

Region 3 outlook for 2019 fishing opener

Little Falls Area

Alexander Lake

Located in northern Morrison County, Alexander is a known destination for walleye, pike, bass, crappie and muskie. 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.

Big Sauk Lake (2,094 acres)

This 2,094-acre impoundment in the Sauk River in Sauk Centre had continued success with walleye fry stocking and puts Sauk Lake on the top of the list for better opener bets within the Little Falls management area. Excellent survival and fast growth have made a good number of keeper walleye available to anglers. 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 some opportunities to use current to your advantage. Big Sauk Lake can offer some great opportunities for largemouth bass, yellow perch and black crappie as well.

Big Birch Lake (2,112 acres)

This 2,112-acre Todd County lake near Grey Eagle attracts attention from a wide variety of anglers. One of the more common species sought after here besides walleye are northern pike. Big Birch was managed for over 20 years with experimental regulations for pike, however, the local anglers wanted to see a change in spite of some noted improvements from the regulation. Bets are good to come across plenty of sub 22” fish and likely good to see 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.

Fairy Lake (305 acres)

While only 305 acres, Fairy Lake offers plenty of opportunities for pike anglers looking to harvest some fish. Our most recent survey data suggested that northern pike numbers were still considerably high (15/net) and average weight around a pound and a half in this nice lake near Long Prairie. If anglers were looking for a place to have a positive impact on a northern pike population by harvesting smaller fish,

Fairy Lake may very well be that opportunity. An excellent county park is adjacent to the public access on the east side. If the pike do not cooperate, the bass and sunfish tend to offer some options.

Bass Lake (122 acres)

Near Pillsbury. A smaller basin (122 acres) with bigger pike thanks to special regulations that have been in place for a number of years now. Previously a 40" minimum was in place for pike with several fish over 40" observed in netting and by anglers. Two years ago, the regulation changed to a 26" maximum length limit to encourage some harvest of smaller pike that have become more abundant. A deep basin with high calorie tulibee forage for pike, walleye and bass to eat can provide for some very impressive fish for anglers.

East Metro Area

Big Marine Lake (1,799 acres)

If you like catching panfish, largemouth bass, northern pike and an occasional walleye in clear water, Big Marine is definitely worth a try. Located in Washington County, Big Marine provides anglers quality fishing year round. Walleye fingerlings are stocked every year now (started in 2016) to see if annual stockings can boost the already solid walleye population at its highest level since the 1990s (4.2 walleye per gill net in 2018). You may have to fish at night for walleye due to the relatively clear water. Pike are numerous but small in size and could benefit from harvesting some of the smaller pike and following the current regulation where the possession limit is 10 with not more than 2 over 26 inches and all pike from 22-26 inches need to be released. Two DNR accesses and one county access (fee/permit needed) provide options to the angler venturing out on Big Marine.

Clear Lake (428 acres)

Visible from Interstate 35 and just west of Forest Lake, Clear Lake provides anglers good fishing on a smaller lake, when compared to its larger cousin Forest Lake. Although walleye and hybrid muskie (tiger muskies) are the primary management species, Clear offers some good northern pike fishing for fish that averaged 26 inches in 2018. Annual walleye fingerling stockings (267 lb/year) produced a walleye population (3.5 walleye per gillnet) in 2018 that was normal when compared to other similar lakes statewide. Abundant bluegill, crappie and yellow perch provide fast action when the pike, tiger muskies and walleyes are not cooperative. Clear Lake has a 17-inch minimum size limit for walleye with a possession limit of three. A DNR access on the west side provides a great place to launch your fishing vessel.

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 2019. Carver (Woodbury), Cobblestone (Apple Valley), Como (St. Paul), and Ravine are stocked every year with yearling and adult walleye to provide quick action in a smaller lake setting.

West Metro Area

Trout

Fishing in trout lakes will again feature Courthouse Lake in Chaska – the only local lake where trout are regularly stocked for the spring opener. The lake will receive its full quota of 1,500 yearling rainbow trout. Survivors left from previous stockings could provide added action at Courthouse Lake, as well as at Quarry and Little Long Lakes. A trout-related note: Unlike for other species, the season for local trout fishing in lakes starts later in the morning of May 11 – one hour before local sunrise.

Walleye

Locally, the best recent walleye abundances have been anything 5 or more per gill net; Lake Nokomis, Hyland Lake, and Spring Lake met that measure among lakes surveyed in 2018.

Northern pike

Many lakes in the West Metro have abundant pike, but some also have bigger fish present. Lakes with 10% or more of pike greater than 30 inches: Nokomis, Long, Spring, and Upper Prior.

Black crappie

10% or more 9+ inches: Lower Prior

Largemouth bass

Lakes with majority of catches were fish over 15 inches, reported from 2018 BASS Minnesota Nation voluntary angler surveys: Bavaria, Medicine, Sarah, Spring, Whaletail, Zumbra, Minnewashta* (* catch-and-release-only Special Regulation)

Hinckley Area

For an “up north” fishing experience within 2 hours of the metro area, the trio of Island, Sand, and Sturgeon lakes in northern Pine County are worth a try. Easily accessible off I-35, all three of the lakes boast abundant northern pike populations. All three are subject to the North Central zone regulation for northern pike enacted in 2018 and should provide plenty of action as well as opportunity for those interested in harvesting small pike under the new, increased bag limit. (North Central zone regulation = 10 fish bag with a 22-26 inch protected slot, no more than 2 over 26 inches.) Island and Sturgeon also have Walleye populations successfully maintained through fingerling stocking. All three lakes offer good panfish fishing year-round and catch-and-release fishing for largemouth bass beginning May 11. Island Lake also has a quality Muskellunge fishery with the season opening June 2nd.

Although many anglers focus on walleye and northern pike for the May 11 opener, the season for trout in inland lakes begins the same day. Grindstone Lake west of Sandstone is stocked annually with rainbow trout and brown trout, and in alternate years with lake trout, providing a unique fishing opportunity for the area. Grindstone is managed as a “two story” fishery, with fishing opportunities for panfish, northern pike, and largemouth and smallmouth bass existing along with the trout species.

Catch-and-release action should be good for smallmouth bass in the early season. Although Grindstone Lake is not a designated trout lake, a trout stamp is required to keep trout.

Sauk Rapids Area

Buffalo Lake (1,500 acres)

Buffalo Lake is a 1,500-acre lake adjacent to the city of Buffalo in Wright County. Anglers can expect good fishing for walleye, northern pike, and black crappie. Netting in 2018 found above average numbers of walleye with very good size. Walleye averaged 17 inches and almost two pounds. Growth in Buffalo Lake is fast and 20% of walleye were longer than 20 inches. Northern pike numbers were good and pike were larger than average for the area. Average length and weight were 26 inches and nearly four pounds with 16% longer than 30 inches. There are plenty of black crappie in Buffalo Lake; a large year class was 7-9 inches long in 2018. These fish should be a few inches longer in 2019 and provide good angling. Largemouth and smallmouth bass, channel catfish, and sunfish can also provide enjoyable angling with some larger fish available.

Sauk River Chain of Lakes

Located in central Minnesota near the city of Richmond, the 3,200 acre Sauk River Chain of Lakes is made up of several connected basins each filled with enough fish habitat to keep any angler occupied for hours. The fishery of the Sauk Chain is managed primarily for Walleye, Muskellunge, and Channel Catfish, although it is also a popular destination for bass, and panfish anglers. Walleye fry are stocked every two years and significant natural reproduction has also been documented in recent years, which should provide anglers some quality opportunities for catching eating sized Walleye with an average size of 1.5 pounds. Since 2011, the Sauk Chain has also been stocked every two years with 1,030 Muskellunge fingerlings. The muskie population is still developing but anglers have reported catching fish in excess of 40 inches in length. Channel Catfish are abundant in the Sauk Chain and anglers have the opportunity to harvest up to 10 catfish (only one over 24 inches) daily. The Sauk Chain can offer opportunities for quality-sized panfish, and this year should be no exception. Look to the back bays around the opener for panfish and potential bass action. The Sauk Chain is infested with zebra mussels and care should be taken not to spread this invasive species.

Lake City Area

Anglers venturing out for the inland season fishing opener 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 1,000 pounds of walleye fingerlings and has substantial natural walleye movement from the Cannon River. Lake Zumbro, north of Rochester, is also stocked every other year with 600 pounds of walleye fingerlings. Good populations of sunfish and crappie are found in Lake Zumbro, along with some larger northern pike. A major dredging project is scheduled to begin this spring on Lake Zumbro, so anglers may have more limited access to the upper parts of the reservoir.

Anglers seeking Northern Pike will do best to cast the shallow bays in those lakes and the shallow lakes in the lower Vermillion River. There is no opening day on the Minnesota-Wisconsin border waters of the Mississippi river and Lake Pepin - they 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 high and boat access points are limited. Hopefully, water levels will recede by late April or early May. As always, the Mississippi River boasts excellent populations of walleye, sauger, largemouth 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. 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.