

Northeast region outlook for 2019 fishing opener

Several areas will be closed to fishing to protect vulnerable populations. Check the DNR website for a [listing of seasonal closures](#).

Aitkin

In the Aitkin area anglers may want to consider Farm Island, Hill, Big Sandy, Minnewawa, Waukenabo, Round (North of Garrison) and Cedar lakes. The very dark water of Big Sandy will be the first to warm in comparison to the clearer waters of Cedar and Farm Island, and will probably make it one of the best bets for numbers of walleye early in the season.

Other fishing options in the area are the Mississippi River and its larger tributaries (Willow, Sandy, Swan, Rice rivers) plus Snake River in the southeastern part of the county. These waters often don't get the same fishing pressure of the more popular lakes and can provide for some fast action. Although often overlooked, the Mississippi River is known to produce excellent catches of walleye, northern pike, catfish and of course smallmouth bass later in the season. With over 100 miles of river in the Aitkin area, the Mississippi can be a great place to get away from the crowds.

Brainerd

In the Brainerd area walleye fishing on the area's largest lakes, Gull, Whitefish, Edward and North Long, are the best bets. These lakes are also great choices for quality-sized northern pike. Trout fishing in the Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area is a great alternative fishing outing especially for those with smaller crafts or shore anglers. Catch and release largemouth bass opportunities abound in Crow Wing and Cass counties.

Grand Rapids

In the Grand Rapids area anglers looking to catch good numbers of quality walleye, along with some fish for the frying pan, should focus on shallow, fertile lakes early in the fishing season. These lakes have stained water that warms up quickly, and are typical favorites for early season anglers. Some lakes to try include Winnibigoshish, Cut Foot Sioux, Island, Split Hand or Round. Anglers will find that these lakes support good numbers of keeper-sized fish, and provide the chance at catching a large fish. Be sure to note that special regulations exist on these waters so consult the fishing regulation book prior to heading out.

Anglers looking for fast action for smaller walleye should consider Bowstring or Jessie lakes. Cold, clear, deep lakes such as Pokegama, Siseebakwet and Trout lakes also provide excellent walleye fishing opportunities, but the action typically improves a little later in the season, as water temperatures slowly increase.

Anglers looking for a break from walleye or pike fishing will find excellent panfish opportunities throughout the Grand Rapids area. Yellow perch numbers are up in Winnibigoshish, providing quality fishing opportunities. Several area lakes also provide good bluegill and crappie action early in the season. Popular spring panfish locations include Split Hand, Bass, Graves and Dixon lakes. These lakes are known for big panfish and have a special 5 fish bag limit for sunfish. Split Hand also has a 5 fish bag limit for crappie and produces some very large fish at times.

Tower

In the Tower area, Lake Vermilion will provide anglers an opportunity to keep walleye across a wide range of sizes. The protected slot from 20 to 26 inches with a 4 fish bag limit is still in place. Abundance remains excellent with lots of keepers from 16 to 20 inches. And there is always opportunity for big “photo” fish. New this year, Vermilion pike will be regulated under the northeast zone regulation so all pike from 30 to 40 inches must be released, with only one pike allowed over 40 inches in the two fish bag limit.

Recent surveys of lakes in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness points to some excellent walleye lakes for that wilderness opener experience: Birch, Knife, Clear and Ottertrack. Both Trout and Kekakabic in the BWCAW have healthy lake trout populations. Closer to Ely, Bear Head Lake in the state park has a nice abundance of walleye between 12 and 20 inches as well as decent size largemouth bass.

International Falls

In the International Falls area the best and most consistent walleye-angling success on Rainy Lake usually occurs during the summer months when fish can be found on the mid-lake reefs. Rainy is a large, deep lake that warms up slowly and as a result, early season angling for walleye can be challenging; however, success can be found in shallow bays that warm up quickly (Black Bay for example) and areas with current. The 2018 fall assessment of Rainy Lake found good numbers of walleye in the 12-13 and 15-17 inch length groups, which should provide good angling opportunities in 2019.

Kabetogama Lake usually becomes ice free about a week before Rainy Lake and warms quicker since it is smaller and not as deep. The earlier warm-up often results in good early season success for walleye anglers on Kabetogama. Much of the shoreline provides excellent walleye spawning habitat so the fish are well distributed and anglers don't have to go far to find fish. Fishing from shore can be good some years. A very strong year-class of walleye produced in 2015 and good production in 2016 will provide angling opportunities for eating sized walleye this year. Anglers are reminded that the walleye slot limit was modified on March 1 to an 18-26 inch protected slot limit, with one walleye over 26 inches allowed in possession (applies to all lakes in the Namakan Reservoir).

Pelican Lake near Orr is a relatively large (nearly 11,000 acre) lake with a diverse fishery that provides opportunities to catch northern pike, bass (largemouth and smallmouth), walleye,

black crappie and bluegill. Special regulations for northern pike and bass were first implemented in 1998. The northern pike regulation has been discontinued and the lake is now part of the North Central zone regulation (22-26 inch protected slot, 10fish bag, only 2 larger than 26 inches). The bass regulation remains in place and protects fish from 14 to 20 inches. Those seeking a fishing opportunity on a smaller lake should consider Ash Lake north of Orr. The northern pike population has really responded well to the 24-36 inch protected slot, creating a high quality northern pike fishing experience. Numerous smallmouth bass, above-average numbers of walleye, and good numbers of decent sized bluegill make Ash Lake a worthy destination for early season action.

Duluth

In the Duluth area the St. Louis River continues to provide high quality fishing opportunities for walleye and many other species such as muskellunge, northern pike, smallmouth bass, black crappie and channel catfish. Angler catch rates for lake sturgeon have also been high. Anglers should handle sturgeon carefully and release them back to the water as quickly as possible.

Finland

In the Finland area there are numerous lakes with good walleye populations and a variety of sizes; however, early season walleye fishing can be challenging. Patches of snow on the ground and the remnants of winter ice on larger/deeper lakes are not unusual for the fishing opener. Typically, the shallower, darker and riverine lakes in the area provide the best walleye fishing early in the season as walleye spawning is completed earlier in these waters.

As water temperatures increases in late May and early June the deeper, colder and clearer lakes become more productive for walleye angling. Northern pike are abundant in many Finland area lakes and generally provide for good angling action throughout the year. The lakes in the Finland area are relatively small with varying degrees of access, small fishing boats and canoes will get the angler on most lakes while larger trailer-in boats are limited to about 25 lakes with concrete plank or gravel back-down accesses. Parking can be an issue with few accesses having capacity for 10 vehicle/trailer combinations. Lakes to consider for opener in the Finland area include Crooked, Four Mile, Greenwood, the McDougal Chain of Lakes, Sand and Windy. Opening weekend also provides good fishing for rainbow trout, brook trout and splake in the 25 lakes that are managed for trout fishing in the Finland area.

Grand Marais

In the Grand Marais area walleye populations in most lakes will lack a dominant year class, meaning fish should be available in a wide range of sizes, but perhaps in somewhat lower numbers. Remnants of a strong 2012 year class may provide some opportunity to catch larger walleye. We may be facing another spring with a late ice-out, and it is possible that many of the larger, deeper lakes in the area could still have significant ice cover on opening day. Anglers should be prepared to look for open water, and may be best off to target one of the many smaller, shallower lakes in the area that tend to be good early season choices. As usual, fishing should be good in the area's many stream trout lakes, although ice could be an issue on some.

Lake trout fishing should be good where a launch is possible; recent surveys have shown excellent lake trout numbers in most of the lakes checked. Anglers could also check out some of the area's streams; it is very likely that steelhead will still be running in the larger rivers along Lake Superior on opening day.

Lake Superior

In the Lake Superior area, steelhead fishing in tributaries has already begun; however, the recent snow event will make for interesting fishing and colder water for the next week or so. There are remnant patches of ice remaining on the big lake but anglers are looking forward to getting out after lake trout and coho salmon. Lake trout harvest has been very good in recent years, but we may be on the bottom of the coho cycle this summer. Two strong year-classes of smelt have resulted in stronger runs in the past two years with dip-netters finally having some good luck in the streams as well as seining along Park Point in Duluth.