

NE Region 2020 Fishing opener outlook  
April 23, 2020

Aitkin: In the Aitkin area, anglers may want to consider Farm Island, Hill, Big Sandy, Minnewawa, Esquagamah, Big Pine (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, Big Pine, Hill and Farm Island, and will probably make it one the best bets for numbers of walleye early in the season. Don't forget the new 3-fish limit for Walleye on Lake Minnewawa if you do give that a go. Big Sandy and Farm Island also have special regulations for Walleye, so pay attention to the signs and fishing regulation synopsis for those regs too. Other fishing options in the area include the often-overlooked Mississippi River and its larger tributaries (Willow, Sandy, Swan and Rice Rivers) plus the Snake River in the southeast 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. The Upper 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 the 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 Chain including Round Lake, Whitefish, Pelican, 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 for shore-anglers. Rainbow Trout will be stocked on time for the opener this year, despite the Covid-19 pandemic challenges. Lake Trout are a new option in Sagamore Lake and the Pennington-Arco-Alstead-Mahnomen Complex. No live minnows may be used or possessed in designated Trout Lakes, such as these. You may use live leeches and minnows that are dead and frozen, dried or pickled. The Lake Trout daily limit is two, but consider releasing small Lake Trout to help these newly emerging fisheries develop. The Mississippi River and the Crow Wing River are great options to get away from crowds in the usual Walleye spots. Check river flow and depth conditions ahead of time and plan accordingly. Largemouth Bass (catch and release through May 22nd), Crappie and Bluegill opportunities abound in the hundreds of Crow Wing and Cass County waterbodies.

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. The St. Louis River also offers excellent shore-fishing opportunities at Rice's Point, Munger Landing, Boy-Scout Landing and Perch Lake. Other excellent angling opportunities exist among the reservoirs north of Duluth. Wild Rice and Boulder Reservoirs are shallow and warm quickly and may provide more consistent early season action than some other larger and deeper lakes. These lakes offer ample year-classes of eater size Walleye with some opportunities for trophy catches. Anglers looking for fast action for smaller Walleye may want to consider Island Lake Reservoir.

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 12 to 16 inches. And there is always opportunity for big "photo" fish. If you would like a more remote fishing experience without going in to the Boundary Waters, Big Lake on the Echo Trail northwest of Ely should provide some great walleye fishing and the occasional catch of a large smallmouth bass. The area also has a number of stream trout

lakes such as Tofte, Miner's Pit, High, and Dry Lakes and others offering rainbow, brook, brown, and splake trout fishing.

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 temperature increases in late May/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 ten 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.

Grand Rapids: 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 in the Grand Rapids area. These lakes have stained water that warms up quickly, and are typical favorites for early season anglers. Some lakes to try include Cut Foot Sioux, Island, Split Hand, or Round lakes. Anglers will find that these lakes support good numbers of keeper size 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. The 17-26 inch protected slot limits on Trout, Swan, Split Hand, and Moose lakes were modified to 20-24 inch protected slots in 2020. This change will allow more harvest while still protecting size quality. Anglers should note the special regulations on Swan Lake now include tributaries streams. The protected slot limit on Deer Lake near Effie was dropped. Anglers on Winnibigoshish should find improved numbers of smaller fish in 2020, as the 2018 year class of Walleye looks to be strong. 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.

Grand Marais: In the Grand Marais area 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 some ice cover on this year's early opening day. Anglers should be prepared to look for open water, and may want to target one of the many smaller, shallower lakes in the area that tend to be good early season choices. Lakes in the west end of the area should be among the better bets for walleye. Although we haven't seen any really dominant walleye year classes lately, overall numbers in lakes in the area have been good, and some are yielding larger fish than usual. Opening-day fishing is usually good as well in the area's many stream trout lakes. Area lake trout populations seem to be in very good shape, with high numbers and some large fish turning up in several recently surveyed lakes. Lake trout will still be in the shallows, and should be active on the opener. If lakes are slow, steelhead should still be running in the larger rivers along Lake Superior on opening day.

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 2019 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 2020. 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 continue to provide opportunities for both eating sized walleye in the 12-14 inch size class as well as fish over 18 inches. Sauger production on Kabetogama was excellent in 2016 (the second highest on record) and growth is typically fast. These fish will provide additional harvest opportunities on Kabetogama in 2020. Anglers are reminded that both Rainy and Kabetogama lakes currently have a protected slot limit for walleye. All walleye from 18-26 inches long must be released, with one walleye over 26 inches allowed in a possession limit (applies to all lakes in the Namakan Reservoir as well). 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. Recent assessments on lakes in the Orr area indicate very good production of black crappie on several lakes. Anglers won't be disappointed if they spend some time chasing crappies on any of the lakes around Orr in 2020.

Lake Superior: In the Lake Superior Area, steelhead fishing in tributaries has already begun. Cool overnight temperatures and remnant snow in the headwaters is keeping water temperatures quite cool which may lead to a prolonged run this spring. Anglers have also been targeting Coho salmon, Rainbow Trout, and Lake Trout since early February and as smelt move nearshore to spawn these predators will follow. Lake trout harvest has been very good in recent years and early reports of Coho and Chinook salmon appear to show perhaps an increase in angling opportunities this spring.