

NW REGION OUTLOOK FOR 2020 FISHING OPENER

April 3, 2020

Ice-out across Northwest Minnesota is expected to be about normal this spring. The snowpack across much of the region is deteriorating rapidly with a late March warming trend and rains. Most lakes in the northern part of the region have 15-20 inches of solid ice. Ice thickness on the Canadian border waters is 24-30 inches. The weather forecast through the middle of April is for normal temperatures and above normal precipitation patterns. Overall ice thickness this winter was less than normal as a result of early, heavy snow cover. It is expected that we will be completely ice-free by the May 9 opener. The heavy snowfall experienced this winter in combination with a very wet fall will result in elevated lake and river levels across the region. Fish spawning activity is expected to occur near normal timing this spring pending major weather shifts in late April or early May. Traditional walleye opener lakes that tend to have earlier ice out dates with large expanses of shallow water and those with streams and rivers flowing through them will be the best bets for the opener. Anglers fishing lakes that are prone to winterkill on severe winters should check with local DNR Fisheries offices to make sure their lakes did not succumb to winterkill.

Walleye populations in our natural walleye lakes and many of our stocked lakes have excellent abundance and fish of a variety of sizes. Various strong year-classes of walleye are common across most of our natural walleye lakes and stocking efforts have contributed to good success on others. Walleye from good year-classes produced from 2013-2016 (14-20 inches) will comprise the bread and butter fish from most of our primary walleye lakes. Strong year-classes from 2018 and 2019 on many waters will likely be represented in the catch as well but will not be large enough to keep. Walleye Anglers can expect excellent walleye fishing on our large walleye lakes, particularly on Leech, Upper Red, Lake of the Woods and Cass lakes. The Walleye population on Leech remains strong and anglers can expect abundant walleye from 12-26 inches. Walleye numbers in Upper Red remain high. Multiple strong year-classes have produced many fish in the 12-20 inch size range. Protected slot limits remain in effect Lake of the Woods and several secondary basins in the Region. Walleye abundance remains strong on Cass Lake. Walleye and Sauger abundance in Lake of the Woods are well above average with excellent size distributions. The Northwest Region also boasts arguably the best trophy Northern Pike lakes in the State of Minnesota: Lake of the Woods and Upper Red Lake. While the opening weekend is not typically prime time for big pike, anglers should not rule out an encounter with one of these brutes. Anglers are reminded that special regulations are in place to protect large pike on both of these waters and about 50 other lakes in the region.

Anglers will also encounter signs at more than 50 lakes in the Northwest Region inviting public comment on a proposal to implement special angling regulations to improve/protect Bluegill size. Anglers interested in learning more about these proposals are encouraged to contact their local Area Fisheries office.

2020 will be the third year with the statewide Northern Pike zone regulations. These regulations apply to all waters with the exception the above-referenced special regulation lakes and North Dakota border waters. The new statewide Northern Pike regulations are based on management “Zones” that have been tailored to the specific population characteristics of each zone. Much of Northwest Minnesota lies in the “North-Central Zone” which has the following regulations:

- Daily and possession limit of 10 pike
- Not more than 2 pike may be over 26 inches
- All pike from 22-26 inches must be released immediately

Each year, public accesses need a considerable amount of work to repair ice heave damage and to ensure accesses are in order for the opener. Parks and Trails staff will do their best to have ramps and get the loading docks installed before the May 9 opener. Anglers are reminded to help prevent the spread of invasive species by inspecting their boats for invasive plants and animal, draining all water from their bilges and livewells and remembering to pull their drain plug before traveling down the road.

Here is a general opener forecast by management area, a few noteworthy lakes that could provide some exceptional fishing, and an overview of the status of the large walleye lakes.

BAUDETTE

Rainy River: Each spring, Walleye migrate from Lake of the Woods to the Rainy River to spawn. Many of those fish are still in the river when the Walleye season opens in May. This can lead to some great fishing opportunities for anglers. And, although hundreds of anglers flock to Lake of the Woods for the annual Walleye opener, not many people fish on the Rainy River at that time of the year. The Rainy River and its tributaries are also home to a high quality Northern Pike population. Northern Pike fishing can be very good in spring and early summer. Besides great fishing, the Rainy River corridor can also offer some protection from the cold winds that often occur during the early part of the Walleye season. There are several public boat ramps located along the Rainy River, there is a public fishing pier located on Baudette Bay in the City of Baudette, and there is shore fishing opportunities near most public boat ramps and in Franz Jevne State Park.

Hayes Lake: Located in northwestern Minnesota, Hayes Lake is 108-acre reservoir on the Roseau River. Hayes is located entirely within Hayes Lake State Park and only electric motors are permitted on the lake. A fishing pier is available within the park along with a paved boat ramp on the southeast end of the lake. There is also a dock and canoe access located near the campground on the south side of the lake. As Hayes Lake lies within a state park, state park vehicle permits are required. Hayes Lake offers some great fishing opportunities for multiple species. Good numbers of Northern Pike are present with the potential to catch a large fish being a possibility. Bluegill are also a popular option with decent numbers of quality size fish up to ten inches in the population. Largemouth Bass provide a third option for anglers with a healthy population present in Hayes Lake. The season for Largemouth Bass and Northern Pike begins on May 9 (bass

are catch and release only from May 9th through May 22nd). A reminder to anglers, the limit for Northern Pike is ten and all Northern Pike between 22 and 26 inches must be immediately released. Two Northern Pike over 26 inches may be harvested. For other regulations refer to the Minnesota fishing regulations book.

BEMIDJI

General Outlook for Bemidji Area: As of early April, it appears that arrival of spring in the Bemidji area will be on time, if not a little early. Considerable snowpack this winter should maintain lake levels and stream conditions, despite a gradual snow melt. This should result in good conditions for getting docks in the water, launching boats, and, most likely, walleyes in typical post-spawn patterns.

Pike Bay (4,751 acres): Pike Bay is connected to Cass Lake but is actually a lake all of its own, despite the cryptic name. It is located in northern Cass County, just south of the city of Cass Lake and within the Chippewa National Forest. Public access points include a National Forest Campground on the south side of the lake, and a city park on the north side. The lake is also accessible by boat from Cass Lake through the stream channel that connects the two lakes. Pike Bay is known for its Walleye and Muskellunge fisheries in the summer and for its perch fishing in the winter. A population assessment in 2019 resulted in a Walleye catch rate of 9.4 fish/gill net, the highest catch rate of the last 5 assessments, which cover a 20-year period. In 2019, Walleye sizes ranged from 10 inches to nearly 27 inches in length, with an average size of about 15 inches. The broad size range represents fish from 13 different year classes. In addition to Walleye, Yellow Perch are typically abundant, and 2019 was no exception with a catch rate of 57 fish/gill net. High-density perch populations usually result in lots of small fish, but in 2019 nearly a quarter of all perch in the sample were 9 inches or larger. In addition to perch and Walleye, Pike Bay is home to Muskellunge, Bluegill, Black Crappie, Rock Bass and Burbot. These species all tend to be present in low densities but are capable of reaching large sizes. Of note, Pike Bay is one of about a dozen connected lakes in the Cass Chain of Lakes that are being considered for special harvest regulations for sunfish as part of the Quality Bluegill Initiative. For more information, contact the Bemidji Fisheries office at bemidji.fisheries@state.mn.us.

DETROIT LAKES

General Outlook for the Detroit Lakes Area: As of the last week of March, warm temperatures have cleared most lakes of snow. Water levels continue to be high due in part to heavy precipitation during autumn, 2019. There is a reasonable chance that Walleye spawning will begin toward the early end of the normal range this year. Normally, Walleye spawning begins in earnest during mid-April in this area. Most Detroit Lakes area Walleye spawning should be completed well ahead of the May 9 opener in 2020. A variety of other fishing opportunities also exist. Virtually no winterkill has been reported in susceptible waters. It has been several years since severe winterkills occurred and many of these shallow lakes hold good populations of Walleye, Bluegill, Black Crappie, Northern Pike and Yellow Perch.

Lake Sallie (1,211 acres) is located three miles southwest of Detroit Lakes. The public access is located on the northeast shore near the DNR headquarters. Lake Sallie has been the site of a state Walleye egg-taking site since 1912. Consequently, Walleye are stocked annually. Walleye catch rates in 2019 were very good. In fact, the catch rate of Walleye was the third highest recorded for Lake Sallie. The average length sampled was 16.9 inches but good numbers of several sizes of Walleye up to 25 inches were observed. Fish ranged 15-20 inches. Numbers of Northern Pike were up in 2019, and the average size remains very good at 26 inches. Although pike over 24 inches must be released, some anglers have likened pike fishing here to that found in Canada, with large pike the rule rather than the exception. Sallie also has good numbers of Bluegill and Largemouth Bass, as well as being an early-season destination for Black Crappie.

Lake Melissa (1,830 acres) is just downstream from Lake Sallie and is located about six miles southwest of Detroit Lakes. A state-owned public access is located on the east shore, just west of Highway 59. Lake Melissa is a fairly round lake with a good amount of underwater structure. Historically, the lake supports a diverse fishery, with good catch rates for several popular species including Walleye, Northern Pike, Bluegill, and Largemouth Bass. Similar to Lake Sallie, Lake Melissa has a long held reputation as an early season Black Crappie destination. The Black Crappie population has moderate average size, but is more known for the numbers of fish that can be caught. Catch rates of Walleye were good in 2019, falling above the historical average for number of fish per net. Walleye length was nearly identical to that in Sallie at 16.2 inches.

FERGUS FALLS

General Outlook for Fergus Falls Area: As of late March, area lakes still have plenty of ice, but it is becoming soft. Long-range forecasts are predicting normal to above-normal air temperatures in the next few weeks. Ice-out should be about average this year; therefore, Walleye spawning activities should occur during the normal time-frame in mid to late April. Anglers should expect to find Walleyes in post-spawn conditions by the May 9th fishing opener. Male Walleyes may be actively feeding during this period and will likely be in shallow water areas while larger female Walleyes may still be recovering from spawning activities. Northern Pike will be feeding actively as they spawn earlier than Walleyes. Panfish opportunities may be a viable option if the Walleye and Northern Pike are not cooperating. Many area lakes presently support abundant populations of Bluegill and Black Crappie with good size structures. Generally speaking, anglers should expect good Walleye fishing on area lakes during the 2020 season as several strong natural year classes and supplemental stockings have established abundant Walleye populations. The Largemouth and Smallmouth Bass angling seasons will also begin on the May 9th opener; however, it is catch and release only until May 23rd.

Anna Lake (538 acres) is located in south-central Otter Tail County four miles north of Underwood. A DNR owned concrete public access is located off of County Road 35 along the southwest shoreline. Anna Lake is considered a good all-around fishing lake. Data collected from the 2019 standard fisheries survey indicate that many fish species are thriving in Anna Lake. The Walleye gill net catch rate was 7.1 per net, which exceeds the long-range management goal for this lake. The 2014 and 2016 year classes are strong and correspond to years of Walleye fry stocking. Walleyes from these year classes

ranged in length from 13.4 to 19.3 inches. Overall, Walleyes ranged in length from 9.1 to 28.2 inches with a mean length and weight of 17.3 inches and 1.9 pounds. A moderate-density Northern Pike population exists with a good average size. Pike ranged in length from 16.6 to 30.7 inches with a mean length and weight of 23.2 inches and 2.7 pounds. Twenty percent of the pike exceeded 26.0 inches in length. The Bluegill and Black Crappie populations are abundant and both possess good size structures. Bluegills up to 8.3 inches were sampled and 65% were 7.0 inches or greater in length. Black Crappies up to 13.0 inches were sampled and 76% were 10.0 inches or greater in length. Bluegills and crappies could provide an alternative if Walleye and pike are not active. Largemouth Bass are also very abundant. Bass ranged in length from 7.7 to 18.1 inches with a mean length and weight of 12.7 inches and 1.2 pounds.

Fish Lake (888 acres) is located in central Otter Tail County five miles northeast of Fergus Falls. A DNR owned concrete public access is located off of County Road 1 along the along the north shoreline. Fish Lake is also considered a good all-around fishing lake and data collected from the 2019 standard fisheries survey indicate that many fish species are thriving in this lake as well. The Walleye gill net catch rate was 5.0 per net, which is equivalent to the long-range management goal for this lake. The 2015 year class is strong and correlates to a year of Walleye fry stocking. Walleye from this year class ranged in length from 13.7 to 17.5 inches with a mean length of 15.5 inches. Overall, Walleye ranged in length from 13.7 to 24.8 inches with a mean length and weight of 18.5 inches and 2.3 pounds. A moderate-density Northern Pike population exists with an excellent size structure. Pike ranged in length from 16.3 to 34.6 inches with a mean length and weight of 24.1 inches and 3.2 pounds. Thirty-one percent of the pike exceeded 26.0 inches in length. The Black Crappie population is extremely abundant with strong 2015 and 2016 year classes. The majority of crappie that anglers catch will exceed 10.0 inches in length. Bluegill up to 8.5 inches were sampled and 15% were 7.0 inches or greater in length. Fish Lake also has a balanced Largemouth Bass population. Bass ranged in length from 9.5 to 19.9 inches with a mean length and weight of 14.3 inches and 1.7 pounds.

GLENWOOD

General outlook for Glenwood Area lakes: As of late March, winter ice cover is weakening and opening around the shoreline. Fish communities in winterkill prone lakes have escaped winterkill. With the gradual warm up, it appears the lakes within the Glenwood Area will be ice free well in advance of fishing opener. Water levels in most lakes will be above average. Survey information gained last summer and fall affords optimism for good fishing.

Pelican Lake (3,761 acres) is a large, shallow, fertile lake located in northeast Grant County near Ashby. Maximum depth is 21 feet. Average depth is 10 feet. Due to its irregular shape, the lake has nearly 28 miles of shoreline. An improved public access is located on the northwest shore off State Highway 78.

Walleye are abundant. Gill net catches during the 2017 survey averaged 13.3 fish/net. Age structure of gill net captures and fall electrofishing surveys revealed that strong year classes of young Walleye were established in 2014, 2015, 2017, and 2019. The strong 2014 year class and fair 2018 stem from natural reproduction. Young Walleye grow fast

in Pelican Lake. Four-year-old captures caught during the June 2017 survey averaged 16.6 inches. Due to contributions of natural reproduction supplemented with fry stockings, Walleye fishing opportunities look very promising.

Pelican Lake also supports a good crappie fishery. Both Black and White Crappie exist in the lake. Crappie densities are currently elevated in response to good reproductive success and recruitment in 2012, 2014, and 2015. Five year old black crappie captures in the 2017 survey averaged 11.6 inches. With addition of 2014 and 2015 year classes, anglers can expect many crappie measuring 10.0 to 13.0 inches.

Bass anglers can take advantage of quality catch-and-release fishing experiences. Good numbers of 15.0 inch and larger bass were captured during the spring 2017 electrofishing survey. Length frequency of Largemouth Bass captures extended to 18.3 inches.

Lake Reno (3,808 acres) is a popular fishing destination. The lake is eight miles south of Alexandria on the west side of State Highway 29. The lake is shallow with a maximum depth of 23.0 feet. Average depth is estimated at 17.0 feet. Public access sites exist on northeast shoreline off State Highway 27 and the southwest end of the lake.

The most recent standard fisheries survey was completed in early July 2018. Walleye continue to be abundant in response to natural reproduction and alternate year supplemental fry stockings. Gill net catches averaged 18.4 fish/net. Length of captures ranged from 7.4 to 25.5 inches and averaged 17.4 inches. Annual recruitment was fair to good in 2013, 2015, 2016, and 2017, thus there is promise of good harvest potential for 15.0 – 20.0 inch Walleye in 2020.

Black Crappie fishing success was exceptional for an extended period with recruitment of very strong 2010 and 2011 year classes to a harvestable size. Catches have moderated with harvest and loss of those year classes to old age. Age frequency distribution of 2018 crappie catches describes establishment of a fair year class in 2015, followed with a very strong year class produced in 2016. Anglers began to target this promising year class this winter as fast growing crappie approached 10.0 inches.

Lake Reno also supports good fishing opportunities for Largemouth Bass, Bluegill, and Northern Pike. Length distribution of bass captures caught during the spring electrofishing survey extended to 17.6 inches. Forty-nine percent of bass captures measured at least 15.0 inches in length.

Anglers are reminded of Northern Pike harvest regulation changes and encouraged to take full advantage of expanded harvest opportunities for pike within the North Central Harvest Zone. Many lakes in west-central Minnesota hold an over-abundance of small pike. Increasing harvest and reducing densities of 22.0-inch and smaller pike is projected to improve growth and average size of Northern Pike and increase survival and effectiveness of Walleye stockings.

PARK RAPIDS

General Outlook for Park Rapids Area: Although we had plenty of snow early, a very mild March has reduced that significantly. Long-range forecasts are predicting continuing mild temperatures. That may mean a normal ice out, around mid-April or even earlier on most lakes. Northern Pike spawning begins as the ice is going out and Walleye spawning begins a week or more later, so most fish will likely be in post spawn patterns by fishing opener. Because of the longer winter, and ample snow some smaller or shallow lakes may have experienced winterkills this year.

Anglers are reminded of the Northern Pike zone regulations and Park Rapids area lakes that have special or experimental regulations that differ from statewide regulations. Please note specific regulations in the current Minnesota Fishing Regulations Booklet.

- All Species: Lester and LaSalle
- Bass: Little Mantrap and George.
- Crappie: Big Mantrap and Spider
- Northern Pike: Fifth, Sixth, Eighth, Ninth and Tenth Crow Wing; George; Big Mantrap (Mantrap) and Blueberry.
- Walleye: Big Sand and Kabekona

Kabekona Lake (2,433 acres) is located about three miles south of Laporte in northeastern Hubbard County. It has a maximum depth of 133 feet. A county owned access is located at the west end of the lake, off highway 64.

Kabekona has had an experimental Walleye regulation since 2006. Currently, all Walleye between 20 and 26 inches must be immediately released. Anglers are allowed to harvest Walleye less than 20 inches and one over 26 inches in a possession limit of four. The regulation was intended to improve natural reproduction of Walleye. Evaluations indicate that more young Walleye are being naturally produced, and abundance in 2017 was the highest ever observed at Kabekona. There were plenty of Walleye in the protected size range, but there are also more 15 to 20 inch fish in recent years than there ever have been.

Northern Pike have never been real abundant in Kabekona, but they can reach good sizes. Largemouth and Smallmouth Bass, Black Crappies, Bluegills and Pumpkinseed sunfish can also be found in this lake, but those species are not abundant.

Big Sand Lake (1,659 acres) has a maximum depth of 135 feet. It is located about five miles northeast of Park Rapids in Hubbard County. A state owned public access is located at the southeast end of Big Sand, at the lake outlet.

An experimental, protected slot Walleye regulation was implemented in 1995 that prohibited harvest of medium to large sized Walleye. The regulation appeared to help increase natural reproduction and Walleye abundance. The regulation was changed slightly in 2005 to allow anglers to harvest a few more Walleye. It now prohibits harvest of walleye between 20 and 28 inches long, and allows only one walleye larger than 28 inches in possession.

Walleye stocking was discontinued in 2004, yet Walleye abundance has remained well above the normal range for similar lakes, and well above the long-range goal for Big

Sand. In the most recent survey there were plenty of 16 to 20 inch Walleyes that would be available for harvest, and fish up to 28 inches. Northern Pike are not real abundant in Big Sand, but can be quite large. There are good populations of both Largemouth and Smallmouth Bass.

Upper and Lower Bottle Lakes (459 and 641 acres) have maximum depths of 55 and 110 feet. They are located about eight miles northeast of Park Rapids. A state owned public access is located on the north end of Upper Bottle Lake. Additional access is available off County Road 40, through Emma Lake and the Sand River to Lower Bottle, but it may be difficult for larger boats.

During assessments of the lakes in 2013, walleye abundance was higher in both lakes than any previous sample. Abundance declined in 2018 samples, but was still higher than other similar lakes. Strong year classes of walleye have been observed from both stocked and non-stocked years, suggesting that stocking and natural reproduction are both contributing to the lakes' walleye populations. Most of the walleyes in the 2018 samples were 14 to 17 inches, with fish up to 24½ inches.

Northern pike are very abundant in the Bottle Lakes. Most are 17 to 25 inches, with fish up to 39 inches sampled. Largemouth Bass are not real abundant, but can range up to 19 inches. Smallmouth Bass were lower in abundance, and reached 16 ½ inches in the 2018 sample. Crappies are not very abundant, but can be good sized.

WALKER

General Outlook for Walker Area: Ice out is currently on time with the historical average of April 26. Walleye spawning should be winding down by the May 9 fishing opener but fish, especially males, could still be congregated and make for a very good shallow water bite on Opening Day. Panfish and bass action should be good in shallow water areas by Memorial Day.

Northern Pike are abundant in most area lakes with smaller fish easy to find. Several lakes do have a protected slot limit of 24 to 36 inches, possession limit of three fish, for Northern Pike. In some cases, surveys have found an increase in the proportion of Northern Pike 30+ inches long since the regulations were implemented in 2003. With exception to lakes with a 24 to 36 inch protected slot limit, all others in the area will fall under the regulation implemented in 2018 for pike in the North Central Zone, which is a 10 fish limit with only two longer than 26.0 inches; all pike 22-26" must be released.

A number of lakes in the Walker area have experimental or special regulations for certain species, including Northern Pike, Walleye, Bass, Sunfish, and Black Crappie. These special rules are designed to maintain or improve fishery quality. A notice of these regulations is posted at each lake's public access. Anglers should consult their 2020 Minnesota Fishing Regulations booklet for the most current information.

Boy Lake (3,465 acres) is located east of Leech Lake in Cass County. The public access is located on the west shore off of 24th Ave. The Walleye population is strong and the 2017 survey found fish ranging from 9 to 27 inches long, with most Walleyes between 12

and 19 inches long. The Boy Lake Walleye population demonstrates consistent natural reproduction which provides multiple year-classes available to anglers. Black Crappie and Bluegill are abundant with excellent size structure. Black Crappie up to 14 inches and Bluegill up to 10 inches long are present. Northern Pike are very abundant and tend to be small in size but fish up to 32 inches long were sampled. In addition, Muskellunge are present in Boy Lake and provide anglers with opportunity to catch quality-size fish.

Pine Mountain Lake (1,612 acres) is located west of Backus in Cass County. The public access is located on the east shore off of Washburn Ave. Pine Mountain supports a healthy Walleye population, fish ranging from 8 to 22 inches long in the 2019 survey. The 2016 year-class appears strong and should be of harvestable size in 2020. Northern Pike are abundant with large fish present in the population; lengths ranged from 12 to 37 inches. Black Crappie are present and ranged in length from 4 to 12 inches long. Bluegill are very abundant in Pine Mountain Lake and fish measuring 9 inches long were sampled.

Inguadona Lake (1,132 acres) is located east of Longville in Cass County. The public access is located on the east shore off of Woodley Trail. The Walleye population is stable with a wide range of fish available to anglers. The 2019 survey sampled Walleyes ranging in size from 8 to 27 inches long. Inguadona Lake also contains strong populations of Black Crappie and Bluegill and both species attain quality sizes. Black Crappie ranged in length from 8 to 14 inches long and Bluegills up to 9 inches were sampled. Special Regulations for Black Crappie (possession limit 10) and Bluegill (possession limit 5) are in effect to promote quality panfish populations. Inguadona Lake supports a low-density Muskellunge population with large fish present.

NW REGION LARGE LAKE OUTLOOK

Lake of the Woods: Walleye and Sauger are the most important sport fish on Lake of the Woods, and as such those populations are monitored annually. This assessment has been conducted every September since 1981, so there is a lot of good population trend data available for these species.

Walleye 14 to 18 inches long were either at or above the historic average and should be abundant on opener. In addition to these keeper-size walleye, anglers should also notice good numbers of small walleye, in the 8 to 10-inch range. These walleye showed up in good numbers in our annual fall survey, as well as during the creel survey conducted last winter.

Lake of the Woods is well known for the trophy-size Walleye that anglers catch every year, and Walleye up to 32 inches are sampled every year during DNR fish sampling. Consider that these fish are quite old, and that it takes a long time for them to get to be of trophy size. Carefully consider what you will do with one of these fish before you harvest it, as it may have more value to the gene pool than it does as a fillet. Generally, a 25-inch long Walleye is about 10 to 15 years old, and a 30-inch Walleye is over 20 years old.

Sauger abundance has remained high since 2016 due to years of good reproductive success in 2011 and from 2014 to 2017. Sauger 10 inches and above were abundant during fall gill netting and last winter's creel survey.

Anglers should be aware of special fishing regulations on Lake of the Woods. These regulations are designed to maintain a quality fishery and fishing experience. The combined Walleye-Sauger limit is six, but no more than four of those fish may be Walleye. All Walleye between 19.5 and 28 inches in length must be immediately released, and only one Walleye longer than 28 inches may be possessed.

Northern Pike are frequently overlooked by many anglers on Lake of the Woods. Both Lake of the Woods and the Rainy River support populations of trophy pike, with individuals over 40 inches long. Northern Pike season is open continuously on Lake of the Woods and Rainy River. The period immediately after ice-out is an excellent time to participate in this fishery. Anglers who would like to target Northern Pike should focus their efforts near spawning sites. Major spawning sites are Bostic Creek, Zippel Bay, and the Warroad River in addition to the Rainy River proper. Northern Pike are also managed by special regulation. The possession limit is three. All Northern Pike from 30 to 40 inches long must be released immediately. An angler may possess one Northern Pike over 40 inches long.

Lake Sturgeon are another species that anglers may encounter, particularly if fishing the lower reaches of the Rainy River or Fourmile Bay. Sturgeon are highly vulnerable to over-harvest, so regulations governing the harvest of these fish are fairly restrictive. Anglers that have purchased a Lake Sturgeon Harvest Tag may harvest one Lake Sturgeon per calendar year. The harvest season runs from April 24 to May 7, and from July 1 to September 30. Anglers may catch and release fish for sturgeon from May 8 to May 15, and from October 1 through the following April 23. The Lake Sturgeon season is closed from May 16 to June 30, so anglers *cannot fish* for sturgeon during this period. Only Lake Sturgeon from 45 to 50 inches long, or over 75 inches long, may be harvested.

Anglers should also be aware that Lake Sturgeon regulations are much more restrictive in Ontario. Sturgeon are classified as "Threatened" and the fishing season is closed. You may not harvest, or fish for, sturgeon on the Ontario portions of Lake of the Woods and the Rainy River. If you are fishing for Lake Sturgeon, know which side of the border you are on.

Lake of the Woods and the Rainy River have been designated as infested waters due to the presence of spiny water flea, and most recently zebra mussel within Lake of the Woods. With this infestation, anglers have an obligation to prevent the spread of this invading species to other water bodies. Anglers must make sure they do not transport any lake water in their boats. Bilges, live wells and bait wells must all be drained at boat landings, and boat has to be trailered with all of the plugs out. Check the DNR web site for more specific information of how to prevent the spread of spiny water flea and zebra mussels.

Cass Lake: Cass Lake is typically a good choice for early season Walleye fishing, especially the inlets and outlets of Cass and throughout its connected waters. With spring shaping up to be a little early this year, the fish may be closer to the main basins of Cass Lake, having returned from a variety of spawning migrations. The Walleye population is healthy and comprised of good numbers of fish distributed among many different size and age classes. Angler catch rates should be good, with an abundance of fish from the strong 2013 year-class that are in the 18- to 20-inch range. There are also good numbers of larger fish as well as a strong 2018 year class that currently averages about 12 inches. Although night fishing has been popular on Cass Lake for a long time, the water, which was already clear, has gotten even clearer from the recent zebra mussel invasion. As a result, fishing when there is a chop on the water or during low light periods tends to most productive.

The Northern Pike population is at average levels of abundance with good numbers of fish between 22 and 30 inches. Cass Lake generally produces a few trophy Northern Pike each year as well. Cass is also well known as a premier native Muskellunge lake and anglers catch a wide size range of fish, with some topping 50 inches. Anglers are reminded that the statewide Muskellunge season opens on June 6th and the statewide minimum length limit is 54 inches.

Yellow Perch numbers in Cass Lake are above the long-term average, and growth rates have improved. As a result, there is excellent opportunity to find some quality sized Yellow Perch. Fishing the past few years has been good and this is expected to continue into the upcoming season.

The zebra mussel population is well established and distributed throughout Cass Lake and connected waters. Starry Stonewort is also present. Remember to inspect your boat hull and anchor for unwanted hitchhikers, drain all of your water, and remove your boat plugs before leaving the access.

Upper Red Lake: The fishing outlook for Upper Red Lake is good. On waters under the jurisdiction of the State of Minnesota (the eastern 48,000 acres of Upper Red Lake), licensed anglers will be allowed a daily and possession limit of four Walleye, with one fish larger than 17 inches allowed in possession. This regulation is intended to allow harvest of fish across a broad size range while the mature female population is in what we consider the “optimal” condition. May and June catch rates have been strong since reopening the fishery in 2006. Given the prospects for an early ice out, anglers should plan on fishing away from the river and stream mouths and target the shoreline breaks or even off-shore structure as the Walleye will likely have completed spawning well ahead opening day. As usual, there are good numbers of fish from 14 to 18 inches along with decent numbers in the low twenties. Be prepared to accurately measure your catch by having the proper tools in your boat.

Anglers interested in catching large Northern Pike are probably already familiar with Upper Red Lake. Northern Pike size structure is impressive, and although angler catch rates may be low at times, the incentive is the potential to catch a trophy. Anglers should be aware of the new special regulation for Northern Pike: all fish from 30 to 40 inches must be immediately released, and only one fish larger than 40 inches is allowed in

possession. This narrower slot limit will allow some additional harvest of fish for the eating and greater opportunity to harvest a trophy. There are excellent numbers of 36- to 40-inch fish in the population right now, and the number of fish over 40 inches has recently improved as well.

Anglers should be prepared to encounter a variety of DNR and Beltrami County staff while fishing or accessing Upper Red Lake. In addition to requests by DNR creel survey clerks and conservation officers, staff from the various invasive species programs may be doing inspections, decontaminating watercraft and providing educational information. Zebra Mussel veligers (larvae) were documented in the lake in 2018 and again in 2019. Also, with spiny water fleas established in Rainy Lake, the Rainy River, and Lake of the Woods, Upper Red Lake and other nearby waters are at risk for direct transfer of this aquatic invasive species by anglers. Anglers leaving any lake should remember that they are required by law to drain all water from boats, live wells, and bait wells and ensure the effective removal of all aquatic plants and/or other invasive species from their boat, trailer, and other equipment.

Leech Lake: The 2020 fishing outlook on Leech Lake should be very good. Walleye numbers were within management goals in the 2019 September survey but poor ice conditions through the majority of the 2019/20 winter fishing season should result in excellent numbers of Walleye available for harvest for the opener. Walleye in the fall sample ranged in length from 6 to 28 inches, and included a number of younger year classes that should be large enough to harvest in the next year or two. A new Walleye regulation of 4 fish total with only 1 over 20.0 inches allowed in possession was implemented in 2019. The objectives of this regulation change was to reduce spawner stock biomass and provide additional harvest opportunity to anglers. This regulation will be evaluated annually and adjustments will be made based on management plan objectives and action items

Northern Pike catch rates were up from the previous survey with 4.9 fish/net in the fall sample. Catch rates have historically ranged from 4 to 6 fish per net and the lower management goal is at least 4.2 fish/net. New Northern Pike zone regulations were put in place in 2018, and should benefit the Northern Pike population on Leech Lake.

Yellow Perch numbers in the 2019 fall survey were higher than the previous few years. Perch sampled ranged from 5 to 11 inches with nearly 30 percent of fish over 8.0 inches.

A current focus on Leech Lake is the impacts that zebra mussels will have in the future. Immature zebra mussel larvae, called veligers, were found in 2016. Adults were beginning to be reported in various western bays in the lake in the summer of 2019. There are currently no known methods to control or reduce numbers of zebra mussels once they are found in natural systems. Aquatic invasive species (AIS) like zebra mussels are moved from infested to non-infested waters by anglers, boaters, and lake shore owners and can adversely impact lakes and fish populations. To avoid spreading AIS, lake users are required to remove all aquatic plants or animals from their watercraft and drain all water from their boat before leaving the access. Additional information on all of these topics can be found on the DNR website (www.dnr.state.mn.us) or by contacting the Walker Area Fisheries office.