

Northeast Region Fishing Outlook for 2022

Outlook by areas

Aitkin Area

Open water fishing in the Aitkin Area will likely get off to a cool start. As of mid-April, area lakes were still frozen tight with lots of ice. As such, we'd expect water temperatures to be much colder this opener than they were last year, when ice-out and that super warm weather came so early.

The 2016-2018 year classes of walleye appear to be pretty good in the area, so decent numbers of walleye 14-20 inches would be expected. With the colder water temperatures this year it may be worth your while to fish warmer areas of the lakes for walleye. Also, slow trolling or drifting with live bait is often one of the best methods to put fish in the boat this time of year. Some lakes in the area with decent walleye populations include Farm Island, Big Sandy, Minnewawa, Dam, Waukenabo, 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 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 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. 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.

Also, don't forget there are a handful of lakes with newer sunfish regulations. Dam, Minnewawa, Horseshoe, Waukenabo, Rat, Vanduse, Clear (near Glen) and Gun lakes now have 10-fish limits for sunfish. Big Sandy and connected waters also have five-fish limits for sunfish. These rules are meant to maintain or improve quality in the sunfish populations. Once a population suffers from poor size structure, often due to over harvest, it is a long and difficult process to reverse the trend. Anglers are encouraged to be selective with their harvest of bigger sunfish. By recycling these large fish, the next time you or your kids are out in the same area you'll have another chance at catching a trophy, which may be even bigger the second time around.

In addition to these typical species, stream trout roam the waters of Blue, Taylor (near Hill City) and Loon lakes, as well as Morrison Brook and Two River Springs. New to the trout scene is Long Lake, near Glen. Splake were stocked there beginning in 2018 and so there may be some nicer ones now available.

We also ask anglers to do their part in preventing the spread of aquatic invasive species by remembering to clean-drain-dispose each time you leave a lake.

But the most important thing we ask is that everyone stay safe and have fun during the upcoming season — sober boating and wear your PFDs!

From all of us at the Aitkin Fisheries Office, good luck and have a great year!

Brainerd area

In the Brainerd area walleye fishing on the area's largest lakes — Gull Chain, Whitefish Chain, Pelican Lake, Lake Edward and North Long Lake — are the best bets. These lakes are also great choices for quality-sized northern pike. One of the many smaller lakes in the area will have warmed up sooner with this late ice-out, and crappies and sunfish can be caught in the warmest areas of the lake. 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.

Duluth area

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, Boy-Scout Landing and Perch Lake. Please note that the Munger Landing boat launch, fishing pier and parking areas will be closed to watercraft, vehicle and pedestrian traffic from the spring of 2022 through the fall of 2023 to facilitate habitat restoration work. Also note that the St. Louis River, downstream of the Minnesota/Wisconsin border cable, is managed as a border water and has different regulations than other inland Minnesota waters. Lastly, there is a seasonal fish sanctuary from the border cable downstream to Highway 23, which does not allow for fishing until May 19.

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 waterbodies 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, which has an experimental fishing regulation that encourages the harvest of small, abundant walleye. The regulation is a 15 to 20 inch protected slot limit (all walleye from 15 to 20 inches must be immediately released), bag limit of 10 with not more than one walleye over 20 inches in possession. The goal of the regulation is to improve the average size of walleye while also enabling the sustainable harvest of abundant small fish while protecting most large walleye from harvest. Anglers looking for panfish action should be aware that reduced bag limits designed to protect and improve quality panfish opportunities have been implemented on six Duluth area waterbodies including Fish, Elliot, Moosehead, Strand, Wild Rice and Whiteface.

Finland area

Finland Fisheries Management Area has numerous lakes with good walleye populations and a variety of sizes. However, early season walleye fishing can be challenging. The spring season of 2022 looks to be a late ice-out and walleye fishing might not turn on until a few weeks after opener. 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.

With the late spring, anglers might find more success pursuing stream trout in lakes on opener. The Finland Fisheries Management Area has numerous stream-trout lakes. Many of the easily accessible lakes are stocked with yearling brook trout and/or rainbow trout prior to opening weekend, depending on ice-out and hatchery schedules. The more remote stream trout lakes can be difficult to access early in the season with frost coming out of the roads making for soft spots. Water temperatures in the area's stream-trout lakes should be ideal and trout should be actively feeding. Lakes such as Hogback and Echo have boat accesses suitable for small boats and canoes. While, lakes such as Divide and Section Eight require anglers to carry-in boats or canoes a short distance. Remote lake such as Eikela, Steer, Trappers and Goldeneye lakes will require a longer carry and best suited for canoe or float tube fishing. Anglers with ATVs can access Bean Lake near Silver Bay and Norway Lake near Babbitt.

Anglers who prefer a remote wilderness fishing experience might try the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW) lakes of Isabella, Kawishiwi, Bog and Perent lakes. All these lakes are good bets early in the season and are also located near the edge of the BWCAW making a day trip feasible. Island and Isabella rivers may also provide good river fishing within the BWCAW. Anglers seeking a wilderness fishing experience outside the BWCAW might try the Timber-Frear Loop. The Timber-Frear is a 15-mile loop of backcountry lakes (Whitefish, Elbow, Finger, Timber, Frear and Lost lakes) that offers a wilderness type of canoe trip without wilderness regulation or the need for a permit. The walleye populations in these lakes are well above average for their lake class. Northern pike are also present in most of these lakes.

Grand Marais area

Ice-out dates in the Grand Marais area will probably be fairly late in 2022, and few lakes will have warmed much by opening day. The result may be slow walleye fishing, especially on the larger, deeper lakes, some of which may still be ice-covered. Best bets for walleye will be the area's smaller, shallow, bog-stained lakes. Several can be found on the western side of Cook County. There anglers should find good numbers of fish, although many will be small due to the presence of fairly strong 2018 and 2019 year classes in many lakes. Smallmouth bass fishing will probably remain slow well into June. In this area, these late springs are great opportunities to fish for lake trout and stream trout in our inland lakes. Lake trout should be in the shallows and active on the larger lakes like Greenwood, Gunflint and Loon, and catchable from a canoe in any of the area's smaller lake trout lakes. Trout streams in the area may still be running high and cold on the fishing opener, but as they drop and warm up, they are worth a try as well. It is likely that some steelhead will still be in the larger streams along Lake Superior on opening day.

Grand Rapids area

The Grand Rapids Area provides excellent walleye angling opportunities, and May and June are considered to be prime time on many of our best waters. 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 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. Anglers looking for fast action for smaller walleye should consider Bowstring, Sand 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.

Northern pike anglers will find many good options in the Grand Rapids area. Large pike can be found in several area lakes including Swan, Trout and Pokegama. Although these lakes do not have special pike regulations, anglers are encouraged to protect the resource by releasing pike over 26 inches. Balsam, Spider, Coon-Sandwich and North Star are other good lakes for catching a large pike. These lakes have a special regulation requiring the release of pike from 24-36 inches.

Anglers looking for a break from walleye or pike fishing will find excellent panfish opportunities throughout the Grand Rapids area. Several area lakes 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 five-fish bag limit for bluegill. Split Hand also has a five-fish bag limit for crappie and produces some very large fish at times.

Several lakes in the area are infested with invasive species including Eurasian milfoil, curly leaf pondweed and faucet snails. Zebra mussels are found in Winnibigoshish, Pokegama, Bowstring and Sand lakes in recent years. Starry stonewort, an invasive algae that form thick mats, was discovered in Winnibigoshish. Anglers are reminded to drain their boats, live wells and bait buckets and to transport their boat with the drain plug removed. The transportation of invasive species is illegal and anglers are encouraged to thoroughly wash their equipment before moving it into another lake.

International Falls area

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 2021 fall assessment of Rainy Lake found below average overall walleye numbers but a wide distribution of sizes with above average numbers of fish in the 15-16 inch length group. There were also above average numbers of 9-inch walleyes in fall 2021 sampling that will grow into harvestable sizes over the next 2-3 years.

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. Strong year-classes of walleye produced in 2015 and 2016 continue to provide opportunities for both eating-sized walleye in the 15-17 inch size class as well as fish over 18 inches. In fact, fall 2021 sampling showed some of the best catch rates ever on Lake Kabetogama of walleyes greater than 17 inches long. We are also seeing large numbers of fish from the 2020 year-class that should recruit to the fishery over the next couple years.

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, 10 fish bag, only two 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 will find plenty of lakes in the Orr area with opportunities to catch bass, bluegill, crappie, walleyes and northern pike.

Lake Superior area

Angling opportunities on Lake Superior typically begin well before the walleye opener but with this late spring anglers have been anxiously awaiting the remaining snow and ice to clear to begin boat, stream and smelting season. Early spring boat anglers targeting nearshore lake trout and Coho salmon near Duluth typically do well trolling stickbaits near the surface. Steelhead anglers will be swinging egg patterns or spawn sacs with the lower shore streams warming up first and progressing up the North Shore as the temperatures increase. Smelters using seine nets along Park Point in Duluth and dipnets in the tributaries should see decent smelting opportunities as water temperatures slowly increase to the magic 40 degree mark. Non-native smelt populations have declined substantially since the 1960s and 1970s with the rehabilitation of lake trout. Many more smelt end up as fish food instead of in the buckets and coolers of anglers, but with lake trout back as the top native predator in Lake Superior the overall health and stability of the lake is much better.

Tower area

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 four-fish bag limit is still in place. Abundance remains excellent with lots of keepers in the 14- to 18-inch range. Bigger fish are more abundant than normal too, including many above the protected slot limit. Muskie fishing continues to produce trophy fish for those willing to gear up for the challenge. Muskie fishing on inland waters begins June 4, 2022. Good walleye fishing can be found in many other lakes in the area, especially those that are challenging to get to. Smallmouth fishing, especially in the Boundary Waters, can be productive as well. The area hosts a number of designated stream trout lakes. Some have improved

boat landings, some require portaging, some have a wilderness component, and some are suitable for shoreline angling. The trout species include rainbow, brook, brown trout and splake. A trout stamp is required to fish on designated stream trout lakes or to possess trout. A few of the stream trout lakes include Tofte, Miner's Pit, High, and Dry lakes.