

Northeast Region Fishing Outlook for 2026

We wish you an enjoyable 2026 fishing season!

These fishing outlooks contain a wide range of fisheries information compiled in April by 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](#). Following these outlooks, we have included other important reminders to consider for your fishing season.

Outlook by areas

Aitkin area

The Aitkin fisheries area provides a multitude of angling opportunities for bass, walleye, northern pike, panfish, catfish and muskellunge. For the duration of the open water season, fantastic bites can be found throughout Aitkin County for all these species and more.

From ice-off to the regular fishing opener (Saturday, May 9), anglers can find willing-to-bite sunfish and crappies moving from their mid-winter basin habitats towards nearby shallow, dark-bottom bays that warm quickly. Starting the day fishing shallow and methodically working deeper with live bait or small plastics until you run into active fish is generally the best strategy during this transition period. New for 2026, beginning March 1, anglers have also had the chance to participate in a catch-and-release season for largemouth and smallmouth bass prior to the harvest season that begins Saturday, May 23. Largemouth bass can be found in most Aitkin area lakes, while the best smallmouth bass bites will be found in the Mississippi River, Round Lake near Garrison and Farm Island Lake.

Once the walleye and northern pike opener rolls around, anglers will find the Aitkin area's strongest walleye populations in Big Sandy, Farm Island, Minnewawa, Waukenabo, Round (near Garrison) and Ripple lakes. A close to normal ice-out in the Aitkin area would mean walleye are post-spawn and feeding actively by fishing opener. Generally, these fish will be found on shallow sand flats, rock piles, emerging weed lines, and any areas of current or comparatively warm water. Rigging live bait, slip bobbers, jigs and minnows, or casting and trolling minnow-style crankbaits in these habitats are all productive early season tactics. Don't forget, special regulations exist for walleye on Big Sandy, Minnewawa and Farm Island lakes.

Small and mid-size northern pike are prevalent in most Aitkin area lakes. Anglers wanting to target larger pike should focus on Hill, Sugar, Big Sandy and Shumway lakes. A reminder that a 22- to 26-inch protected slot is in place for pike in the north-central management zone, and anglers are encouraged to harvest pike below that protected slot to help maintain and improve size structure in the Aitkin area.

An emerging and still underutilized fishery in the Aitkin area is the 110-mile stretch of Mississippi River and its tributaries. Channel catfish populations in this reach of the river have greatly increased in recent years, and they offer a year-round season, fast action and great eating, especially out of cooler water. Walleye, smallmouth bass, northern pike and muskie are also present in the Mississippi River and offer additional angling options with little to no fishing pressure.

The Aitkin area also provides a handful of stream trout fishing opportunities at Blue, Taylor and Loon lakes, as well as Morrison Brook and Two Rivers Springs. All of these locations offer shore fishing opportunities and contain a diverse array of trout species.

A handful of lakes with special sunfish regulations exist in the Aitkin area that anglers are asked to be mindful of.

Dam, Minnewawa, Horseshoe, Waukenabo, Rat, Vanduse, Clear and Gun lakes all have 10-fish limits, while Big Sandy and all connected waters have a five-fish limit. These limits are intended to maintain and improve size structure. In addition to these special regulations, anglers chasing panfish on all Aitkin Lakes are asked to practice selective harvest by releasing large sunfish and crappies. Typically, when most of a lake's large panfish are harvested, it is very difficult to attain quality size structure in the future.

Finally, we ask anglers to do their part in preventing the spread of aquatic invasive species by ensuring they clean, drain and dry their boat before leaving the lake. Further, properly disposing of unwanted bait is extremely important in preventing AIS spread. Most importantly, we ask that everyone have a safe and fun open water season, practice safe boating and always wear your life jacket. From everyone here at the Aitkin fisheries office, good luck and tight lines!

Grand Rapids area

The Grand Rapids area provides excellent walleye angling opportunities, and May and June can 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 quickly and are typical favorites for early-season anglers. With early ice-out, however, some lakes may be a little ahead of schedule this year in terms of fish location and seasonal progression. Lakes to consider include Winnie, Cut Foot Sioux, Island, Jessie, Split Hand, Bowstring, Swan, Trout and Round. These lakes support good numbers of keeper-sized fish and provide opportunities to catch larger fish. Be aware that special regulations may exist on these waters, so consult the fishing regulations booklet before heading out.

Northern pike anglers will find many good options in the Grand Rapids area. Numerous lakes have high numbers of pike under 22 inches. These smaller, harvestable fish make excellent table fare, so anglers are encouraged to take advantage of this surplus. Harvesting these fish can also help improve the overall size of pike and reduce competition with other valued species such as walleye. Larger pike can be found in lakes such as 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 also good lakes for catching large pike and have special regulations requiring the release of pike from 24 to 36 inches.

Anglers looking for alternative species to walleye will find excellent sunfish opportunities throughout the area. Several lakes provide good sunfish action early in the season. Popular lakes include Cut Foot Lakes, Winnie, Split Hand, Bass, Graves and Dixon. These lakes are known for large sunfish and have a special five-fish bag limit.

Bass anglers will find many lakes with both largemouth and smallmouth bass populations. Most lakes contain largemouth bass, and with a little research, anglers can find lakes with either high numbers or fewer fish with larger average size. Deer Lake and Bass Lake (Cohasset) are well-known for smallmouth bass, along with several other area lakes.

Grand Rapids also manages several stream trout lakes with various levels of accessibility (boat ramp to backpacking). Trout species stocked include Rainbow, Brook and Splake. A trout stamp is required in addition to a fishing license to angler on these waters and more information can be found on page 32 of the 2026 fishing regulations booklet. Area lakes to consider include Camp 4, Deepwater, Erskine, Kremer, Larson, Lucky, Moonshine, Pickerel and Tioga Mine Pit.

Several lakes in the area are infested with invasive species, including Eurasian milfoil, curly-leaf pondweed, and faucet snails. Zebra mussels are present in Winnibigoshish, Pokegama, Bowstring, Sand, Jessie, Turtle, Moose and Swan lakes. Starry stonewort, an invasive algae that forms thick mats, is present in Lake Winnie.

Anglers are reminded to drain boats, livewells, and bait buckets, and to transport boats with the drain plug removed. Transporting invasive species is illegal, and anglers should thoroughly wash equipment before moving to another lake. Water levels at accesses may be low this year due to lack of precipitation, so use caution when launching.

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

Recent fish population assessments of Rainy Lake showed consistently high walleye numbers with a good size distribution. In 2025, walleye lengths ranged from 6.1 to 26.8 and averaged 13.4 inches long. Anglers can expect to find good numbers of harvestable-sized walleyes from a large cohort produced in 2021, with many of these in the 12- to 15-inch length groups in 2025. Anglers are also likely to encounter a lot of smaller fish because it appears that Rainy may have hatched another strong class of walleyes in 2024. The 2024 year-class were primarily in the 7- and 8-inch length ranges in 2025. Rainy is also known to produce large walleyes for those seeking memorable and trophy-sized fish.

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 2025 Kabetogama fall assessment showed good numbers of walleyes in the 14- to 17-inch length groups which should provide anglers with opportunity to catch harvestable-sized walleyes in 2026. There appears to be fewer 9- to 13-inch walleyes in Kabetogama due to weak year classes after the very strong 2020 year class. However, the 2025 assessment found above average numbers of walleyes that hatched in 2024 and were primarily in the seven and 8-inch length groups. The 2025 survey also saw above average numbers of 18- to 24-inch walleyes.

Anglers are reminded that both Rainy and Kabetogama lakes currently have a protected slot limit for walleye. All walleye from 18 to 26 inches long must be released, with one walleye over 26 inches allowed in a possession limit of four (applies to all lakes in the Namakan Reservoir as well).

Ban Lake near Orr is a small (389 acre) lake with a diverse fishery that provides anglers opportunities to catch bluegill, black crappie, largemouth bass, smallmouth bass, northern pike and walleye. Ban Lake has no special regulations. Fishing regulations follow statewide regulations for inland waters. Northern pike regulations follow the northeast zone regulation. Ban Lake is best known for its quality bluegill and black crappie fisheries, but it also supports fantastic largemouth and smallmouth bass populations. The 2025 assessment found above average bluegill catch rates with good numbers of fish above 7 inches and some reaching lengths greater than 9 inches. Black crappie catches were down from recent surveys, but fish over 10 inches were present. Bass (largemouth and smallmouth) are not an actively managed species in Ban Lake, but a robust population exists for both species. Largemouth bass average length was 12.7 inches with individuals approaching 18 inches present. Smallmouth bass average length was 14.3 inches with individuals approaching 17 inches present. While present in lower density, Ban Lake offers a high-quality northern pike fishery. Average length during the 2025 assessment was 26.4 inches with several fish over 36 inches (max length of 38.2 inches) present. Walleye have been stocked into Ban Lake historically, but it is apparent that Ban Lake is less conducive to support a walleye population and better suited for panfish and bass species. Walleye were sampled in low numbers during the 2025 assessment with lengths ranging from 20 to 23.3 inches. Ban Lake may not be a destination walleye fishery but its panfish and bass fisheries provide a great opportunity for anglers.

Brainerd area

With more than 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, Edward, Round and Whitefish. Good year classes of walleyes are present providing opportunities for both harvest and creating trophy fish memories. The 2024 year class in Gull is particularly strong with fish measuring 10 to 13 inches at present. Early season walleye angling in May and June can be good. These larger lakes are also great choices for quality-sized northern pike. Although most of these lakes do not have special pike regulations, anglers are

encouraged to release larger pike.

Bass anglers will find numerous lakes with quality bass populations and the year round catch and release season will provide anglers additional opportunities to catch these hard fighting fish. While largemouth bass are most common, smallmouth bass numbers continue to increase in many lakes. 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 inches.

Smaller lakes and bays in the area are the first to warm in the spring and crappies and sunfish can be caught in the warmest areas of the lake early in the season. There are excellent opportunities for catching numbers as well as quality 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 with rainbow, brook, brown and lake trout available depending on the lake. Several of the lakes in this area also have northern pike, some of which have been well-fed by stocked trout and have attained trophy size. Anglers are encouraged to watch for signs regarding an upcoming northern pike regulation proposal within the Cuyuna state recreation area.

Duluth area

The St. Louis River Estuary continues to offer exceptional and diverse fishing opportunities for walleye and other species, including muskie, smallmouth bass, black crappie and channel catfish. The 2018, 2019 and 2020 walleye year classes are very strong, and are now exceeding the 15-inch minimum size limit, ranging mostly from 16 to 22 inches. For anglers without a boat, the St. Louis River offers several shore-fishing opportunities, including Rice's Point, Boy-Scout Landing, Perch Lake and various spots along the Waabizheshikana Trail in west Duluth. Please note that the St. Louis River downstream of the Minnesota-Wisconsin border cable is managed as a border water and is subject to different regulations than other inland Minnesota waters. Additionally, there is a seasonal fish sanctuary from the border cable downstream to Highway 23, where angling is not permitted until May 19. Looking ahead, anglers should also start to plan for the closure of the Rice's Point access beginning this fall. Construction associated with the Blatnik Bridge replacement is expected to begin later this year and will necessitate a multiple-year closure of the Rice's Point public water access.

Other excellent angling opportunities exist among the reservoirs north of Duluth. Boulder and Fish reservoirs are relatively shallow and warm quickly, often providing more consistent early-season action than some larger, deeper lakes. Recent surveys on Boulder Reservoir have documented multiple strong walleye year classes, and fishing is expected to remain strong, offering anglers good numbers of quality fish. Similarly, sampling conducted in summer 2025 on Fish Reservoir revealed a robust walleye population, with fish averaging around 18 inches and multiple memorable fish exceeding 25 inches being caught.

Anglers seeking fast action and increased harvest opportunities for smaller walleye may want to consider Island Lake Reservoir, which has an experimental regulation designed to encourage harvest of abundant fish. Under this regulation, walleye from 15 to 20 inches must be immediately released, the bag limit is 10, and no more than one walleye over 20 inches may be kept. The goal is to improve average walleye size while allowing sustainable harvest of smaller fish and protecting larger individuals.

Quality panfish opportunities are also present across Duluth area reservoirs and local lakes. Anglers targeting panfish should note that reduced bag limits have been implemented on six Duluth area waterbodies (Elliot, Fish, Moosehead, Strand, Whiteface and Wild Rice) to protect and enhance quality panfish size structure.

Anglers looking for stream trout fishing opportunities have ample options in the Duluth fisheries area. Some streams adjacent to Lake Superior take springtime spawning runs of Steelhead Rainbow Trout like the Knife and Lester rivers. Many local inland streams support brook trout populations including the Knife, Blackhoof and Sucker rivers. Other brook trout opportunities closer to the Duluth metro include Miller, Knowlton and Keene creeks.

Tower area

Ice out in 2026 appears to be on pace with what we experienced in 2025 in the Tower area. This should correspond with a close to average spawning season for walleye and seasonable water temperatures for gamefish opener. By opener, the vast majority of walleye will likely be on the tail end of spawning or having completely wrapped up. However, hungry fish looking to replenish their energy may be found not far from their spawning grounds. Some male walleye may still be in typical spawning locations and fishing should continue to pick-up as the water temps slowly rise. Dark water lakes with areas of current such as Birch (near Babbitt), Fall and the White Iron/Garden Chain should be considered good options early in the year.

An excellent 2021 walleye year-class should provide Lake Vermilion anglers with a great opportunity to catch eater sized fish. The protected slot from 20 to 26 inches with a four-fish bag limit is still in place. Abundance remains excellent with plenty of keepers in the 14- to 19-inch range, especially in West Vermilion. Larger fish are also quite abundant, including many in or above the protected slot limit.

Lake Vermilion muskie fishing continues to produce trophy fish for those willing to gear up for the challenge. Muskie fishing on inland waters begins Saturday, June 6.

Smallmouth and largemouth bass fishing should continue to be good on several area lakes, with water temps conducive to spawning by the end of May. Lake trout anglers may also find fish still cruising some of the shallow water, especially early, however as water temps increase, lake trout will follow the cold-water refuge to deeper depths.

The Tower area hosts a number of designated stream trout lakes. Some have improved boat landings and/or shore fishing opportunities, while others require portaging with a wilderness component. 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 more accessible stream trout lakes in the area include Tofte, Hanson (which is now being stocked with rainbow trout), Miner's Pit, Embarrass Pit (also now stocked with rainbow's), and Jammer Lake. 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.

Finland area

After a couple mild winters, the winter of 2026 brought colder and snowier conditions to the Finland area, and coupled with a slow start to spring, ice-out may not occur until early May for many lakes in the area. The increased snowpack and cooler start to spring may limit early season travel in some areas of the Superior National Forest where roads are not plowed but should improve quickly once the weather begins to warm. Access to campgrounds and lakes along maintained system roads should be clear for anglers participating in the 2026 fishing opener.

May and June are excellent months to fish the stocked stream trout lakes managed by the Finland fisheries office. Many of these lakes receive annual stockings of catchable-sized (yearling) rainbow trout and brook trout each spring and can provide good action during the early season when water temperatures are still cool and fish are active. Most of the lakes managed for rainbow trout also receive fall stockings of splake which provide a chance to catch multiple species of trout during a trip. The most popular trout options in the area are Echo, Hogback, and Divide lakes. These lakes are stocked with rainbow trout yearlings in the spring and fall, have small boat ramps or carry down accesses, and good shore fishing opportunities. For anglers looking to escape the beaten path, there are also remote trout lakes in the area that can provide both solitude and good fishing for stocked brook trout. To view all the trout water in the Finland fisheries area and other portions of the northeast Minnesota, check out the [DNR Troutfinder](#).

Walleye and northern pike fishing on area lakes can be a little slow around opening weekend due to colder water temperatures compared to other portions of the state. The area's shallower walleye lakes with darker water generally warm faster and tend to provide better early season catch rates than the deeper, clearer lakes. Good early season options that have federal campgrounds and boat launches include Silver Island Lake, Toohey Lake and North McDougal Lake. As the season progresses, walleye fishing will improve in the clearer, deeper lakes like Windy,

Wilson and Dumbbell. Dumbbell Lake also supports a population of Shoepack strain muskies that provide a unique fishing opportunity for the area once that season opens. Lax Lake, located near Silver Bay, hosts a fishing pier at the public access and the lake is a good option for targeting panfish and largemouth bass. For anglers looking for a backcountry fishing experience outside of the BWCAW, they might consider the U.S. Forest Service administered Timber-Frear Canoe Route which encompasses six quality walleye lakes and features 11 dispersed campsites available on a first-come first-served basis.

The Finland fisheries area also supports good stream fishing opportunities for wild brook trout. Fishing in streams usually starts to pick up after the spring runoff period when the water temperatures approach 50 degrees. Popular options for inland brook trout fishing in the Finland area include the Little Isabella, Manitou and Split Rock rivers. Steelhead fishing on Lake Superior tributary streams usually starts in mid-April and can run through late May depending on water temperatures and flow conditions. Good options for Steelhead anglers include the lower portions of the Stewart, Gooseberry and Baptism rivers.

Grand Marais area

Similar to last year, late winter snowfall and cold temps caused snow and ice to persist. Depending on warm weather and rain events, ice out might occur around the May 9th fishing opener. Some lakes may still see ice cover. Walleye may still be spawning in certain areas and result in the bite being “hit or miss”. The Grand Marais area has a handful of waters that are closed in May to protect walleye spawning populations so please check the regulations prior to your fishing trip. Signs are placed on shore or with floating signs at those locations. A reminder that on Sea Gull, Gull and Saganaga lakes there is a three-walleye bag limit with only one fish larger than 20 inches. Trophy northern pike can likely be found in shallow warmer bays of larger lakes, but water temps may need to come up before they are willing to bite. Smallmouth bass fishing will be extremely slow for the opener with cold water temps.

Lake trout fishing, in relatively shallow water, should be excellent for the opener where lakes have recently lost ice cover. For anglers looking to target stocked rainbow trout lakes, try Birch, Esther, Kimball, Mayhew, Mink, Pine (i.e. Trestle Pine), Thompson, Trout and Leo lakes. Those lakes are stocked annually with yearling rainbow trout in mid to late May. Many area lakes are also stocked with fall fingerling brook trout or splake, both inside and outside the BWCAW. Backcountry fishing for brook trout, lake trout and splake can be outstanding. Fishing for trout should be good this spring with cold temperatures keeping fish in shallow waters and more accessible to shore or canoe anglers.

The major tributaries of Lake Superior in the Grand Marais area will likely be opening later than usual due to persisting ice cover and deep snow and might still hold some steelhead into May. Popular tributaries to fish on the upper shore are the Temperance, Cascade, Devil Track and Brule rivers. Brook trout fishing in streams (above barriers) may be good with decent stream flow. A reminder that different trout regulations exist for Lake Superior and tributaries below posted boundaries, streams above posted boundaries, and inland lakes. Anglers should be aware that public access on forest roads and portage trails may be in poor spring conditions with some roads still needing work from last year’s flooding events. Please plan accordingly.

Lake Superior area

Angling opportunities on Lake Superior typically begin well before the walleye opener and anglers have had good luck fishing for coho salmon and steelhead from shore and boat despite ice and cold temperatures keeping them from fishing the tributaries. Early spring boat anglers targeting nearshore lake trout and Coho salmon near Duluth have done well trolling stickbaits near the surface. Given the strong bite during the short-lived February ice fishery, it should be a great year for anglers targeting Coho.

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; however, cold overnight temperatures extending into mid-April will push the main run out later than it typically would be. A large 2022 year-class of cisco (a.k.a., tullibee or lake herring) allowed some predation pressure to be lifted from smelt and this spring, smelters should see good numbers if water conditions and temperatures allow. As spring turns to summer

the lake trout fishing is anticipated to be great again this year with DNR surveys showing near record-high abundance.

Anglers may notice more sea lamprey wounds on Lake Superior lake trout and salmon this year due to deferred treatments by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 2020; however, increased treatments the past few years should push back against higher-than-normal sea lamprey abundance.

Reminders for a great season

Introduce someone to fishing

Are you planning to introduce someone to fishing? Are you new to fishing and want to give it a try? We have tips and information for you — check out our [learn to fish webpages](#)!

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](#).

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](#).

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

After analyzing data showing the presence of mercury and per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances in the tissue of some fish from certain Minnesota waterbodies, the Minnesota Department of Health has updated its fish consumption guidelines. The updates include new length-based guidelines for walleye and northern pike, more protective guidelines for northeast Minnesota, and new guidelines for the Vermillion River in Dakota and Scott counties.

The MDH continues to advise that fish are generally a good part of a healthy diet, providing a source of protein and other nutrients, low in saturated fats. Some fish species, such as purchased salmon high in omega-3 fatty acids and low in mercury, help with heart health and brain function.

MDH's [updated fish consumption guidelines](#) provide the information you need to maintain fish in your diet that are low in contaminants.