

Northwest 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

Outlook by Area and for Large Lakes

Baudette area

The Baudette fisheries area, located in the far northwestern portion of Minnesota, offers a variety of fishing opportunities for a variety of species and waterbody types. Generally, it looks like we are going to have another excellent season of fishing. Lake of the Woods is the most popular fishing destination in the Baudette fisheries area (see the Northwest Region Large Lake profiles later in this report).

Walleye are the most popular fish with anglers in the area and there are a number of good options for targeting them. Rainy River offers excellent walleye fishing. 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. 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. This can lead to some great fishing opportunities for anglers. Although thousands 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.

In the western portion of the Baudette fisheries area, Red Lake River Reservoir, and the Red River offer opportunities to fish for walleye. Based on recent monitoring conducted by area fisheries staff, anglers can expect to find healthy walleye populations in Red Lake River Reservoir.

Opportunities also exist to target other fish in the Baudette fisheries area including species such as northern pike, lake sturgeon, channel catfish, bass and various panfish species. Northern pike can be targeted in nearly every public waterbody in the Baudette fisheries area.

The Rainy River offers an excellent opportunity to target large northern pike though large pike have been caught in other waterbodies in the Baudette fisheries area.

Lake sturgeon are most likely to be encountered by anglers fishing the Rainy River and fish exceeding 100 pounds have been observed in the river.

The best options for anglers looking to target channel catfish in the Baudette fisheries area are the Red, Roseau, Red Lake and South Branch Two Rivers. Hayes Lake is a great place to target largemouth bass while the Rainy River provides opportunity to target smallmouth bass.

Hayes Lake is also a good option for anglers wishing to target various panfish. Lake Bronson is currently not accessible to fishing opportunities because the lake was drawn down for the replacement of the reservoir dam. Construction will continue through 2026 and will not provide opportunities for anglers until completed.

There is good public access to all the fishing locations referenced above. There are several public boat ramps located

along the Rainy River, a public fishing pier located on Baudette Bay in the city of Baudette, and shore fishing opportunities near most public boat ramps and in Franz Jevne State Park. On the Roseau River there are multiple concrete boat ramps. There is a fishing pier at Roseau City Park and bank fishing opportunities at the Stoies bridge access and at Roseau City Park. There are bank fishing opportunities on the Red Lake River in the city of Thief River Falls and the South Branch Two Rivers in the city of Hallock. There are also multiple boat accesses to the Red River in the Baudette fisheries area. Shore fishing opportunities on the Red River exist at the Frank Rose Aquatic Management Area. Access to Red Lake River Reservoir includes two public access points located on the reservoir in the city of Thief River Falls as well as a fishing pier located in the city park. A concrete boat ramp and fishing pier are located at Hayes Lake. Only electric motors are allowed on Hayes Lake.

Hayes Lake and Lake Bronson are both located entirely within state parks and as such vehicle permits are required. As a reminder, the Rainy River and Red River both have special border water regulations. Also, northern pike now are managed according to zones and all water bodies that do not have special regulations fall into the northwest zone regulations. For more information on regulations pick up a regulation booklet or check the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources [fishing regulations webpage](#).

Bemidji area

The Bemidji fisheries management area encompasses all of Beltrami and Clearwater counties, as well as the very northern fringe of Hubbard and Cass counties. At the time of this writing, it appears that spring ice-out dates will be near average which should result in a variety of options for fishing on or near opening weekend.

Anglers should have good luck targeting walleye on their favorite opener lakes. Shallower lakes such as Blackduck, Gull, Plantagenet, Turtle and Wolf are popular choices for area anglers on the fishing opener because they are warmer and often have more active fish than deeper lakes. Larger lakes such as Andrusia, Bemidji, Cass and Pike Bay are also excellent choices, but with a slightly early opener and a normally timed spring, anglers should focus near the inlets and outlets of those lakes where fish are likely to still be congregated following spawning.

The tradition of the walleye opener often overshadows quality springtime fishing for a number of other fish species commonly found in the area. Many lakes offer great fishing opportunities for bass, crappie, perch and sunfish which are often pre-spawn at this time. Some of the more popular multi-species lakes include Big Bass, Grace, Gull, North and South Twin, Pimushe, Rabideau and most of the lakes in the Turtle River chain.

For a quieter alternative, consider trout fishing on one of the area trout streams instead. Two self-sustaining brook trout streams, Necktie River and Sucker Brook, offer challenging fishing in tight quarters for small to medium sized brook trout. A couple of larger streams, Clearwater and Battle rivers, offer chances to catch stocked rainbow and brown trout. Other opportunities to catch stream trout include any of the stocked trout lakes in the area which include Benjamin, Deep, Island and Long.

Detroit Lakes area

Ice-out dates for area lakes look to be in the normal range for mid- to late April. This will result in most species completing spawning activity within the normal chronology. That is, fishing locations and techniques should be predictable with better odds on small to medium sized lakes with darker water where water temperature may be higher. Walleye should remain shallow and be found around traditional spottail shiner runs. As such, most bait shops in northern Minnesota should be stocked with this popular bait. The lack of significant snow cover for most of the winter suggests aquatic vegetation growth should also be ahead of schedule. Anglers may be surprised to find significant vegetation on fishing opener growing on shallow flats that traditionally had little to no new vegetation growth at that time.

Traditional walleye lakes in the Detroit Lakes area that continue to have strong walleye populations include Sallie, Detroit, Maple, White Earth and Big Cormorant. Recent lake surveys on Many Point and Maple recorded the second highest catch rates for walleye since surveys began on those lakes.

Northern pike are always active during the first month of the fishing season. Anglers are reminded of the statewide

zone regulations for northern pike. In the north central zone, the bag limit is 10 and all pike from 22 to 26 inches must be released, and no more than two pike over 26 inches long can be kept. Popular lakes that offer quality pike fishing are Big Cormorant, Acorn, Elbow and Sauer.

Black crappie and bluegill fishing are always good bets in the Detroit Lakes fisheries area. Popular lakes such as Sallie, Melissa, Detroit, Toad and Big Sugar Bush have black crappie populations with good numbers of harvestable fish. Bluegill anglers can find fish in almost all lakes within the Detroit Lakes area, but common destinations include Little Sugar Bush, Big Floyd, Turtle and Sand lakes. Anglers should be aware that the popular sunfish lakes of Height of Land, Rock and Tamarack experienced significant winterkills in 2023. As a result, anglers will find few fish available for harvest for several more years. A reminder to be on the lookout for reduced bag limits of sunfish. There are now 13 lakes within the Detroit Lakes management area that have such regulations.

Anglers are now able to fish for largemouth and smallmouth bass year-round; however, bass may only be harvested from Saturday, May 23 through Sunday, Feb. 28, 2027. Largemouth bass are common across area lakes, while good smallmouth bass populations can be found in Big Cormorant, Island, White Earth and Strawberry lakes.

Muskellunge were introduced into Detroit and Many Point lakes. A trophy fishery has developed in Detroit Lake and has become very popular among muskie anglers. The muskie population in Many Point Lake is excellent though not yet known as a destination for trophy sized fish as stocking was only initiated in 2006. The muskie angling season begins each year on the first Saturday in June.

Additional angling opportunities exist for rainbow trout in the Detroit Lakes area at Bad Medicine Lake and Hanson Lake. Catchable-sized fish have been stocked into both lakes, with periodic stocking of larger fish when they are available. Anglers traditionally have very good success fishing Bad Medicine in May before surface waters warm past 60 degrees. Stream trout were also stocked into the Felton Pits in late 2025. The season for stream trout in lakes runs from Saturday, May 9 through Saturday, Oct. 31 and requires the purchase of a trout stamp.

Fergus Falls area

The Fergus Falls area encompasses all of Otter Tail County and the Red River of the North along the Wilkin County border with North Dakota. As of late March, area lakes are still ice covered, and the long-term weather forecast is for average air temperatures. Unless weather conditions change, walleye spawning activities will likely occur during the normal timeframe of mid to late April. Anglers can expect to find walleyes in a post-spawn phase on most lakes for the May 9 opener.

Normal spawning seasons generally make for better walleye angling on the opener as fish are recovered from the spawn and feeding actively. As the season progresses and water temperatures continue to warm, anglers should expect good walleye fishing on area lakes during the 2026 season as several strong natural year classes and supplemental stockings have established abundant walleye populations.

Small, shallow lakes are usually popular for the opener because the water temperatures will be warmer and the fish more active. Some traditional favorites for the opener include Walker, Adley, South Ten Mile, Orwell, Fish (by Weetown) and Anna lakes. Some larger, deeper lakes that presently have strong year classes of harvestable walleyes include Pelican, Rush, West Battle, North Lida, Otter Tail and the Pine lakes. Anglers should be aware that there is a 17- to 26-inch protected slot size limit for walleye on the Lida Lake and an 18- to 26-inch protected slot size limit for Big and Little Pine lakes. Some medium-sized lakes with moderate mean depths that also have strong year classes of harvestable walleyes include Big McDonald, Pickerel, Sybil, Jewett, Jolly Ann, Eagle and Portage. Anglers seeking a trophy "walleye of a lifetime" should consider giving Little McDonald, Norway or Paul lakes a try.

Northern pike should be feeding aggressively as they spawn earlier than walleyes. Most of the large lakes in the area consistently produce above-average sized pike. Some smaller lakes that anglers may want to check out for nice northern pike include Anna, Pleasant, Sewell, Johnson, Devils and Leaf lakes. Anglers are reminded of the northern pike slot length limit. The bag limit is 10 with not more than two over 26 inches. All pike from 22 to 26 inches must

be released. Anglers looking to take advantage of the 10 fish bag limit can look to lakes like Six, Leek, Rose, East Battle, Heilberger, East Twin, Loon and Long by Jewett. These lakes have an abundance of small pike less than 22 inches in length.

Panfish opportunities may be a viable option if the walleye and northern pike are not cooperating. Many area lakes presently support abundant populations of sunfish and black crappie with good size structures. Several of these lakes include Rush, Marion, Blanche, Lizzie, Schwartz, Anderson and the Leaf Lakes. Anglers targeting sunfish need to be aware of 23 lakes in the area with reduced daily bag limits. The intent of the reduced bag limits is to maintain or improve the size structures of sunfish in lakes that have historically produced quality populations. Lakes with a five sunfish daily bag limit include Star, West Silent, Franklin, Bass, Middle, Annie Battle, Norway, Fish by Weetown and Fish by Parkers Prairie. Lakes with a 10 sunfish daily bag limit include East Lost, West Lost, Crystal, Deer, Wall, Red River, Prairie, Stuart, Big Pine, South Lida, North Lida, Twenty-One, Fladmark and Long by Vergas. Area lakes with a reduced bag limit (five per day) of black crappies are Fladmark, Twenty-one, Annie Battle, West Battle, Fish by Parkers Prairie, Fish by Weetown, Orwell, Star and Pine lakes.

In a new development for 2026, the largemouth and smallmouth bass angling seasons are now open year-round for catch and release only angling; however, anglers are reminded that the bass harvest season does not open until Saturday, May 23. Most area lakes consistently produce abundant largemouth bass populations. Anglers interested in smallmouth bass should look to East Silent, Pickerel, South Ten Mile, North Lida, Hoot and Lizzie lakes. Anglers interested in a float fishing trip should consider the Otter Tail River, as it has a nationally renowned catch and release only smallmouth bass fishery. Many anglers from across the country annually visit the Fergus Falls area to experience this unique fishery.

Many shore fishing opportunities exist in Otter Tail County for anglers without access to a fishing vessel. Public fishing piers are located on Pebble and Hoot lakes in Fergus Falls, Long Lake in Vergas, Beers Lake in Maplewood State Park, Molly Stark Lake in Glendalough State Park, Pelican Bay of Otter Tail Lake, the Otter Tail Lake outlet and on the Red River in Breckenridge. The Orwell Dam Recreation Area on the Otter Tail River south of Fergus Falls and the Phelps Mill County Park on the Otter Tail River near Maine are also very popular shore fishing locations as well.

For anglers wanting to try something unique in the area for the opener, Bass Lake in Maplewood State Park is an option for rainbow trout fishing. Bass Lake is stocked annually with rainbow trout. Anglers are reminded that a state park permit and a trout stamp are required to fish Bass Lake. The use of live minnows for bait is prohibited and the bag limit is five with not more than three over 16 inches in length.

Another unique experience would be to give catfishing a try. The Red River along the Wilkin County border is home to a world class channel catfish fishery. The Red River supports an incredible abundance of these whiskered fish with opportunities to catch trophy fish as well. There are several public watercraft accesses and shore fishing areas located along this stretch of the river. The season is open year-round with a daily bag limit of five catfish with only one fish allowed over 24 inches.

Good luck to all anglers going out on the opener in the Fergus Falls area this year. Please show respect for fellow anglers on the water and at the public water accesses. Also, please dispose of your litter properly, help prevent the spread of invasive species by following watercraft transportation laws, and most importantly, remember to wear your life jackets.

Glenwood area

Typically, our shallow, turbid lakes are your best bet early in the season because they warm faster and fish become more active. These productive lakes also tend to have greater walleye numbers. Shallow prairie lakes in the western and southern part of the four-county work area would be good options. For example, strong walleye numbers are present in the lakes within the Pomme de Terre River system. In addition, lakes that winterkilled during the 2022-2023 winter have fast growth rates for fish, and walleye in those lakes should already be harvestable size. Bass and northern pike are most abundant in clear, vegetated lakes, which tend to be in Pope and Douglas counties, especially in the northern and eastern parts of the work area, such as the Alexandria Chain.

While many anglers target larger gamefish species during opener, do not forget about the excellent panfish opportunities during this time of year. Most lakes in the area support good populations of black crappie and bluegill. Anglers have plenty of lakes to choose from, including 17 lakes that were included in the Quality Sunfish Initiative. These include 10-sunfish bag limits on lakes Amelia, Andrew, Blackwell, Gilchrist, Grove, Irene, Leven, Mill, Minnewaska, Osakis (including Little Osakis), Red Rock, Reno, Vermont and Villard, and five-sunfish bag limits on Moon, Round and Whiskey.

A recent addition to the Glenwood Area is the opportunity to fish for trout. Since 2019, catchable-size trout have been stocked annually into Spruce Creek by the Viking Sportsmen and the DNR. Shore fishing is available in Spruce Hill County Park, northeast of Alexandria. In 2025, more than 2,400 rainbow trout and 500 brown trout were stocked into Spruce Creek. The stream trout opener is April 11. New in fall of 2025 was the stocking of Mill Pond, near Spruce Center, with 3- to 6- pound trout (130 rainbow and 150 brown trout). Trout season in lakes is open from Saturday, May 9 through Saturday, Oct. 31. Early in the season likely will present the best chance of success, as over summer survival is uncertain.

For a unique opportunity in the Glenwood Area, head to the West Branch of the Chippewa River or Lake Emily for channel catfish. First sampled in 1995, catfish are now abundant. During the 2025 survey, catfish averaged 21 inches, with the largest being 28 inches.

Park Rapids area

As this outlook is being written, area lakes still have ice, but it is slowly deteriorating. The extended forecast predicts a drier string of days with daily temperatures above freezing. As water temperatures gradually begins to trend upwards, northern pike and walleye will begin spawning later this month and should be completed by fishing opener. Northern pike and walleye should be in post spawn patterns by the May 9 fishing opener. As for other fish species, the timing of water warmup and photoperiod lengths will dictate where and when each species will begin to spawn.

Barring any drastic changes in the weather pattern, walleye fishing should provide anglers in the Park Rapids area with post-spawn conditions for walleye and northern pike. Early season lakes in the Park Rapids area to target walleye include Fish Hook and Eagle Island and the Potato chain. As the season progresses and the water warms, other lakes such as Big Sand, Eleventh Crow Wing, Kabekona, Long, and Upper and Lower Bottles are the go-to lakes for anglers.

In typical fashion, black crappie and sunfish action should start ramping up around Memorial Day weekend. Anglers looking to target lakes that will provide ample angling opportunities in the Park Rapids area should target Big Mantrap, Belle Taine and any of the lakes in the Crow Wing chain. Some of the better lakes in the area for largemouth bass are Belle Taine, East Crooked, Eighth, Ninth and Tenth Crow Wing, Spider and Little Mantrap. Duck and Lake George also have abundant bass populations but not many large bass. Smallmouth bass fishing should be getting good as the season progresses, lakes to target in the Park Rapids area are Belle Taine, Big Sand, Boulder, East Crooked and Potato.

Northern pike are abundant in the Park Rapids Fisheries Management Area. Lakes that have a better overall size structure are lakes that have the special regulation of 24- to 36-inch protected slot such as Big Mantrap, George, and Fifth and Sixth Crow Wing. In comparison, lakes in the statewide zone regulation such as Garfield, Little Sand, Portage, Potato and Straight have high abundances of pike but these fish tend to be smaller in size. Anglers targeting these north-central zone regulation lakes can take advantage of the increased possession limit of 10, of which no more than two can be above 26 inches, and all fish between 22 to 26 inches must be released.

Anglers targeting northern pike are reminded that there is a difference between the northern pike north-central zone regulation and the special regulation for northern pike. In Park Rapids, we have eight lakes with special northern pike regulations and several others for bass, black crappie or walleye. These lakes include:

- Northern pike – Fifth, Sixth, Eighth, Ninth and Tenth Crow Wing, George, Big Mantrap and Blueberry
- Bass – Little Mantrap and George
- Black crappie – Big Mantrap and Spider
- Sunfish – First, Second, Third, and Fourth Crow Wing and Garfield
- Walleye – Kabekona
- All species – Lester and LaSalle

If you aren't targeting a specific species and are willing to try different techniques, consider fishing Fish Hook or Potato lakes, with a goal of catching multiple species of fish. These two lakes are some of the better all-around lakes as you will find walleye, northern pike, largemouth and smallmouth bass, bluegill and black crappie.

Anglers can help prevent the spread of aquatic invasive species, 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. The Park Rapids Area prevention and education efforts have successfully slowed the spread of AIS, but more were added in 2024 and 2025. The latest addition was the entire Eagle, Island, Potato, and Fish Hook chain with the infestation of zebra mussels as well as Big Sand, Little Sand and connected Ida Lake. They joined the list of Benedict, Garfield and Long lakes. However, we are still at two lakes with Eurasian water milfoil (Bad Axe and Big Mantrap).

Walker area

As of early April, area lakes are still ice covered with a fresh new coating of snow. Anglers can anticipate finding walleye in post-spawn conditions by early to mid-May in time for the fishing opener. Walker Fisheries Management Area lakes have the potential to provide excellent multispecies angling opportunities. Based on assessments completed in 2025, quality populations of walleye can be found in Woman, Boy, Long (Lost Rocky), Leech, Six Mile, Thirteen and Pine Mountain lakes. These lakes produced decent catches of walleye ranging from 8 to 26 inches with quality size structure and ample fish measuring between 15 and 18 inches.

Quality angling opportunities for largemouth and/or smallmouth bass exist on Portage, Blackwater, Mule, Moccasin, Long (Lost Rocky), Little Boy, Wabedo and Woman lakes. Smallmouth bass are becoming increasingly more popular to target on Woman and Leech Lake.

In addition to Leech Lake, muskie can be targeted on Baby, Boy, Man, Little Boy, Wabedo, Inguadona and Woman lakes and their connecting waters with the opportunity for trophy-sized fish. A muskie egg-take occurs on Leech Lake once every four years. During 2025 sampling sampled fish ranged in size from 25 to 52 inches. A reminder to all anglers that muskie opener is Saturday, June 6.

Northern pike are abundant within the Walker fisheries area lakes. Anglers are reminded of the statewide zone regulations for northern pike. In the north central zone, the bag limit is 10, all pike from 22 to 26 inches must be released, and no more than two pike over 26 inches long can be harvested. Additional special regulations are in place on Little Boy, Wabedo, Child, Woman and Girl lakes. Surveys completed in 2025 found abundant pike populations in (Pine Mountain, Five Point, Webb, Six Mile, Boy, Long and Swift lakes. Pike exceeding 26 inches were found in all these waters and the largest pike sampled was over 36 inches.

Black crappie and sunfish can be caught throughout area waters with many lakes producing quality sized fish. Lakes sampled in 2025 with decent catch rates of quality sized crappie included Pine Mountain, Five Point, Woman, Webb, Boy and Swift lakes. Anglers targeting panfish should be reminded of special regulations in the form of reduced bag limits on some of these lakes. Lakes with new (implemented after 2020) sunfish regulations include Beuber, Boy, Big Portage, Crooked, Deep Portage, Leech, Lower Sucker, Lower Trelipe, Middle Sucker, Ox Yoke, Sanborn, Sugar, Upper Sucker, Upper Trelipe, Vermillion and Welsh lakes.

Northwest Region Large Lake Outlook for 2026

Lake of the Woods

Walleye and sauger are the most important sport fish in Lake of the Woods, and as such those populations are monitored annually. Annual assessments have been conducted in early September since 1981.

Walleye 11 to 25 inches long were above the historic average last September during the annual fall survey. The strong 2021 year class will be contributing to the desired harvest range during the summer of 2026.

Lake of the Woods is well known for the trophy-size walleye. Fish up to 30 inches are sampled every year during DNR sampling. The abundance of walleye greater than 20 inches remains high and should provide anglers plenty of opportunity to catch large fish.

Sauger abundance was above the long-term average last September due to multiple strong year-classes from 2019, 2022 and 2023.

Anglers should be aware of special fishing regulations on Lake of the Woods. These regulations are designed to maintain a quality fishery and fishing experiences. The combined walleye-sauger limit is six, but no more than four of those fish may be walleye. All walleye between 19 1/2 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 who 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 Sept 30. Anglers may catch and release fish for sturgeon from May 8 to May 15, and from Oct. 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 there are classified as threatened and the fishing season is closed. You may not harvest, or fish for, lake sturgeon on the Ontario portions of Lake of the Woods and the Rainy River. If you are fishing for lake sturgeon, it is very important to know which side of the border you are fishing.

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 designation, anglers have an obligation to prevent the spread of these invasive 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 must be trailered with all the plugs out. Check the [DNR website](#) for more specific information of how to prevent the spread of spiny water flea and zebra mussels.

Cass Lake

Cass Lake and its connected waters are typically a good choice for early season walleye fishing with the inlets and outlets of the connected waters being popular early season spots. While the walleye population in Cass Lake is down a bit, the 2021 year class is providing keeper-sized fish around 18 inches. There are also good numbers of fish in the mid-20-inch range with some even pushing up towards 30 inches. Night fishing has been popular on Cass Lake for a number of years as the clear water makes this the prime time to fish walleye. Daytime fishing seems to be most productive when there is a chop on the water or during low light periods.

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 muskie 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 Saturday, June 6 and the statewide minimum length limit is 54 inches.

Yellow perch numbers in Cass Lake are near average but abundance of fish over 9 inches is record high. Fish are growing rapidly which has resulted in anglers finding more keeper sized fish as well as fish over 12 inches. Anglers pursuing sunfish should remember there is a chain-wide five fish daily bag limit for sunfish. The possession limit for sunfish remains at 20 fish.

Zebra mussels and starry stonewort are present in the lake. Remember to inspect your boat hull and anchor for unwanted hitchhikers and drain all your water and keep your boat plugs out when leaving the landing area.

Upper Red

The fishing outlook for Upper Red Lake is excellent. 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 five walleye with one fish larger than 17 inches allowed in possession. This regulation is intended to focus angler harvest on smaller fish as there is an abundance of these fish in the population. Given the likelihood of an average spring, we are expecting a good bite. Anglers who spread out and find active fish should have no trouble finding plenty of keeper fish as abundance of these fish is excellent. But given that the spawn will have only recently been completed larger spawning fish will be concentrated on the shoreline break so be prepared to accurately measure your catch by having a proper measuring board 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 special regulation for northern pike: all fish from 30 to 40 inches must be immediately released, and only one fish greater than 40 inches is allowed in possession. Be sure to examine all northern pike caught for a small tag on the left side of their top (dorsal) fin. These yellow tags have unique numbers and can be reported to the creel clerk, on the [Minnesota DNR website](#), or by contacting the Bemidji area fisheries office. Tagged fish of the appropriate size may be harvested if you choose; however, if you release a tagged fish, please do not remove the tag from the fish.

Black crappie are showing up in angler catches in greater numbers than they have in several years. These fish are nearly all from the 2018 year class and average around 13 inches. However, there are a few fish from some older year classes still out there that provide an opportunity to catch an impressive 14 or 15 incher that may invoke memories of the “crappie boom” that occurred in the early 2000s. However, the current bump in crappie fishing success should not be misinterpreted as a new crappie boom, but rather increased opportunity for a few bonus fish as the 2018 year class is not nearly as large as the historic 1995 year class. Anglers targeting black crappie will be most successful in late May and early June looking for fish in and adjacent to likely spawning areas.

Anglers should be prepared to encounter a variety of natural resources staff while fishing or accessing Upper Red Lake. In addition to requests by DNR creel survey clerks and conservation officers, staff from the various DNR and Beltrami County invasive species programs may be doing inspections and providing educational information. Red Lake is designated as an infested water with both zebra mussels and starry stonewort present. 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 nuisance species by boaters. 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

Leech Lake is one of the most diverse among Minnesota’s large lakes, offering outstanding angling opportunities for a variety of species. Walleyes are the most targeted species by anglers visiting Leech Lake, a popular destination for

fishing opener. Walleye abundance in Leech is being driven by the historically large 2021 year class, now measuring 17 to 21 inches, and the 2023 year class, now measuring 13 to 16 inches. Walleye sampled in 2025 ranged in length from 8 to 26 inches. The walleye regulation of four fish with only one over 20 inches allowed in possession was implemented in 2019 and will continue based on observed desired effects on the walleye population.

Last spring (2025) a stocking evaluation was carried out in accordance with objectives outlined in the 2021–2025 Leech Lake Management Plan. Results showed that natural reproduction in the lake was suitable, however first summer survival of fry was low, a consequence of reduced zooplankton abundance as the food web has been in flux following the expansion of zebra mussels in the lake since 2021. The large average size of the 2025 year class of fingerlings sampled in October may result in a year-class that outperforms expectations and provides good fishing, like the 2023 year class.

As of March 1, 2021, sunfish and black crappie reduced daily limits on Leech Lake were implemented. Specifically, anglers can harvest five sunfish and five crappie daily; statewide possession limits of 20 sunfish and 10 crappie remain unchanged. The purpose of these reduced bag limits is to ensure that quality size structure of panfish is maintained. Anglers often target panfish in the shallower muddy bays of the lake in the spring and on weed edges throughout the summer. A targeted panfish assessment is scheduled for May to June 2026 on Leech to track abundance and size structure metrics.

Leech Lake supports a low to moderate northern pike density. Maintaining a stable abundance of northern pike is important as northern pike provide angling year-round and are a predator in competition with walleye for forage. Northern pike on Leech Lake fall under the north central pike management zone where anglers can keep 10 northern pike, but no more than two longer than 26 inches and all from 22 to 26 inches must be released. Northern pike abundance has decreased in annual assessments since 2015. Low pike abundance promotes quality size, an objective that has been recognized as important to anglers visiting Leech Lake.

Yellow perch abundance remains below management objectives, nevertheless quality size structure continues to provide exceptional perch fishing, and many anglers reported success this past winter. Anglers harvest more yellow perch (by number) on Leech Lake than any other species throughout the year. Above average trawl catches of perch in 2023 and 2025 showed the first positive sign in over a decade of a potential increase in perch abundance at the juvenile stage. Perch sampled in the 2025 fall assessment ranged from 5 to 13 inches.

Increased interest in bass angling on Leech Lake over the past decade has been captured in summer creel surveys, particularly by anglers targeting smallmouth bass. Smallmouth were targeted by a substantial share of anglers visiting Leech Lake in 2024, comparable to largemouth bass, northern pike and panfish. Main lake rock reefs and humps provide great habitat for smallmouth, while largemouth are frequently targeted in the shallower vegetated bays along with panfish.

Muskie angling is also popular on Leech Lake with the chance to catch a trophy. The muskie population, in addition to being prized widely by muskie anglers, possesses a unique genetic strain characterized by its large size potential. Several ongoing muskie focused research projects are happening on Leech Lake in 2026 including a genetic based mark-recapture effort and a telemetry study focused on muskie movement, habitat use and mortality. For more information on these projects please reach out to the [Walker area fisheries office](#) .

Minnesota DNR fisheries staff collect monthly water samples at five stations around Leech Lake and have documented reduced zooplankton abundance in recent years following zebra mussel expansion throughout the main lake and western bays. Zebra mussels are filter feeders that consume plant-like organisms called phytoplankton. Phytoplankton are the basis of the lake's food web and are critical for zooplankton production. There are currently no known methods to control or reduce zebra mussels once they are established in natural systems. Starry stonewort, an invasive alga, was found in Steamboat Bay in 2021. AIS like zebra mussels and starry stonewort are moved from infested to non-infested waters by anglers, boaters, and lake shore owners and can adversely impact lakes and fish populations. Other invasive species in Leech Lake include Eurasian water milfoil, rusty crayfish and curly-leaf pondweed. 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 these topics can be found on the [Minnesota DNR website](#) or by contacting the [Walker area fisheries office](#).

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.