

## Northeast Region Fishing Outlook for 2023

### Duluth

In the Duluth area, the St. Louis River continues to provide high quality angling 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, Perch Lake and several places along the Western Waterfront Trail including a new fishing pier installed at Indian Point in 2022. Please note that the Munger Landing boat launch, fishing pier and parking areas will be closed to watercraft, vehicle and pedestrian traffic through 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. Boulder Reservoir is shallow and warms quickly and may provide more consistent early season action than some other larger and deeper lakes. Boulder offers 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 and 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 were implemented on six Duluth area waterbodies including Elliot, Fish, Moosehead, Strand, Wild Rice and Whiteface.

### Lake Superior

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 seasons. 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 air and water 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 become 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.

## **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 quickly (Black Bay for example) and areas with current.

The 2022 fall assessment of Rainy Lake found above average overall walleye numbers with a lot of fish in the 7–12-inch length groups. Rainy Lake appears to have produced a large cohort of fish in 2021 and most of these were in the 7–8-inch length groups in the 2022 survey. There were also a good number of walleyes produced in 2019, and they were in the 10–12-inch length groups but will grow to preferred harvestable sizes over the next couple years. The 2022 survey also caught good numbers of 14- and 15-inch fish from various year-classes.

Kabetogama Lake usually becomes ice free about a week before Rainy Lake and warms more quickly since it is smaller and not as deep. The earlier warm-up often results in good early season success for walleye anglers. 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 have now largely grown into the protected slot but continue to provide opportunities for catch and release of larger fish. The 2022 Kabetogama fall assessment was dominated by smaller fish in the 8–12-inch length groups. Really good numbers of walleyes were caught from the 2021 year-class. Walleyes from the 2021 year-class ranged from 9.3 to 13.5 inches with most individuals in the 10–12-inch length groups. As a bonus, Sauger numbers have increased in each of the past two surveys on Lake Kabetogama, and the 2022 survey showed good numbers in the 14–16-inch length groups.

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 2 northern 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.

## **Grand Rapids**

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-Sandwick 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.

## **Aitkin**

Open water fishing in the Aitkin Area will likely get off to a cool start. As of late-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 are in a more typical year, when ice-out comes much earlier. Several year classes of walleye from 2016 to 2019 appear to be pretty decent in the area, so 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, Round (W. of Palisade), Waukenabo, Esquagamah and Cedar (near Aitkin) Lakes. The dark water of Big Sandy and Esquagamah will be the first to warm in comparison to the clearer waters of Cedar and Farm Island and will probably make them a decent bet for walleye early in the season. Don't forget there are special regulations for walleye on Big Sandy and connected waters, Minnewawa and Farm Island.

Other fishing options in the area are the Mississippi River and its larger tributaries (Willow, Sandy, Swan, Rice Rivers) plus the Snake River in the southeast part of the county. These moving waters often don't get the same fishing pressure of the more popular lakes and can provide for some fast action for walleye, channel catfish, northern pike and later in the season smallmouth bass. 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. Newer 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 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**

With over 400 lakes and several rivers and streams, the Brainerd lakes area has lots of quality angling opportunities. Best bets for walleye fishing are the largest of the area's lakes — Gull, Pelican, North Long, and Whitefish lakes. Edward and Round are also good options and because they are a bit smaller and shallower, they tend to warm up a bit quicker than the others and that may be important given the cool start to spring. These lakes are also great choices for quality-sized northern pike.

Bass anglers will find numerous lakes with quality bass populations. Though the larger lakes and lake chains attract numerous tournament anglers, anglers should not overlook the smaller lakes. Many have high numbers of bass and have the capacity to produce trophies over 20".

The many smaller lakes in the area will have warmed up sooner with a later ice-out, and crappies and sunfish can be caught in the warmest areas of the lake. There are excellent opportunities for catching big panfish throughout the area. Quite a few area lakes have a five-fish daily bag limit for sunfish and crappies, so anglers are reminded to check the regulations for the waters they intend to fish.

Trout fishing in the Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area is a great alternative fishing outing especially for those with smaller crafts or shore anglers. Angling is generally very good early in the season on these lakes.

## **Grand Marais**

Ice-out dates in the Grand Marais area will be late in 2023 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. Anglers should find decent numbers of fish due to fairly strong 2018- and 2019-year classes documented in many of the area's naturalized Walleye lakes. Many of these lakes also support Northern Pike which can add to the early season action. Smallmouth bass fishing will probably remain slow well into June.

Late springs in this area are great opportunities to fish for stocked stream trout or wild lake trout in our inland lakes. Each spring the Grand Marais office stocks yearling (9-12 inch) Rainbow Trout into several easily accessible lakes, including Mink, Kimball, Leo, Birch, Trout, Mayhew, and Pine (aka Trestle Pine). Often times these stocking occur the week before the fishing opener and can provide excellent opening weekend fishing. If stocking is delayed due to late ice-out these lakes can still provide decent fishing on opening weekend due to holdover of fish stocked the previous spring. The Grand Marais office also stocks many remote lakes regularly with Brook Trout and Splake, although access to many of these lakes may be difficult early in the season due to residual snowpack or soft/sloppy forest roads.

Lake trout should be in the shallows and active on the larger accessible lakes like Greenwood, Gunflint, and Loon, and catchable from a canoe in any of the area's smaller lake trout lakes. Inland brook trout streams 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. Late springs also provide the opportunity to fish steelhead well into May in the larger streams along Lake Superior.

## **Tower**

In the Tower area, spring was delayed, and some lakes and their fish populations might not be warmed up by mid-May. As is usual, however, fishing will quickly become productive for many anglers in the Tower area. Lake Vermilion will provide anglers an opportunity to catch 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 19-inch range, especially in West Vermilion. Larger fish are more abundant than normal, too, including many in or 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 3, 2023. Good walleye fishing can be found in many other lakes in the area, especially those that are challenging to get to. Smallmouth bass fishing, especially in the Boundary Waters, can be productive as well.

The Tower 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. Trout species available in this area include rainbow, brook, and 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 Lake, Miner's Pit, St. James Pit, and

Mott Pit. Regarding any type of fishing in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, all lakes require a valid travel permit that is administered by the U.S. Forest Service.