

## Central Region 2020 Fisheries Outlook

The DNR's Central Region spans from Mille Lacs Lake to the Hinckley area, and south through St. Cloud and the Twin Cities metro to the Iowa border in southeast Minnesota. The region has diverse options for anglers to fish close to home, including trout streams, medium to large rivers, and lakes from a few acres to over 10,000 acres in the case of Mille Lacs and Pepin. Anglers will find good opportunities to pursue panfish, walleye, northern pike, trout, bass (catch and release season opens May 9, harvest season opens May 22) and musky (season opens June 6).

Anglers will see proposed special regulation signs posted on 32 lakes in the region. These are part of the DNR's Quality Bluegill Initiative, a statewide effort to protect and enhance the size of bluegill through bag limits that are reduced to either 5 or 10 fish. Bluegill size declines with too much harvest, and these regulations are being applied on lakes that have shown the potential to grow big bluegills in the past. Some lakes are also proposed for reduce crappie bag limits, so that the size structure of both panfish species can be improved.

Here are some good options to try in different parts of the region.

### Mille Lacs

Walleye is the fish of interest to the majority of anglers that visit Mille Lacs Lake. After a series of weak year classes from 2009 through 2012, we have recently seen better survival of young walleye. Of particular note is the 2013-year class, which is the third strongest year class produced since annual sampling began in 1979. With the restrictive regulations that have been in place in recent years, walleye from this year class have survived very well and will be a large portion of what anglers catch. These walleye currently range from about 17 to almost 22 inches in length. The 2017-year class is also strong. Anglers will notice a fair abundance of these walleye, which average about 13 inches in length. In addition to these fish, good numbers of older, larger walleye are also present. The oldest walleye sampled last fall was a 23-year old female that was about 27 inches long.

Anglers experienced very high catch rates of walleye through the summer of 2019 and the following winter. These high catch rates were the result of the low abundance of prey species (primarily small yellow perch). We anticipate that these high catch rates will continue into the early part of the summer.

The second most-targeted species on the lake is smallmouth bass. Few anglers choose to harvest a smallmouth bass, but the opportunity to catch a trophy-size individual is what draws anglers to the lake. Smallmouth bass sampling last spring indicated a very high quality population, with fish from 16 to 20-inches forming the bulk of the sample. Several individuals over 21-inches long were found.

Relatively few anglers target northern pike, but the lake does support a high quality population of these fish. Sampling consistently documents individuals of over 40-inches in length. Muskellunge are also popular. Muskellunge are the only species that is routinely stocked in Mille Lacs Lake. Reports of muskellunge in the 60-inch class have come from anglers and through sampling.

Anglers have to be aware of several special regulations on Mille Lacs Lake. Heavy fishing pressure in the winter of 2019-2020 and a high catch rate of walleyes has left a lower amount of the State's harvest allocation of walleye remaining for open water fishing. As a result, fishing for walleye will be catch-and-release for most of the summer, except July. The walleye season will be closed in July to minimize

hooking mortality, which counts toward the State's harvest allocation, during the warmest time of year. This means anglers may not target walleye during the closure. In addition to the closure, anglers may not use many types of live bait commonly used when fishing for walleye. With the July closure, we hope to stay within the State's harvest allocation and avoid another closure to walleye fishing later in the summer. This would provide an opportunity for walleye fishing through the fall.

New regulations for smallmouth bass and northern pike are in place beginning this spring. Both of these regulations are designed to maintain the quality size of the smallmouth bass and northern pike populations. The smallmouth bass regulation has been changed from a 17 to 21-inch protected slot to a 17-inch maximum size. Similarly, the northern pike regulation is now a 30-inch maximum size, changed from a 30 to 40-inch protected slot, combined with a reduction in the possession limit from 5 to 3 northern pike. The northern pike regulation will apply to the entire open season, rather than having a separate regulation during the winter.

### Little Falls Area

**Big Sauk Lake:** This 2,094 acre impoundment of the Sauk River in Sauk Centre had continued success from Walleye fry stocking, and puts Sauk Lake on the top of the list for better opener in the area. Excellent survival and fast growth have made a good number of keeper walleye available to anglers. Our sampling in 2019 yielded the highest catch rates ever for walleye (14.5/net). You should expect a good numbers of fish between 15 and 25 inches this spring with the occasional larger fish thrown in. This long body of water has the Sauk River running through it that can offer opportunities to use current to your advantage in locating fish. Big Sauk Lake can offer some great opportunities for largemouth bass, yellow perch and black crappie as well. Further details can be found at the Lakefinder site here: <https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/lakefind/showreport.html?downum=77015000>

**Alexander Lake:** This 2,708 acre lake located in northern Morrison County is a known destination for walleye, pike, bass, crappie and musky. It offers complex habitat types to choose from and a variety of presentation options to catch walleye. Walleye fry are stocked annually and have had success reaching adult size. Although Alexander has Eurasian water milfoil, the fish tend to use both the inside and outside edges of the beds when foraging. Due to the better than average water clarity, it might be a good idea to spend some time during evening hours for walleye. Good year classes in recent years should allow anglers ample opportunities to catch "eater" walleye as well as the occasional trophy. Further details can be found at the Lakefinder site here: <https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/lakefind/showreport.html?downum=49007900>

**Big Birch Lake:** This 2,112 acre Todd County lake near Grey Eagle attracts attention for a variety of species. One of the more common targets here besides walleye are northern pike. Big Birch was managed for over 20 years with experimental regulations for pike. However, local anglers wanted to see the removal of the regulation in spite of some noted improvements in pike sizes. Bets are good to come across plenty of sub 22" fish, but also some pike greater than 26" as well. The lake offers opportunities to try different habitat types with an upper and lower basin, humps, bays and vegetation changes throughout both. Other species of note include smallmouth bass, largemouth bass, bluegill and crappie in decent sizes and numbers to offer opportunities for angling. Further details can be found at the Lakefinder site here: <https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/lakefind/showreport.html?downum=77008400>

## St. Cloud Area

Two Rivers Lake is a 575-acre in size, and located near Holdingford in Stearns County. Anglers can expect good fishing for walleye, northern pike, and black crappie. A lake survey by Sauk Rapids Fisheries in 2019 found decent walleye numbers, averaging over 15 inches, with a fair number over 20 inches. The largest Walleye was over 29 inches. Most were two year old fish and should be keepers in 2020. Recent Walleye stocking has been successful and anglers have reported good fishing for the past few years. Northern Pike numbers were very high in 2019, but average size of 23 inches and almost 3 pounds was decent. A quarter of the pike were over 26 inches with a few over 30 inches. Black crappie numbers continue to be above average and most were 7 to 8 inches long. This abundant year class should grow to be keepers in 2020. Some crappies were over 12 inches. Other fish worth pursuing include: largemouth bass, smallmouth bass, and bluegill.

Angling opportunities abound in 3,158-acre Clearwater Lake near Annandale in Wright County. A lake survey in 2019 found good angling opportunities for largemouth bass, northern pike, walleye, and panfish. Good numbers of largemouth bass were available with an average length of 13 inches, 34% over 15 inches, and larger bass over 20 inches. Northern pike were numerous with a decent average size (22 inches, 2 ½ pounds) plus larger pike up to 34 inches. Walleye numbers have declined recently, but decent numbers of walleye over 20 inches are available. Walleye averaged over 18 inches and almost 3 pounds. Additional stocking recently should improve walleye numbers in the future. Bluegill numbers were good, with fish over 8 inches available. Black crappie numbers remained strong, with 10-12 inch crappies available. Spring netting recently found good numbers of crappie 12 inch to over 14 inches.

Cedar Lake is an 837-acre lake located near the City of Annandale in Wright County. The lake has three public accesses and can be busy on the fishing opener. Cedar Lake offers fishing opportunities for multiple species. Walleye fingerlings have been stocked every other year since 1970. The most recent lake survey conducted in 2019 found average numbers of walleye with a good average size. Walleye caught ranged in length from 11 to 26 inches and averaged 17.5 inches and nearly 2 pounds. Northern pike abundance remains high although the average size was respectable at 23 inches and almost 3 pounds. While anglers will encounter numerous pike under 26 inches, they also have a chance to catch a large fish pike up to 35 inches. Cedar Lake also offers an excellent opportunity to catch largemouth bass. Bass numbers in 2019 were about average whereas previous surveys bass abundance was high. In 2019, the average size of bass sampled was 14 inches and 1 ½ pounds. Fifty-two percent of the catch was longer than 15 inches, and the largest bass sampled was just under 19 inches. Black crappie and bluegill are also popular species in Cedar Lake and at certain times can provide excellent fishing. Crappies up to 14 inches and bluegill up to nine inches are found in the lake.

The Briggs Chain of Lakes (Briggs, Julia and Rush lakes) are located five miles north of the City of Clear Lake in Sherburne County. The lakes are connected by a navigable channel, and offer fishing opportunities for multiple species. Walleye fry have been stocked every other year since 1999. The most recent lake survey conducted in 2019 found average numbers of walleye with a good average size. Walleye caught ranged in length from eight to 28 inches and averaged 18.5 inches and just over 2 pounds. Northern Pike abundance is relatively low, but the average size was large at 26 inches and 4 ½ pounds. Anglers have a good chance to encounter some large pike over 30 inches, as 15% of the catch were longer than 30 inches. The Briggs Chain of Lakes also offers an excellent opportunity to catch largemouth bass and a few smallmouth bass. Bass numbers in 2019 were slightly below average for the area, but Largemouth up to 20 inches and Smallmouth up to 17 inches are available. Thirty-nine percent of the largemouth bass caught were longer than 15 inches while the largest bass sampled was just under

20 inches. Black crappie and bluegill are also popular species in the Briggs Chain of Lake and at certain times can provide excellent fishing. Crappies up to 13 inches and bluegill up to nine inches are found in the lakes.

### Hinckley Area

The southern part of the four county Hinckley fisheries management area offers plenty of opportunities for anglers just outside of the north Twin Cities metro area. The Chisago City area lakes (Green, Chisago, South Lindstrom, North Center, and South Center) have a total of nearly 4,800 acres of water with ample parking at access sites. All of the lakes have plenty of action for crappies, sunfish and bass. North and South Center lakes have a special regulation for northern pike: protected slot of 24-36 inches, and a bag limit of 3 with 1 over 36 inches allowed. Northern pike are more abundant in North Center than South Center, but both lakes should have plenty of action for northerns within the 24-36 inch slot, plus a chance at a trophy sized pike. Walleye abundance is good in both lakes thanks to a large 2014 year class. Chisago and South Lindstrom lakes have good numbers of walleye and northern pike; these lakes fall under the statewide North Central zone regulation for northern pike (bag limit 10, protected slot 22-26 inches, no more than 2 over 26"). Green Lake has a seventeen inch minimum length regulation for Walleye; even with that regulation there are plenty of fish that exceed that size. Green also has abundant northern pike, with opportunities for harvest under the North Central zone regulation.

For anglers in the northern Pine County area, the trio of Island, Sand, and Sturgeon lakes are worth a try. All three of the lakes boast abundant northern pike populations and should provide plenty of action as well as opportunity for those interested in harvesting small pike. Island and Sturgeon also have walleye populations successfully maintained through fingerling stocking. A 2019 lake survey on Island Lake found increased walleye numbers from previous surveys due to recent good stocked year classes that are now 15-20" in length. Island Lake also has harvestable size yellow perch. All three lakes offer good panfish fishing year round. Island Lake contains muskellunge.

### West Metro Area

The winter of 2019-20 provided conditions in line with recent climate trends-- shorter ice-cover period and fewer incidences of low wintertime oxygen (winterkill) in shallow waters. This allowed area fish populations in more marginal lakes such as Spurzem and Eagle (Carver County) to survive and have such lakes be better open-water options than after a harder winter.

Statewide, 2019 was the wettest year in Minnesota history. Local effects were higher lake levels and long-lasting increased flows in streams and rivers. These conditions provide chances for finding fish in less-expected places because of connectivity and fish movements. Consider trying smaller or shallower waters connected to "fish lakes" or larger streams. Spring flooding of the Minnesota River and Mississippi Rivers made connections to floodplain lakes, so those short-term fisheries are options as long as water levels sustain fish.

The primary local trout lakes-- Courthouse and Quarry-- will get surplus brook trout this spring-- about 1,200 1-lb fish each. Courthouse Lake will receive its full normal quota of 1,500 yearling rainbow trout. Survivors left from previous stockings could add potential to these lakes, as well as at Little Long Lake.

For waters managed in the Fishing in the Neighborhood (FiN) program we recommend, for the time being, sticking to waters that are larger, deeper, or known to over-winter fish. As of spring 2020, FiN stocking efforts in ponds prone to winterkill will be delayed, reduced, or cancelled for this year.

Locally, the best recent walleye abundances have been anything five or more per gill net; Lake Waconia met that measure (of lakes surveyed in 2019).

#### Lakes with Better Gamefish Size Structures, From Summer 2019 Survey Results

Northern pike-- 10% or more 30+ inches: Spurzem, Fish (Hennepin County), Cedar (Hennepin County), Harriet, Independence, Steiger, Susan, Waconia, and Minnetonka.

Black crappie-- 10% or more 9+ inches: Minnetonka, Fish (Hennepin County), Harriet, Dutch, Independence, Susan, and Waconia.

Bluegill and/or other sunfishes-- 10% or more 7+ inches: Spurzem, Minnetonka, Fish (Hennepin County), Fish (Scott County), Bde Maka Ska, Harriet, Dutch, Steiger, Susan and Waconia.

Largemouth bass: lakes with majority of fish over 15 inches, from either our targeted sampling (electrofishing) or 2019 BASS Minnesota Nation angler reports: Minnewashta\*, Sarah, Spring and Steiger\* (\* catch-and-release-only Special Regulation)

#### East Metro Area

Located within the City of Forest Lake and just east of Interstate 35, Forest Lake boasts good numbers of northern pike and walleye. Northern pike and walleye were captured at a rate of 10.4 and 5.5 per gill net, respectively, during the 2019 survey. Walleye fingerlings are now stocked annually, and produced a walleye population that averaged 20 inches and 3.2 pounds in 2019. Northern pike numbers were up and average size was down slightly (just under 23 inches) from the 2017 survey. There are also respectable sizes and numbers of largemouth bass and muskellunge. Three public accesses and a private marina provide access to a lake comprised of three basins and plenty of structure.

Smaller lakes: If fishing East Metro's larger lakes is not your thing, give one of our smaller Fishing in the Neighborhood (FiN) lakes a try for walleye in 2020. Carver (Woodbury), Cobblestone (Apple Valley), Como (St. Paul), and Ravine lakes are stocked every year with yearling and adult walleye to provide quick action in a smaller lake setting.

Don't forget about East Metro's large rivers. The St. Croix River from Taylors Falls to the confluence with Pool 3 of the Mississippi River offers solid fishing for lake sturgeon, flathead and channel catfish, walleye, sauger, muskellunge, white bass and smallmouth bass. Please refer to the Wisconsin-Minnesota Border Waters page in the 2020 Minnesota Fishing Regulation Booklet for the current regulations for the St. Croix River. In addition, Pool 2 of the Mississippi River (Ford Dam to Hastings Dam) is a great place to catch a variety of fish species and the fishing season is open year-round for catch and release angling for walleye, sauger, largemouth and smallmouth bass. All backwaters and connected lakes except for Crosby, Pickerel, Upper, Little Pigs Eye, and North Star Steel lakes have the same regulations. Pool 2 also boasts good populations of white bass, channel catfish and flathead catfish.

#### Lake City Area

Anglers venturing out for the inland season fishing in the Lake City Area will find a good population of walleye in Lake Byllesby near Cannon Falls. This lake is stocked every other year with

walleye fingerlings and has substantial natural walleye movement from the Cannon River. Lake Zumbro, north of Rochester, is also stocked every other year with walleye fingerlings. Good populations of sunfish and crappie are found in Lake Zumbro, along with some larger northern pike. For a unique fishing opportunity, try floating the smaller Cannon or Zumbro Rivers for both northern pike and walleye with the potential to also catch sauger, white bass and crappies.

Anglers seeking northern pike will do best to cast the shallow bays in those lakes and the shallow lakes in the lower Vermillion River. The Minnesota-Wisconsin border waters of the Mississippi river and Lake Pepin are open to angling year-round for all species, except for a winter closure on flathead catfish. While the big river can always change, water levels are currently very good and most boat access points are open. As always, the Mississippi River boasts excellent populations of walleye, sauger, sargemouth and smallmouth bass, northern pike, white bass, channel and flathead catfish. In recent years, the bluegill and yellow perch fishing has really taken off in Lake Pepin, and the size of these fish is truly impressive.

New in 2020, there are lower bag limits for some species on the Mississippi River from the mouth of the St. Croix River to the Iowa border, including Lake Pepin. The combined walleye/sauger bag limit is now four, the catfish bag limit is 10 with only one fish over 30 inches, the combined white and yellow bass limit is 10, the sunfish, crappie and yellow perch limits are each 15, and the shovelnose sturgeon limit is 3. On Pool 9 to the Iowa border walleye and sauger regulations were aligned with Iowa's, with a 15-inch minimum length limit for walleye and none for sauger, a protected slot limit of 20 to 27 inches for walleye and only one walleye over 27 inches allowed for harvest.

#### [Southeast Minnesota Trout Streams](#)

These are the good old days when it comes to trout fishing in Southeast Minnesota. Trout populations are at their highest levels in 50+ years across the region, meaning there are numerous opportunities for anglers to catch brook, brown and rainbow trout. Descriptions of prime trout streams is on DNR website at <https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/areas/fisheries/lanesboro/opportunities/index.html>.