

# Central Region Fishing Outlook for 2024

## Reminders for a great season

Welcome to the 2024 fishing season! These fishing outlooks contain a wide range of fisheries information compiled from local DNR Fisheries staff. You can find more information about the management, habitat and oversight work performed by area fisheries staff, and how to contact them, on the [DNR area fisheries pages](#). We hope you have a great fishing experience. And we also encourage you to take a kid fishing or [introduce someone new to fishing!](#)

### Check the DNR fishing webpage

The DNR has a [fishing page](#) to help answer angler questions. The page links to [LakeFinder](#), which provides maps, special regulation information for individual lakes, other detailed information on lakes throughout the state, and the StreamFinder tool that provides a description, species list, regulations and access information for [trout streams throughout Minnesota](#). The fishing page includes the online versions of the Minnesota fishing regulations booklet in multiple languages. The regulations booklet is available in print anywhere [DNR licenses are sold](#).

### Clean In Clean Out

Remember anglers and boaters, Clean In Clean Out when boating or fishing in Minnesota. Protect your waters by following state aquatic invasive species laws. Clean, drain, dispose and keep all plugs out while transporting boats. Find information on aquatic invasive species on the [DNR website](#).

### Fish consumption guidance

Anglers can find fish consumption guidance on the [Minnesota Department of Health website](#). Anglers should check for site-specific advice that pertains to the water they're fishing. If eating fish from a variety of waters or a specific water isn't listed, anglers should follow the statewide guidelines. The MDH website has both site-specific and statewide guidance on eating fish.

### Safety must be the priority around cold water

Cold water is dangerous and unexpected falls can quickly turn tragic. About 30% of fatal boating accidents each year happen during the cold-water period, and many involve victims who weren't wearing a life jacket. The most effective way to survive a fall into cold water is to wear a life jacket and make sure the jacket is buckled or zipped. For more information about staying safe on and around cold water, visit the [DNR cold water safety page](#).

## Lake City area

The 2024 Governor's Fishing Opener will be held in Lake City on Lake Pepin and Pool 4 of the Mississippi River. The outlook for walleye and sauger anglers is very positive. Six year-classes from age 4 through age 10 contributed an abundance of sauger in the 2023 gill nets. During the 2024 angling season these fish and fast-growing individuals from the large 2020 year class should provide opportunities for sauger larger than 20 inches. Furthermore, strong reproduction of walleye from 2018-2021 will provide ample fish for anglers in 2024.

Smallmouth bass, largemouth bass, yellow perch, black crappie and bluegill should continue to provide excellent angling opportunities during 2024. The consistent bluegill and yellow perch reproduction observed for the last several decades should continue to provide good angling opportunities with quality sized fish available in 2024. The strong 2018 year class of black crappie will provide larger individuals to the population for the next several years. Northern pike numbers are coming down from recent highs, but anglers should have ample opportunities to target northern pike throughout Pool 4 as abundant food sources rapidly grow pike to preferred and even trophy size when

favorable conditions occur.

### **Other Mississippi River pools**

Fish populations remain in good shape for multiple gamefish species in the pools. Fall backwater electrofishing indicated that panfish (yellow perch, bluegill, bass and crappie) populations are above average, with quality size fish in all the pools sampled. Poor ice conditions in winter 2024 likely substantially reduced ice fishing pressure and overall harvest, and we expect a good open water angling for these species. Walleye and sauger are being caught in good numbers in tailwater habitat below the locks and dams, and should continue during the summer and fall in multiple habitat types in all of the pools. Catfish populations are in great shape in all the pools and will provide great angling opportunities throughout the summer and fall. Low water levels and flows in summer and fall 2023 followed by minimal flooding in spring 2024 may result in high abundance of vegetation and algal blooms in backwater habitats similar to previous low water years.

## **East Metro area**

### **Forest Lake (2,251 acres)**

Located within the city of Forest Lake and just east of Interstate 35, Forest Lake has good numbers of northern pike and walleye. Northern pike and walleye were captured at a rate of 4.5 and 9.8 per gill net, respectively, during the 2023 survey. Averaging 18.6 inches, walleye were sampled at the highest catches every recorded in the 2023 survey. Similarly, northern pike averaged an all-time high of 25.3 inches. Remember that fishing begins for largemouth bass on May 11 and for muskellunge on June 1. Catch-and-release for largemouth bass runs May 11 through May 24th. Three public accesses and a private marina provide access to a lake comprised of three basins and plenty of structure.

### **Bald Eagle Lake (1,047 acres)**

Located within the city of White Bear Lake and right off U.S. Highway 61, Bald Eagle Lake provides a solid fishery for both northern pike and walleye, that are stocked annually. In 2022, walleye averaged 17 inches and were sampled at their highest levels (4.3 per gill net) since 2008. Northern pike, averaging 24 inches, were in decent numbers at 6.2 per gill net. Bald Eagle also provides respectable panfish, largemouth bass and muskie fishing. One public access operated by Ramsey County is located just off Highway 61 on the east side of the lake.

### **Smaller lakes**

If fishing East Metro's larger lakes is not your thing, give one of the smaller Fishing in the Neighborhood lakes a try for walleye in 2024. Carver (Woodbury), Cobblestone (Apple Valley), Como (St. Paul) and Ravine (Cottage Grove) lakes are stocked every year with yearling and adult walleye to provide quick action in a smaller lake setting.

### **Remember East Metro's 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, muskie, white bass, and smallmouth bass. Refer to the Wisconsin-Minnesota Border Waters page in the 2024 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. The fishing season is open year-round with a catch and release only regulation for walleye, sauger, largemouth and smallmouth bass. Pool 2 also offers good fishing for white bass, channel catfish and flathead catfish and is comprised of all backwaters and connected lakes except for Crosby, Pickerel, Upper, Little Pigs Eye and North Star Steel lakes.

## **West Metro Area**

### **Lake Waconia**

Lake Waconia is a 3,080-acre lake located north of the city of Waconia in central Carver County. Public water access

is provided at three locations around the lake with 82 vehicle/trailer spots in total. Waconia is primarily managed for walleye (special regulation: 16-inch minimum length) and muskie (muskie angling is not open until June 1). In addition, Lake Waconia supports catchable populations of largemouth bass, northern pike, sunfish and black crappie. The 2022 survey marked the highest catch rate of walleye in Lake Waconia in the previous 20 years. Average size of walleye sampled was 16.8 inches and the largest fish sampled was 27.1 inches, providing excellent angling opportunities. Additionally, black crappie numbers were high with some fish over 10 inches, and sunfish are abundant but with higher numbers of smaller fish. A lesser-known species that anglers may not be aware of existing in Waconia is freshwater drum. Low numbers of freshwater drum were sampled in 2022; however, average size was phenomenal with an average length of 22.3 inches and fish up to 26 inches sampled.

### **Lake Nokomis**

Lake Nokomis is a 201-acre lake located in south Minneapolis that's managed for tiger muskie and walleye, along with a naturally occurring bass-panfish mix. In 2023, walleye abundance (12.2/gill net) was well above typical values, with a desirable average size of 18.2 inches. A boat launch, owned by the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, is located on the northwest corner of the lake. There are two fishing piers and ample shore fishing opportunities as the lake is entirely within Lake Nokomis Park. Rental canoes are available, subject to availability and hours of operation. The lake's depth structure allows you to cast to deep water from many places on shore. To supplement walleye fishing, try for the abundant bluegill and moderately abundant crappie. Boat anglers need to know gas motor use is not allowed on Minneapolis city lakes. The Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board allows use of electric motors; gas outboards can remain on a boat as long as the motor is not run. Notice where you park, as some Lake Nokomis Park spaces and lots are metered.

### **Lake Minnetonka**

Lake Minnetonka deserves its reputation as a great multi-species fishery. Crappie and sunfish are abundant and of decent size. Anglers have reported harvesting their limits of crappie earlier this spring and should continue to provide excellent angling opportunities throughout the summer. Northern pike are very abundant but are not just the hammer handles found in many other lakes with abundant pike. Minnetonka has a walleye population with a range of sizes and is one of the best largemouth bass lakes in the area for both numbers and size of fish. Minnetonka is also a popular place to target muskie after the June 1 muskie opener.

## **St. Cloud area**

### **Pearl Lake**

Pearl Lake is a 753-acre lake located in southeastern Stearns County within 10 miles of St. Cloud. The lake is primarily managed for walleye and northern pike. The main change in 2024 is that there are no longer any experimental regulations on the lake. The walleye regulation was removed in 2018 and this year the northern pike regulation was removed. Northern pike in Pearl Lake are abundant, and net catches in 2023 revealed a population that continues to be high. Normally lakes with high populations of northern pike mean lots of small "hammer handles" and although there are plenty of fish less than 22 inches that anglers are encouraged to harvest, prospects for catching quality size pike are good considering the fact that 20% of northern pike exceed 26 inches and 5% exceed 30 inches. Walleye have been managed through fingerling stocking since the 1940s, and the walleye catch is currently high. Walleye ranged in length from 10-28 inches with an average size of 17 inches and 1.9 pounds. Seventy-one percent of the walleye sampled were longer than 15 inches with 19% being longer than 20 inches. Sunfish and largemouth bass are plentiful, but populations generally consist of smaller sized individuals. Currently the population of black crappie is high, with an average size of just under 10 inches. Anglers targeting black crappie should have a good chance at catching quality sized fish as 63% of the sampled population exceeded 10 inches in length. The public access on Pearl Lake is located on the north side of the lake but anglers should arrive early since parking can be problem on opener.

### **Sauk River Chain of Lakes**

Located in south-central Stearns County near the cities of Richmond and Cold Spring, the Sauk River Chain of Lakes is formed by a dam near the city of Cold Spring and is made up of nine different lakes, several of which are located

directly on the Sauk River, while others are off channel but still influenced by the river. The Sauk River chain is a great all-around fishery with an excellent variety of species for the area. Anglers can catch quality-sized sunfish, black crappie, largemouth and smallmouth bass, walleye, muskie, northern pike, and channel catfish. A fisheries survey conducted in 2021 found good numbers of walleye with an average size of 16 inches and 1 1/2 pounds. The lakes also support a good number of sunfish over eight inches and black crappie over 10 inches. Moderate numbers of northern pike were observed with an average length of 22 inches and 2 1/2 pounds with the largest being 35 inches. Anglers have also reported catching muskie exceeding 40 inches. Bass can provide some excellent action with largemouth averaging 12 inches with fish up to 21 inches and smallmouth averaging 13 inches with fish up to 20 inches. Good numbers of large channel catfish are also available with fish averaging 21 inches with a few exceeding 30 inches. The chain has special bag limits on catfish and sunfish so be aware of these if you are planning on harvesting these species. There are two public accesses located on the chain, one located on the Sauk River off County Road 22 just east of Becker Lake and the other is off County Road 71 east of Cedar Island Lake. The lakes are infested with zebra mussels and so anglers should be mindful of this and remember to clean, drain and dry their boat.

### **Two Rivers Lake**

Two Rivers Lake is a 575-acre lake located near Holdingford in Stearns County. Anglers can expect good fishing for walleye, northern pike and black crappie. A lake survey conducted in 2023 found decent walleye numbers, averaging 16 inches long, with a number of fish over 20 inches. The largest walleye sampled was almost 30 inches. Fingerling stocking continues to be successful, and anglers could expect good fishing this opener. Northern pike numbers were high in 2023 and anglers can expect to find some quality size pike out there. Black crappie numbers continue to be above average. While the average size is just under eight inches, anglers can still find some crappies over 10 and 12 inches. Other species worth pursuing include largemouth and smallmouth bass and sunfish.

### **Clearwater Lake**

This 3,158-acre lake is located two miles north of Annandale on the border of Wright and Stearns counties. Clearwater is the largest lake in the Sauk Rapids management area and a popular destination for bass fishing and other recreation. Anglers can expect good fishing for northern pike, largemouth bass and panfish. While walleye opportunities are currently somewhat limited, anglers still have some chances to catch them too. Walleye up to 27 inches were sampled with an average weight of three pounds. Northern pike provide a good harvest opportunity for anglers due to relatively high numbers. Northern pike averaged two and a half pounds in the 2022 survey with some fish over 32 inches available. Largemouth bass numbers are also high and can provide plenty of action for anglers. Black crappie and sunfish are available in good numbers and some larger crappies (up to 14 inches) are present. Starting March 1, daily sunfish and crappie limit were reduced so that the daily possession limit for sunfish is now 10, while the daily possession limit for crappie is now five. There are two public accesses on the west basin and a private fee access located on the east basin. Invasive species present include Eurasian Watermilfoil, Starry Stonewort and Zebra Mussels. It is important to take extra caution and prevent spreading these species to other bodies of water.

### **Sugar Lake**

This 1,015-acre lake is located five miles north of Annandale in northern Wright County. The lake has excellent water quality and is a popular recreation lake managed for walleye, muskie, and northern pike. In 2007, experimental fishing regulations were put in place for northern pike (24 to 36-inch protected slot) and black crappie (five fish daily bag limit). A recent fisheries lake survey conducted at Sugar Lake indicated an abundance of game fish, making it an excellent destination for anglers. The lake offers great fishing opportunities for smaller sized northern pike, largemouth bass and sunfish. Additionally, anglers can expect a chance to catch quality sized black crappie (up to 15 inches) and walleye (up to 31 1/2 inches) with the potential for trophy muskie (up to 54 inches!) as well after the June 1 opener for muskie. Overall, Sugar Lake is an ideal spot for anyone looking for a quality fishing experience. There are two public accesses on the lake, one each on the north and south ends of the lake. During the fishing opener, both can be crowded, but the south access has room for up to 18 vehicles with trailers. Eurasian milfoil, and zebra mussels are present in the lake and users should be careful not to spread these invasive species to other lakes.

## **Hinckley area**

### **Chisago County**

#### ***Chisago chain of lakes***

This chain of lakes (South Center, North Center, South Lindstrom and Chisago) has had good numbers of walleyes in recent surveys. Northern pike grow well in these lakes and there is a 24-36 inch protected slot for pike in North and South Center lakes. Largemouth bass fishing action should be good for the catch and release season which opens on the May 11 fishing opener. East and West Rush Lakes are a good bet for walleye and northern pike, as well as good numbers and sizes of crappies and sunfish.

#### ***Isanti County***

Green Lake west of Cambridge is a good all around lake for walleye, northern pike, largemouth bass, crappies and sunfish. The Rum River, with several access points in the county, also offers fishing for smallmouth bass, walleye, suckers and redhorse.

#### ***Kanabec County***

Walleye in Knife Lake spawned in mid-April and should be well dispersed throughout the lake by the fishing opener. Knife has an 18-24 inch protected slot for walleye with good numbers under 18 inches. Crappie action is usually good on Knife. Fish Lake, Ann Lake and the Snake River are other options for walleye, northern pike, bass, crappies and sunfish.

#### ***Pine County***

Cross and Pokegama lakes, connected to the Snake River system, have a wide variety of fish species. In addition to walleye and northern pike, these lakes have some large crappies and sunfish, as well as catfish, redhorse and white bass. Muskie are stocked in Cross Lake and the season begins June 1. Lake sturgeon are present in the Snake River system and the catch and release season begins on June 16. Island and Sturgeon lakes, just off Interstate 35, both had lake surveys completed in 2023. Results suggest Island might be the better choice for walleye, 20-plus inch northern pike, and keeper size yellow perch, while sturgeon has better numbers and sizes of crappies and sunfish and a healthy largemouth bass population. If size isn't an issue, sturgeon also has abundant northern pike under 20 inches. The season for trout in inland lakes also begins on May 11. Grindstone Lake is the only trout lake in the area and is stocked annually prior to the fishing opener with rainbow trout and brown trout. While Grindstone is not a designated trout lake, a trout stamp is required to keep trout. Grindstone also has fishing for crappies, smallmouth bass and northern pike.

## **Little Falls area**

### **Big Swan Lake**

This 950-acre lake is a gem in Todd County, just outside Swanville. With healthy pike, walleye, bass, crappie and sunfish populations, the lake has plenty to offer anglers. Extensive bulrush beds and excellent submerged vegetation make this an angler's paradise with ample structure. Recent walleye fingerling stockings have survived well and opportunities to catch some quality walleye are available. Special regulations are present for northern pike (24-36" protective slot, with only one over 36" and a six-fish daily bag limit). Size structure of the pike has been impressive, with quite a few fish over 30" present. Additional opportunities are available for quality bass, crappie and "eater" size bluegill as well. More information can be found on the [Big Swan Lakefinder page](#).

### **Sullivan Lake and attached Platte Lake**

Sullivan and connected Platte Lake offer up some excellent fishing opener choices. With some natural reproduction and supplemental walleye fry stocking, several decent year classes are present in both Sullivan and Platte lakes. Located on the northeast corner of Morrison County, several lakes can be found in the area, but Sullivan and Platte offer a nice variety of angling options with excellent walleye, pike, bass and crappie. An experimental 10 fish daily bag limit is in place for sunfish for the lakes. Only 10 total sunfish can be kept daily from both Sullivan and Platte combined. Bulrush beds abound in both lakes offer some unique structure to challenge anglers as well. More

information can be found on the [Sullivan Lake](#) and [Platte Lake](#) pages on Lakefinder.

### **Little Rock Lake and the Mississippi River**

Between both of these connected waters, about 3,000 acres of water are navigable with naturally reproducing walleye, smallmouth bass, largemouth bass, channel catfish, northern pike, black crappie and bluegill available to anglers. Recent efforts to improve fish habitat and water quality using a short-term drawdown on Little Rock Lake in 2019 is certainly having some benefit from a fishery perspective. A recent netting survey from spring 2023 revealed a significant increase in sunfish, crappie and bass recruitment, with sunfish over 10 inches in the sampling effort. Little Rock Lake offers some distinct opportunities for anglers for the fishing opener and beyond. In our 2020 survey we sampled 17.18 walleye per net, which is the highest ever recorded for the basin! Plenty of “keeper” size fish are available, with some approaching 30 inches. There is also a strong population of channel catfish and black crappie, and a reasonable population of northern pike. The Mississippi River offers some great opportunities above the Sartell Dam. Caution is advised if boating farther upstream (beyond the Rice Bridge), as shallower water does prevent conventional boat traffic most of the time. Smallmouth bass, walleye, channel catfish and even muskie can be caught in this stretch of river. Mapping efforts associated with the drawdown were completed and available on the [C-Map Genesis website](#). Lake survey information on Little Rock Lake can be found on the [DNR Lakefinder page](#).

### **Big Sauk Lake**

This 2,094 acre impoundment of 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. Our sampling in 2023, yielded the second highest catch rates ever for walleye at 12.7 per net. Anglers can 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 ample opportunities to use current to an angler’s advantage. Big Sauk Lake can offer some great opportunities for largemouth bass, yellow perch and black crappie as well. Further details can be found on the lake’s [DNR Lakefinder page](#).

### **Alexander Lake**

This 2,708 acre lake located in northern Morrison County 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 watermilfoil, the fish tend to use both the inside and outside edges of the milfoil 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 lake’s [DNR Lakefinder page](#).

### **Mille Lacs Lake**

Anglers can expect to catch good numbers of walleye this season. Walleye angling success during the winter of 2023-24 was very good due to the lack of yellow perch, which are the most important food item for walleye. Anglers should experience high catch rates during the open water season. Live bait rigs or slip bobbers with leeches is the most popular way to catch walleyes on Mille Lacs. Although live bait rigs work the best, anglers also use crankbaits and artificial jigs to catch fish. The most abundant size range anglers can expect to catch is from 17-23 inches. Walleye fishing will be catch and release only to start the season through August 15. After August 15, anglers will be able to keep one walleye between 21-23 inches or one fish over 28 inches.

Mille Lacs Lake is considered a world class smallmouth bass fishery. Anglers come from all over the country to fish smallmouth bass on Mille Lacs. Spring surveys have indicated high numbers of bass over 17 inches, with bass over 20 inches are sampled annually. By all accounts the smallmouth bass fishery in Mille Lacs Lake is very healthy and showing great signs of quality angling for years to come. To manage the lake to provide a high-quality fishery, all bass longer than 17-inches must be released and only 3 bass under 17 inches can be harvested. The harvest season for bass is consistent with statewide regulations, so no harvest prior to May 24.

Northern pike offer a great fishing opportunity on Mille Lacs Lake. There is a healthy population of pike in the lake. The most abundant size range anglers can expect to catch is from 20-30 inches. Pike are often overlooked by anglers, but Mille Lacs Lake has a high-quality size structure, with individuals over 40 inches long sampled annually. Anglers fish for pike all summer long trolling along the edges of aquatic plants in some of the southern bays and trolling crankbaits on mid-water reefs. The northern pike fishery in Mille Lacs Lake appears to be sustaining its quality and maintaining abundance. All northern pike over 30 inches must be immediately released. The possession limit is 3 pike.

Complete regulations are posted at all public access sites, most resort access sites, and on the [Minnesota DNR website](#), so please be familiar with the regulations.

## **Southeast Minnesota trout streams**

One way to avoid the crowds on the fishing opener is to visit the trout streams of southeast Minnesota. If you go, know that many streams in the Lake City and Lanesboro areas are currently at low flow conditions. Lack of snowmelt and rain (until recently) has kept streams at a minimum baseflow for much of the winter and spring. This extended period of low flows has caused an increase of instream sedimentation and growth of filamentous algae and aquatic vegetation. Do not be alarmed at the amount of “greenery” throughout a stream or fine sediment affecting water depth. Ideally, subsequent rainfalls will flush the sediment and algae through these systems and improve stream conditions for anglers. Despite the unique stream conditions, both adult brook and brown trout populations are in good shape. Many streams have higher numbers of fish greater than 10 inches due to successful reproduction in previous years. Spring surveys have indicated that smaller trout are on average doing well in many area streams but may vary by individual stream. Therefore, anglers should expect to see streams looking different than previous visits, but angling opportunities are still plentiful for various species and sizes of trout.