure 1 - Annual walleye near-shore gill net catch rates, from 1981 to 2025. Dotted black line denotes the average (15.2/net).

Walleye catch rates tend to vary quite a bit. Some of this variation is due to environmental conditions during the fall sampling period (in 2016 Walleye seemed to be unusually

"catchable"), but most of it is attributable to the presence, or absence, of strong year classes.

Small Walleye, from 9 to 10 inches long, are below average; a possible indication of a week year-class (2022). Harvestable-sized Walleye (12 to 14 inches long) were above the historic averages (Figure 2).

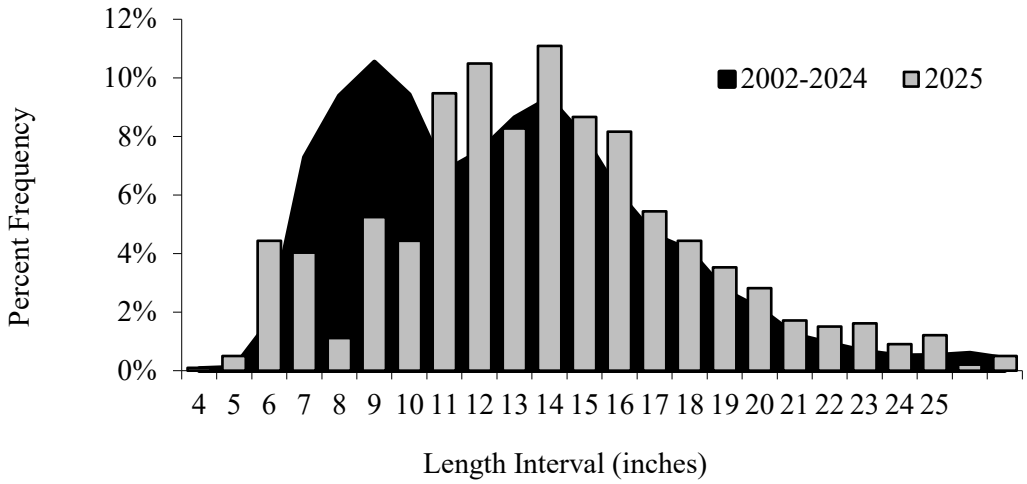


Figure 2 - Walleye size distribution from 2025 fall gill net survey (gray bars). Black shaded area denotes the average length frequency from 2002-2024.

Strong year classes can form most what anglers catch for several years. Fall gill netting showed above average numbers of "eater size" Walleye in the 14 to 16-inch size range.

Describing the size of Walleye anglers can expect to catch is fairly simple, but predicting angler success is very difficult due to the variety of biological and environmental conditions that influence angling success. For instance, a major windstorm as the ice forms can make the water very turbid and thereby reduce angling success.

Anglers are frequently interested in the age of Walleye they have caught. It is rather difficult to provide this information with a great degree of certainty, because individual fish can grow at different rates. Sex of a fish, stage of sexual maturity and various genetic factors all influence growth within a population. Differences in growth between lakes can also be due to climatic conditions and lake productivity.

In general, Walleye in Lake of the Woods reach 13 inches when they are three years old. Male Walleye start to mature when they are 12 inches long and three years old, but it is not until they are 16 inches long and five years old that most male Walleye are sexually mature. Female Walleye grow faster than male Walleye after they reach three years of age. They also mature at an older age. Female Walleye start to mature when they are four years old and 15 inches long, but all of them are not sexually mature until they are nine years old and, at least, 20 inches long. Generally, female Walleye that are 25 inches long are about 10 years old; 30-inch females are about 20 years old.

Sauger outlook. The Sauger population remains at a high level of abundance, at 16.0 Sauger per gill net lift in 2025 nearshore nets) and is above historical average of 15.3/net; Figure 3). Sauger abundance was highest in 2008-10, primarily as a result of the strong year class produced in 2006.

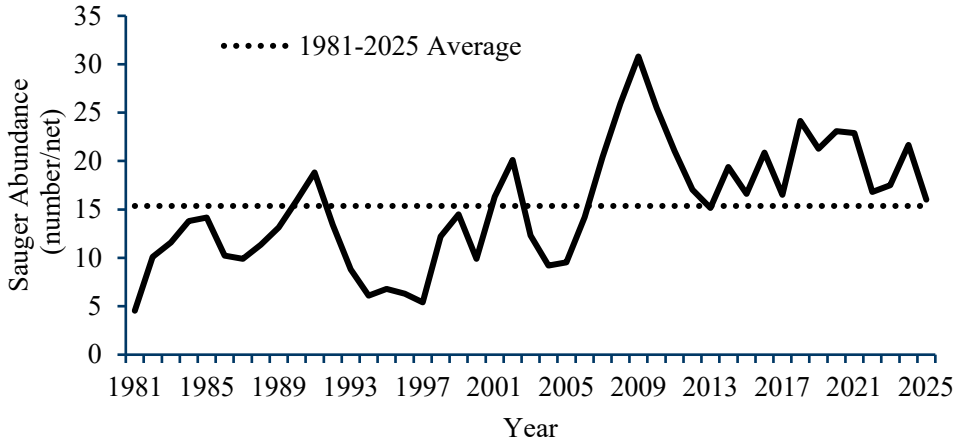


Figure 3- Sauger gill net abundance from 1981 to 2025. Dotted black line denotes the average (15.4/net).

Sauger abundance has been above the 1981-2025 average since 2006. This level of abundance has been maintained by the consistent recruitment of moderate to strong year classes, with relatively few weak year classes. It should be noted that the 2020/21 year classes were below average in strength, 2022 was a strong year class and 2023/24 year classes are predicted to be below average.

Sauger grow at a much slower rate than Walleye, do not get as large as Walleye, and do not get as old. Typical lengths for Sauger sampled during the fall assessment are 8 inches for age-1, 9 inches for age-2, 11 inches for age-3 and 12 inches long for age-4 (Figure 4). The largest Sauger we sampled in 2024 was a 17.4 inch long female that was 10 years old.

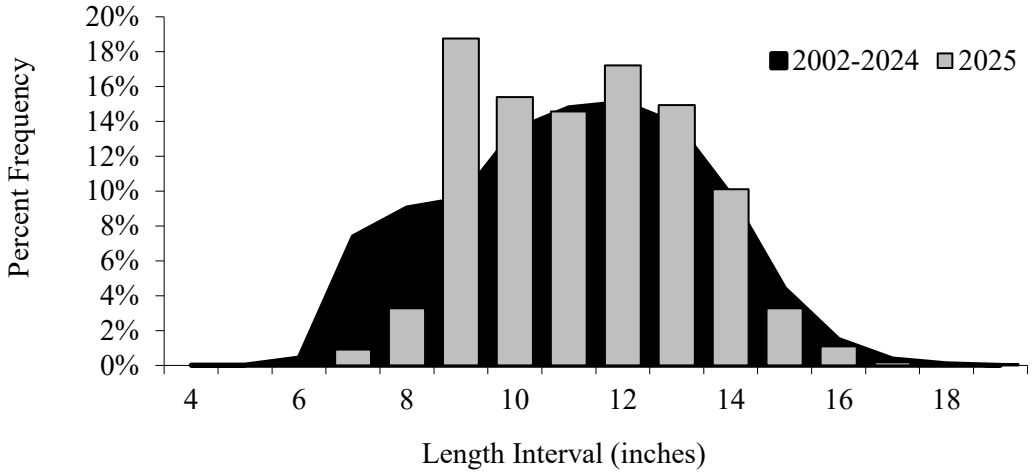


Figure-4 Sauger size distribution from 2025 fall gill net survey (gray bars). Solid line denotes the average length frequency from 2002-2024.

Sauger from 9 through 14 inches were all above the historic average and is the result of excellent recruitment in 2017, 2019 and 2023. Smaller Sauger (6 – 8 inches) were below average (a result of weak year classes).

A description of the sampling programs and management strategies conducted on Lake of the Woods can be viewed on the Lake of the Woods page on the MN-DNR web site.

New Winter Creel Survey Design

Historically, the winter survey was conducted by one creel survey clerk that navigated their way through specific sectors of the lake counting fish houses, checking for occupancy and interviewing anglers while they were actively fishing. Due to the increased fishing pressure and complex ice road network on Lake of the Woods, fisheries managers decided to modify the current winter creel survey design. The new design incorporates two creel clerks where both clerks will be stationed at pre-determined ice road accesses counting vehicles exiting the lake and conducting interviews for anglers that completed their fishing trip (as done on other large lakes such as Upper Red Lake, Leech Lake and Mille Lacs Lake). This new design has been in place since winter of 2022. As mentioned previously, please do your part for fisheries management and cooperate with the survey.

Trash on Lake of the Woods

Legislation took effect July 1st, 2023 making it **illegal to place garbage and waste on or under the ice** of Minnesota's lakes and rivers. The language of this new law can be found at Keep It Clean.

Ice is no place for your garbage and waste. Legally contain and dispose of it.

To help stop litter and human waste from spoiling our lakes, rivers and shorelines:

- Make a plan for trash and waste removal before you hit the ice.

  Whether you access the ice from a public or private entrance, plan to take off of the ice what you take on to it. Many access points and resorts offer garbage collection services. If your site doesn't, make a plan to transport it home for disposal.

- Use colored garbage bags.

  In snowy conditions, white trash bags can be difficult to see. Brightly colored bags or black bags are easier to spot making it less likely trash will inadvertently be left behind.

- Do not place garbage and waste on or under the ice.

  It's the law.

- Make sure your garbage is secure before departing.

  This will help prevent it from blowing out of truck beds and off trailers and sleds.

- Remove all materials when moving a fish house.

  This includes wood blocking, insulation and other items.

It takes all of us working together to Keep It Clean! Thank you for doing your part to ensure the health of our lakes, rivers, fisheries and watershed areas.

Eating fish on the ice?

Many anglers enjoy consuming a portion of their catch on the lake as part of their fishing experience. Since Lake of the Woods has size restrictions (protected slots) on Walleye and Northern Pike, there are some special rules to follow to stay legal. Recall that it is not normally legal to possess Walleye and Northern Pike on the water/ice in a manner in which the length of the fish cannot be determined. Adhering to the following will keep you legal:

- While on the ice, all harvested Walleye and Northern Pike must be intact and measurable, unless the person is in the act of preparing the fish for a meal on the ice.
- If Walleye or Northern Pike are prepared for a meal, anglers are required to retain the measurable carcasses, which count toward their limit for the remainder of the fishing day.
- Do not allow the whole fish or carcasses to freeze together in buckets or bags, since both need to be measurable. Pack them in snow or ice shavings in a bucket or cooler inside the fish house, or vehicle, to prevent them from freezing.
- Anglers are required to properly dispose of the carcasses before harvesting additional fish the following day. It is illegal to dispose of fish carcasses on, or under, the ice.

Lake of the Woods Fisheries Management

In 2024, DNR Fisheries in Baudette began a management plan review/revision for Lake of the Woods. Stated within the fisheries management plan is a brief background of management history, series of management goals and objectives and management actions. This process included broad input from the Lake of the Woods Fisheries Input Group (LOWFIG) to provide perspectives and angler expectations. The LOWFIG included several individuals from various parts of the state and representing different interests. In addition to LOWFIG, there was a scoping survey completed at the beginning of the management planning process and there will be a public comment period prior to implementation of the new plan. Completed in 2025, the 2025-2035 Fisheries Management Plan for Minnesota Waters of Lake of the Woods will guide fisheries management activities on Lake of the Woods into the future.