

Southern 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

Southern Minnesota lakes are some of the best kept secrets across the state. Many are often overlooked for angling in the spring; however, local anglers and outdoor enthusiasts know that great days of fishing are often experienced in the spring on a southern Minnesota lake. With increasing abundance and success of unique lower Mississippi strain walleye, fishing is heating up in southern Minnesota.

Anyone can take part in good angling by boat or on a shoreline at many of the southern waters of the state. Several new shoreline fishing opportunities are available in southern Minnesota, at Lake Shetek, Madison Lake, Francis Lake, Lake Florida Outlet Aquatic Management Area, Clinton Kids Pond, Upper Lake in Atwood and Foot Lake in Willmar. Shallow, fast warming lakes in southern Minnesota can provide great action during the early season while much of the northern part of the state is still thawing out and fishing won't heat up for a month or two. Many great options exist for crappie, perch, pike, bass and walleye. There are even a few muskie lakes that provide great fishing in early June across southern Minnesota. Fisheries crews and supervisors have been attentive and adaptive with shallow lake management to provide the best opportunities in a short period of time. Try out a southern Minnesota lake, you won't be disappointed.

The start of the 2026 season has been yet another mild late winter followed by dry conditions across much of southern Minnesota. Poor late season ice conditions and early ice-out have many anglers eager to hit the open water, if they haven't already! No large scale fish winterkill was observed in 2025/26 winter, which is now the third consecutive year of limited winterkill in southern Minnesota. During the winter of 2023/24 there was significant winterkill and many lakes were restocked with walleye fry, which are now approaching larger sizes with some even topping 20 inches due to fast growth in some shallow/highly productive southern Minnesota lakes.

Remember anglers and boaters, **Clean In Clean Out** when boating or fishing in Minnesota. Be courteous and protect waters by following state aquatic invasive species laws. Clean, drain, dispose and keep all plugs out while transporting boats. Another reminder is that water temperatures in the spring are still cold. Hypothermia can set in within minutes of falling overboard, so please wear your life jacket. If you need fish population assistance, contact [the local Fisheries area office](#) in that area of the state. Have a great fishing experience and take a kid fishing or introduce someone new to shore fishing!

The following fishing information is highlighted below by each DNR area fisheries office in the southern region: Hutchinson, Minnesota River, Ortonville, Spicer, Waterville and Windom. They provide a snapshot of the lake's fishery based on recent netting surveys that evaluate fish populations. The following list of waters are viable options for spring of 2026:

- **Belle Lake (Meeker County)** – a lake with natural reproduction not stocked since 2018
- **Lake Hanska (Brown County)** – a long and narrow lake that has been a walleye destination

- **Big Swan Lake (Meeker County)** – A great walleye resource and perennial favorite
- **Minnesota River (from Granite Falls to Mankato)** – a great multi-species stretch of the river
- **Traverse Lake (Traverse County)** – a walleye factory for years! Two lines on the border water
- **Hendricks Lake (Lincoln County)** – Good numbers of walleye are starting to heat up the action.
- **Big Stone Lake (Big Stone County)** – Good numbers and sizes of walleye, big bluegill potential
- **Koronis Lake (Stearns County)** – providing excellent walleye sizes and good action
- **Green Lake (Kandiyohi County)** – back in the action with good numbers of walleye available
- **Willmar Lake (Kandiyohi County)** – good balance of size and numbers of crappie
- **Fox Lake (Rice County)** – boasts high numbers of walleye for the lake which is often overlooked
- **Elysian Lake (Waseca County)** – Excellent winter angling plus no winterkill equals a good spring.
- **Cannon Lake (Rice County)** – Excellent numbers of walleye with a good size distribution
- **Lake Shetek (Murray County)** – big water, increasing walleye and pike numbers, big success
- **Big Twin Lake (Martin County)** – Overlooked gem in southern Minnesota, good numbers of walleye
- **Dead Coon Lake (Lincoln County)** – Good numbers and sizes of walleye and yellow perch

Hutchinson area

Hutchinson Area Fisheries – covering Brown, McLeod, Meeker, Nicollet, Redwood, Renville and Sibley counties

The spring of 2026 followed a somewhat ordinary winter, and lake ice-out was slightly early to normal for most lakes in the Hutchinson Fisheries Management Area, which includes Meeker, McLeod, Renville, Sibley, Nicollet, Redwood and Brown counties. Lake water levels appeared to be normal, but ice-out was just occurring for lakes in northern McLeod County, when this outlook was written in early April. Silver Lake and Clear Lake, in Sibley County, are the exceptions. The water level was very low in both of those lakes due to drawdown restoration efforts that were occurring over the 2025 to 2026 winter.

Local boat launches should be in good shape for most lakes, if we have normal rainfall in April and May. The traditional fishing opener lands on Saturday, May 9, and fishing prospects in the Hutchinson fisheries area are healthy. Starting in 2026, bass angling can be done year-round, but all bass caught between March 1 and May 22, 2026, must be immediately released as part of the new catch-and-release season.

The Minnesota DNR Division of Parks and Trails reported that several area lakes had buckled boat ramps this spring, and all will be fixed as soon as possible. You can check the [Minnesota DNR Recreation Compass](#) to see if boat ramp docks have been installed on your favorite fishing lake. Several fishing piers sustained damage during the 2025 to 2026 winter, and most should be fixed by the Walleye opener.

Walleye: Belle Lake has been the Hutchinson fisheries area's standard bearer for consistent walleye fishing. The population has been boosted by an abundance of natural reproduction throughout its history. Recent management has backed off fry stocking to see what would happen and the result to date has been a consistent and sustainable walleye fishery. Belle was last stocked with walleye fry in 2018.

Marion Lake has recent and long-term walleye history in its favor. In 2023, 1,300 adult walleye were tagged, and angler harvest was not excessive. Walleye have been abundant on Marion for the last four Minnesota DNR fish surveys, but old marble eyes can be challenging to catch at times. Perch catch rates have been off the charts for the last two assessments at Marion, providing walleye with full bellies!

Jennie Lake has come online with strong walleye angling over the past couple years after a long run of low abundance. The future looks bright with fair numbers of eaters being present.

Big Swan Lake continued to churn out the walleye last summer and this past winter, and there should be some leftovers available for the 2026 opener. The 2022 year class was most abundant, and they are the perfect size for the frying pan.

Washington's walleye bit good during the 2025 to 2026 winter, but anglers did not get them all, so we should expect some decent action this spring. Stella (upstream of Washington) should also produce respectable walleye angling in 2026.

Minnie-Belle was the site of a 2024 walleye tagging study that helped estimate the population size, examine adult spawning population genetic ancestry and estimated angler harvest. Minnie-Belle showed off its robust walleye population with a mix of large fish and some smaller eaters.

Hanska Lake has been the Brown County Walleye producer. Regular fry stocking has resulted in a strong year class of 10- and 11-inch-long fish that were sampled in 2025.

Walleye anglers may want to avoid Swan Lake in McLeod County, as there was a late fall fish kill in 2025 which reduced the population size. Age-2 walleye were stocked in mid-October, and fry will be stocked this spring, but it may take a few years for the population to fully recover.

Northern pike: If you want a chance at the largest northern pike in the Hutchinson fisheries area, Minnie-Belle Lake is the easy choice. Minnie-Belle has had two decades of a 24- to 36-inch protected slot limit that works to ensure that medium and large sized pike are recycled in the lake. DNR Fisheries survey results have consistently shown more large pike in the lake as a result, including fish as large as a 38-inch female caught by Minnesota DNR crews during ice-out netting in 2024.

The other place for bigger pike is Erie Lake. Erie is not a very large lake but has deep water and a great mix of submergent vegetation that provides excellent pike habitat. If you catch a large pike on Erie or other lakes in the Hutchinson fisheries area, consider releasing the fish to provide top-down predator control on smaller pike and to give another angler the opportunity to catch that same fish when it is larger. Big pike are too valuable to be caught only once!

It was unfortunate that Collinwood Lake suffered a partial winterkill in 2023, because it had a large impact on the size structure of the pike population. Many of the larger pike succumbed to the low oxygen level that winter. Then there was a huge recruitment response to the void in the lake, with extremely high numbers of little pike being produced that spring. Currently the lake is dominated by high numbers of small northern pike. However, anglers seeking lots of action should definitely try Collinwood!

Otter Reservoir, adjacent to the city of Hutchinson, has also produced lots of pike over the last 12-month period. If you want a shot at a larger sized pike, you should visit and fish Sleepy Eye, Big Swan, Greenleaf, Star, Round, Jennie, Ripley and Betty lakes. Ice-out netting in 2026 confirmed that there were still high numbers of pike in Hoff Lake, along with a few keeper-sized gators too!

Bass: Washington and Stella lakes grab a lot of the attention for bass fishing in the Hutchinson fisheries area, and for good reason. This pair of connected lakes offers loads of docks, scattered rocks, bullrush beds, and submergent vegetation lanes to catch both smallmouth and largemouth bass. Being within an hour's drive of St. Cloud and the Twin Cities, these lakes are popular with permitted fishing tournaments, local club level bass leagues and for-fun fishing derbies. Smallmouth bass can also be caught in Manuella and Big Swan lakes. For high numbers of largemouth bass, check out Long (Dassel), Minnie-Belle, Erie and Francis lakes. Some real lunker largemouth bass can be found at Little Swan, Ripley, Jennie, Marion and Greenleaf lakes. To get away from the crowds, check out the smaller bass factories like Union, Dunns, Stahl's or Sleepy Eye lakes.

Sunfish: A pair of lakes in the Hutchinson fisheries area currently support some very nice sized sunfish, something of a rarity for the area as well as uncommon across much of the state. Minnie-Belle and Ripley lakes have produced plate-sized sunnies and now have five-sunfish bag limits in place to protect and increase the number of quality (large-sized) sunfish that anglers can catch on these lakes. Both lakes have green sunfish, bluegill and pumpkinseed

as well as hybrids of the various sunfish species, which can make for some giant sunfish. While the population dynamics are slightly different, both Marion and Jennie lakes can kick out an occasional huge (10-inch) sunfish. They can be very hard to find, but these two lakes are places where trophy hunters can seek giant “needle in a haystack” bluegill.

Manuella, Union, Clear (Watkins) and Francis are great places to find a mix of sizes and numbers. If lots of bites and keeping young or novice anglers’ bobbers busy is the goal, try the rock jetties at Stahls or the channel between French Lake and Stahls Lake — which is a great springtime fishing spot.

Bluegill sunfish are ubiquitous to many fishing lakes in the Hutchinson fisheries area but their size and abundance depends on habitat quality and fish community dynamics. One thing anglers can do to preserve large sunfish opportunities for future generations is to release large, male sunfish, best identified by prominent and elongate black ear tabs on their gill covers and bright orange breast colors. These large, parental male sunfish guard nests during the spawn and devote their energy to growth while delaying sexual maturity until later in life, enabling them to grow to large sizes and passing down that useful genetic life history. Removing these parental males results in smaller, earlier maturing males passing on their genetics instead. To keep large sunfish in our lakes, let the big males go and harvest smaller males and females.

Crappie: Crappie fishing in the Hutchinson fisheries area can be good on some lakes at certain times. Like many Minnesota lakes, crappie populations and subsequent angling opportunity can ebb and flow over time as crappies experience erratic recruitment to adult sizes.

Traditionally, Marion has been a popular lake, but abundance of keeper-sized fish has come down a bit from what it was a few years ago, but crappie anglers should still be able to get some for their live-wells. A huge year class of small crappie were present in the 2025 Marion Lake netting survey, and if that cohort continues to develop, fishing could be good this coming winter.

Big Swan Lake has produced some excellent crappie angling over the last 12 months, especially for anglers with forward facing sonar.

Despite a partial winterkill at Richardson Lake in 2023, there were plenty of surviving crappie and the partial kill may have reduced some of the competition amongst this species, temporarily boosting growth and growing larger-sized fish.

A Minnesota DNR netting assessment in 2025 showed that good numbers of black crappie were present at Francis Lake, and fishing reports over the last year verified it!

Jennie Lake has a good mix of keepers and big slab crappies, and springtime can produce some nice catches. A fishing pier is present at Jennie’s south boat access.

Dunns Lake typically has good numbers, and many are eater-sized fish. A few white crappie are also present in Dunns.

Stella Lake had good numbers in the 2025 spring trap netting assessment and 2025 to 2026 ice anglers capitalized on the opportunity.

While Clear Lake (New Ulm) experienced a partial winterkill in 2023, some of the crappie survived and those should provide good angling in 2026.

Spring angling at the Clear Lake Lost Dog and Fox Hunter County Park fishing pier should be good. Steadiness of crappie angling is no easy thing to hold onto, but Clear (Watkins) has been a consistent producer for several years now, both in the open water and ice angling periods.

The 2023 winterkill on Willie Lake was somewhat light, with many crappie surviving the event. Anglers can expect to catch both black and white crappie at Willie Lake, but it’s when the two species hybridize that you might catch the biggest crappie of your life! Shore anglers had outstanding crappie action, for both black and white crappie, last fall at Otter Reservoir, and with no signs of winterkill this spring, the pan-fishing rampage should continue in 2026!

Star Lake should also produce some decent crappie fishing this year. If you want to get away from the crowds, you may want to check out Long Lake (Grove City). Netting in the spring of 2025 showed good numbers 7- to 8-inch black crappie, and with another year of growth, keeper-sized crappie fishing could be pretty good!

Perch: Keeper-sized yellow perch are rare in the Hutchinson fisheries area, but you may find a few at Silver (Silver Lake), Clear (Cedar Mills), Long (Grove City), Preston and Marion lakes.

Bullhead: While requests for good bullhead fishing opportunities have dropped dramatically over the decades, a few people still want to find black bullhead for sentimental fish fries or live-bait use (anglers targeting flathead catfish on the Minnesota River). If you want to catch a mess of black bullhead, give Cedar or Long lakes (Grove City) a try. You can also do well at Otter Reservoir within the Hutchinson city limits. Big Wolf Lake (Hutchinson) would be a wise choice if you seek truly gigantic black bullhead, because they were abundant there when the lake was surveyed in 2023. Bigger yellow bullhead, an indicator species for good water quality, can usually be found at Francis, Stella and Minnie-Belle lakes.

Trout: Trout angling options in the Hutchinson fisheries area include Little Mud Lake (Watkins) for rainbow trout and brown trout. Rainbows are stocked every spring and fall at Little Mud, and larger browns are also stocked before the winter season. Fort Ridgley, Spring (also known as Hindeman), Ramsey and Seven Mile Creeks also offer opportunities to catch stream trout in the area. All four streams are stocked in the spring with both rainbow and brown trout, except for Seven Mile which is only stocked with browns. These put-and-take fisheries offer unique angling opportunities, typically not found in this part of the state. Also, a trout stamp is required if fishing for trout in these lakes.

Channel Catfish: Betty, Big Swan, Marion, Swan (Silver Lake) and Hanska lakes are all places where anglers can target channel catfish. In addition, the South Fork and the North Fork of the Crow River are also good choices for channels.

Minnesota River

Overview and unique fishing regulations

The Minnesota River is a large, dynamic system that flows more than 300 miles across southern Minnesota and supports one of the most diverse fisheries in the state. Anglers commonly target channel catfish, freshwater drum, and walleye (including sauger), while also having opportunities to catch trophy flathead catfish and unique native species such as buffalo, gar, redhorse and sturgeon. If spring flows remain moderate, fishing for walleye and catfish is expected to be excellent in May and June. Anglers should be aware of a few regulations that are specific to the Minnesota River, including the use of two lines during the open water season from Granite Falls dam downstream to the Mississippi River and the allowance of cast nets, with a permit, to harvest gizzard shad for bait in this reach. Access to the river is widespread, with shore fishing available at many parks and public lands and more than 50 public water accesses providing boat launches along the river. Because river conditions can change quickly, boaters should always use caution, wear a life jacket, and check water levels before heading out using resources such as the cooperative stream gaging network.

Upstream of Granite Falls dam

Upstream of Granite Falls dam, anglers can expect consistent fishing for channel catfish, freshwater drum, white bass and walleye. Reports of smallmouth bass in this reach up to Lac qui Parle dam have increased in recent years. Shore anglers often find success below Lac qui Parle dam and near the Big Stone National Wildlife Refuge dam. Because Granite Falls dam limits fish movement, species such as flathead catfish, sauger and shovelnose sturgeon are largely absent upstream.

Granite Falls dam to Mankato

This reach offers some of the river's most consistent multi-species angling, including channel catfish, flathead catfish, freshwater drum and walleye. Fish of notable size are common, with flathead catfish exceeding 40 pounds and walleye approaching 30 inches possible. Walleye fishing typically peaks during spring and fall, with anglers

commonly fishing around tributary mouths and rocky habitats during the spring and around deep holes during late fall and winter. During summer, flathead catfish are most effectively targeted around log jams and current breaks, particularly after dark. Shore access is available below Granite Falls dam, at several Renville County parks, and along the banks of several city parks in New Ulm and Mankato.

Mankato to the Mississippi

The lower river provides excellent boat angling opportunities, and you don't have to motor far from an access to find big fish. Flathead catfish benefit from long lifespans and catch-and-release practices, with individuals exceeding 50 pounds present. Walleye and sauger are abundant and fall fishing can be particularly productive when water levels are favorable. The final 17 miles downstream of the Highway 169 bridge are the most navigable for larger boats; however, anglers should remain alert for commercial barge traffic.

Ortonville Area

The Ortonville Area Fisheries – covers Traverse, Big Stone, western Lac qui Parle, western Swift, western Yellow Medicine and northern Lincoln counties.

Popular Lakes include Artichoke, Big Stone, Hendricks, Lac qui Parle and Traverse. The Minnesota River and many smaller lakes and rivers provide numerous additional angling opportunities. Due to the shallow, productive nature of these water bodies, fish grow fast and quality populations of yellow perch, walleyes, crappies, freshwater drum and white bass are common.

Fisheries staff routinely evaluate fish populations in lakes and streams using gill nets, trap nets, seines and electrofishing. These data are used to make management decisions. The data are also available to anglers in reports which are useful for deciding where to fish. The data presented here are from the most recent surveys conducted.

Walleye: Most lakes in the region are regularly stocked with walleyes, however good natural reproduction does occur in several lakes and rivers. Walleyes are relatively abundant in Artichoke, Oliver, Steep Bank and Traverse lakes. Big Stone, Hendricks and Lac qui Parle also have good populations. Although “eater-sized” walleyes (13-18 inches) are most common, plenty of larger walleyes are also present in these lakes. Walleye fishing can also be good in the Minnesota and Pomme de Terre rivers especially during spring and fall.

Yellow Perch: Yellow perch fishing is very popular and there are numerous options in the area. Hendricks Lake has relatively high numbers of perch with a good percentage over 10 inches. Perch fishing in Big Stone Lake has been down in recent years but decent numbers of 9- to 11-inch perch can still be found. The Oliver lakes and Lake Traverse have moderate numbers of perch and can provide some angling opportunity as well. Yellow perch grow fast in these lakes and can reach 10 inches after three summers.

Crappies: Several lakes can offer up decent crappie fishing. Lac qui Parle Lake has provided a quality crappie population for many years. When the bite is on, good catches of 10- to 13-inch crappies are common. Crappie numbers have been increasing in Big Stone and Traverse Lakes, and angling for them can be good, especially in the spring.

Bluegills: Quality bluegill fishing can be found on some of the larger bodies of water. Improved water clarity has led to increased vegetation in Big Stone and Traverse lakes. This has created better bluegill habitat. During the past several years bluegill fishing has been very good on Big Stone. Traverse can also provide good fishing at times. Anglers have a chance to catch a trophy in both lakes. West Oliver has decent numbers of bluegills and smaller bluegills are common in Del Clark Lake.

Bass: Largemouth and smallmouth bass numbers have increased substantially in the area during recent years. Big Stone is becoming known for its quality largemouth bass fishing. Increased vegetation has led to better survival and recruitment of bass. Growth is fast and many bass over five pounds are caught. Smallmouth bass are present in Traverse and Oliver lakes. Traverse has a substantial amount of rocky habitat and Oliver has abundant flooded timber, cover types that commonly hold bass.

Northern pike: Northern pike numbers have been rising in a number of local lakes. Del Clark, Traverse, Lac qui Parle and Perch lakes provide the best opportunities for catching pike. Artichoke Lake winterkilled in 2022 to 2023 and adult and young-of-year pike have already been found. Most of these lakes have decent numbers over 30 inches. Big Stone has lower, but increasing, pike numbers and anglers have reported catching pike over 40 inches.

Catfish and bullhead: The Minnesota River, Lac qui Parle and Traverse lakes have high numbers of channel catfish. Catfish grow fast and fish over 30 inches are present. Big Stone and Lac qui Parle lakes have decent numbers of large bullheads. Black, yellow and brown bullheads are all present in the area.

Freshwater drum and white bass: Many area lakes and rivers provide good fishing for freshwater drum and white bass. Freshwater drum are commonly known as “sheepshead.” Drum can be caught in Lac qui Parle and Big Stone lakes, whereas the best bets for white bass are Traverse, Big Stone and Hendricks lakes. Both species can be caught from the Minnesota River as well. These species are good to eat and they continue to become more popular with anglers.

Lake sturgeon: Lake sturgeon were historically present in Big Stone Lake and the upper Minnesota River watershed but were extirpated by around 1950 likely due to declining habitat quality and barriers to spawning migration. Habitat conditions have improved since then, so lake sturgeon were reintroduced in 2014 and stocking occurs regularly. Stocking has been successful and sturgeon are frequently caught by anglers, and in DNR sampling. The oldest fish are nearly 60 inches and 65 pounds. Lake sturgeon will continue to be stocked until a self-sustaining population has been re-established.

Trout: Canby Creek, located southwest of Canby, is the only opportunity to catch trout in the Ortonville Fisheries Management Area. Every spring ahead of the statewide stream trout opener, the DNR stocks brown trout that average just over a pound. The best access to the creek is within Stonehill Regional Park. A fee is required to use park facilities, but not to directly access the south parking lot for fishing the creek. In addition to a regular fishing license, a state trout stamp is required. Most of these fish get caught early in the season, so plan your trip accordingly.

Other lakes: Long Tom, Little Long and East Toqua lakes are also popular but were subject to severe winterkill in the winter of 2022-2023. These lakes were stocked with game fish including yellow perch and walleye and good fishing has already been reported. These lakes will be surveyed during summer 2026.

This article includes data from surveys of the more popular lakes in the area. Please [contact the area office](#) with questions about any other lakes of interest. The larger lakes in the Ortonville fisheries area are surveyed annually, while smaller lakes are surveyed every third year or more. More detailed survey reports are available upon request or can be found on the Minnesota DNR Lakefinder website.

Spicer area

Spicer Area Fisheries – covering Kandiyohi County and portions of Stearn, Lyon, Chippewa, Lac qui Parle, Swift and Yellow Medicine counties

Ice-out occurred slightly earlier than average with water temperatures now gradually increasing as the area’s northern pike, walleye and yellow perch populations begin their annual spawning activities. There was no indication of winterkill in area lakes this past winter. The Spicer area fisheries and New London Hatchery staff have geared up for another walleye egg-take season at the same time as early season anglers will be targeting panfish species such as bluegill, crappie and yellow perch, particularly in those shallow bays and shoreline areas where water warms first in addition to largemouth and smallmouth bass anglers this season where it is now legal to target them on a catch-and-release basis until the traditional largemouth and smallmouth bass harvest periods. Fishing activity will ramp up a second time in about a month beginning with the May 9 walleye and northern pike opener where the Spicer fisheries management area offers several quality angling options for yet another great Minnesota fishing opener.

Spring conditions will play a major role in early season success and whether to choose a shallower or deeper lake for the opener is always a big decision. The Spicer area offers a variety of lake types of all sizes and depths. Shallow

lakes, protected bays, and areas with inflowing water will warm first and concentrate fish. For most Minnesota openers, anglers should pay close attention to these areas regardless of which lake they choose.

Walleye: Lakes where recent (2023-2025) fisheries surveys indicate strong populations of quality-sized walleyes include Koronis, Diamond, Florida, Cottonwood, Rice, Green, Willmar and Big Kandiyo.

Koronis continues to provide the best overall size structure, while Diamond and Florida offer an excellent balance of numbers and quality fish. Green Lake is back in play with multiple strong year-classes recruited to the fishery in recent years. Cottonwood and Willmar (including connected Foot Lake) should be reliable early season choices in 2026 due to their shallow depth and rapid warming. Big Kandiyo provides strong potential due to recent potential strong recruitment as measured by fall electrofishing sampling from the annual walleye fry stocking regiment.

Early season success will depend heavily on targeting shallow warming areas. Lakes with bays that warm quickly, or inlets bring in warmer water will often produce the best fishing, especially during cooler spring conditions.

Shore-fishing – Florida and Koronis outlets, Ringo northeast shoreline, West Norway inlet near public access, and Foot and Willmar lakes providing multiple shore-fishing locations are all strong early-season options as is under the Highway 23 bridge on Nest Lake and the shore fishing platforms at the Green Lake outlet.

Basic techniques – Early season walleyes can be effectively targeted with a jig and minnow (1/8–1/4 oz) along shallow shorelines, wind-blown banks, and near inlets. A slip bobber with a leech or minnow is very effective in calmer conditions, especially around shallow structure and emerging vegetation. Casting shallow-running crankbaits or swimbaits during low-light periods can also produce fish. As water warms, gradually move to the first break lines and transition areas just outside shallow bays.

Northern pike: Lakes with the best current combination of size and abundance based on recent surveys include Rice, Koronis, Willmar, East Solomon and Calhoun.

Rice stands out for both number of large fish and trophy potential. Koronis also provides excellent size structure, while Willmar offers a strong combination of abundance and quality fish. East Solomon continues to improve and provides good opportunities for quality sized pike.

Regulations reminder – Most area lakes fall under north central zone regulations (10 fish, 22- to 26-inch protected slot, two over 26 inches). Cottonwood, Wood, Tyson, Lady Slipper and School Grove are managed under southern zone regulations (two fish, 24-inch minimum).

Shore-fishing – Florida and Koronis outlets, Ringo northeast shoreline, Foot and Willmar lake's multiple locations, New London Mill Pond and bridge crossings, Lake Calhoun public access and dam(s).

Basic techniques – Early season northern pike can be effectively targeted using large minnows under a bobber in shallow bays and near emerging vegetation. Casting spoons, spinnerbaits, or shallow-running crankbaits along shoreline cover and wind-blown areas is also very effective. As water temperatures increase, pike will often position along the first break or weed edge where slow presentations with swimbaits or suspended bait can produce larger fish.

Crappie: Diamond and Willmar currently provide some of the best combinations of size and abundance, while Norway offers a well-balanced population. Rice continues to show strong recruitment, maintaining one of the area's most consistent crappie fisheries while downstream Koronis remains a viable option.

Spring crappie fishing is typically best in shallow bays, especially areas with dark bottoms that warm quickly. Inlets and protected shorelines can concentrate fish early.

Basic techniques – Small jigs (1/32–1/16 oz) tipped with a crappie minnow or soft plastic under a slip bobber are very effective in shallow water. Casting small plastics or tube jigs and slowly retrieving them just above emerging vegetation also works well. During calm conditions, a slow vertical presentation around docks, brush, or shoreline cover can be productive. As fish move slightly deeper, try a light jig-and-minnow combination along the first break or edge of developing weeds.

Shore-fishing – West Norway inlet near public access, Ringo shoreline, New London Mill Pond and bridge crossings, and multiple shore-fishing locations on Foot and Willmar lakes.

Bluegill: Several lakes in the Spicer fisheries area are managed under local experimental sunfish regulations designed to improve size structure. These regulations include reduced daily limits on sunfish and/or crappie and are in place on lakes such as Diamond and George (five sunfish daily limit) and Nest, Florida and Long Lake (near Hawick, 10-sunfish daily limit), with George also having a five-crappie daily limit. Anglers should be aware of and follow these regulations when fishing these waters.

Lakes with the best overall bluegill size structure include Henderson and Long Hawick, with Nest providing high numbers of fish. Florida and George show strong developing populations.

Diamond and Green lakes can produce some of the largest bluegill in the area, although these fish occur at lower densities and can be more difficult to locate.

Spring fishing is best in shallow protected bays and dark-bottom areas that warm quickly.

Basic techniques – A small hook or jig (1/64 to 1/32 ounce) tipped with a waxworm, spike or small piece of nightcrawler under a bobber is very effective for bluegills in shallow water. Light line and slow presentations are key. In slightly deeper water, try slowly retrieving a small jig or plastic along weed edges or around shoreline cover. As fish become more active, casting and slowly working small plastics can help locate larger fish.

Shore fishing – Elkhorn lagoon, protected bays, and shallow backwater areas provide good early-season opportunities. Green Lake outlet area, public access at Long Lake Hawick, Highway 23 bay on Nest Lake and Florida outlet all provide excellent opportunities.

Yellow perch: Cottonwood offers the best opportunity for “jumbo” perch. Tyson, Big Kandiyohi and Wakanda provide strong numbers and developing size structure, while Minnetaga supports a smaller but present population of larger fish.

Early-season perch fishing is best in shallow areas and near inlets before fish move deeper later in the season.

Basic techniques – Jumbo perch can be effectively targeted using small jigs (1/32 to 1/16 ounce) tipped with a fathead minnow, waxworm or piece of nightcrawler. Fishing under a slip bobber in shallow bays or along shoreline cover works well early in the season. As fish begin to move deeper, slowly drifting or casting jigs along weed edges and break lines can be very effective. Small spoons or blade baits can also help locate schools of larger perch.

Shore-fishing – Cottonwood and Minnetaga lakes both offer legal shore fishing or road access as does Kandiyohi County Park 1 on the southwest side of Big Kandiyohi Lake.

Bass catch and release now year-round: Camp, East Solomon, Monson and Games lakes currently provide the best largemouth bass fishing opportunities. Green and Koronis remain the top smallmouth bass lakes, with Eagle, Nest and Big Kandiyohi providing additional smallmouth opportunities.

Bass can be an excellent option if walleye fishing is slow on the opener, particularly in warming bays and shallow cover.

Basic techniques – For largemouth bass, target warming shallow bays, emerging vegetation and shoreline cover. Spinnerbaits, chatterbaits and shallow crankbaits work well to cover water, while soft plastics (Texas-rigged worms, stickbaits) are effective when fish are less aggressive. For smallmouth bass, focus on rocky shorelines, points and transition areas. Tubes, ned rigs and small swimbaits fished slowly along bottom are very effective, especially in cooler water. During low-light periods, both species can be caught casting moving baits along wind-blown banks.

Waterville area

Waterville Area Fisheries – covering Blue Earth, Dodge, Faribault, Freeborn, Le Sueur, Mower, Rice, Steele and Waseca counties

The outlook for angling in the Waterville area in 2026 is bright! Natural reproduction in the region’s large, stable

walleye lakes has been good and boom-and-bust lakes are booming with walleye and yellow perch. Angling for largemouth bass just keeps getting better and bluegill and crappie populations are strong at most area lakes.

Anglers are getting accustomed to “early” ice-out and fishing patterns should be similar to the last couple of springs.

Here we provide a brief snapshot to get anglers ready for opening day 2026 breaking down popular lakes in the Waterville area by species. For more details check out our 2026 outlook at the [Waterville area fisheries webpage](#) under the “fishing opportunities” tab.

Walleye: It has been three years since the last severe winterkill and lakes and ponds stocked with walleye fry are booming. Walleye angling ranged from good to fantastic at Lake Elysian this winter — expect more of the same this spring. Eagle Lake should also kick out some walleyes in spring and early summer. Deeper, stable lakes such as Fox Lake, Madison Lake and Lake Tetonka are always good early season bets.

Natural reproduction of walleye has recently been high in lakes through which the Cannon River flows. Lakes like Gorman Lake, Sabre Lake, Tetonka Lake and Cannon Lake all have excellent numbers of walleye and are popular early-season destinations.

Northern pike: Northern pike numbers in most lakes are in the range considered desirable by anglers and managers alike. Northern pike over 24 inches can be found at many lakes including Madison Lake, Fountain Lake and Lura Lake. Other options include the Jefferson chain of lakes or Mills Lake.

Waterville area lakes fall under the southern zone northern pike regulations, which has a two-fish limit and a minimum size limit for harvest of 24 inches. St. Olaf Lake near New Richland has a 30-inch minimum size limit.

Largemouth bass: For fast bass angling action, check out lakes with abundant bass numbers such as Lake Frances or Clear Lake in Waseca County. Lakes with low to medium densities of bass such as Shields Lake, Lura Lake and Lake Tetonka often offer the best crack at fish topping the 20 inch mark. Clear Lake in Waseca has a no-kill regulation for largemouth bass.

Rivers such as the Cannon River, Cedar River, Straight River and Minnesota River provide an opportunity for anglers to catch smallmouth bass. Smallmouth bass are also present in Lake Tetonka although in low numbers.

Crappies and bluegill: Many small lakes in the area hold large numbers of mid-sized bluegills. Anglers looking for numbers should try East Jefferson Lake or West Jefferson Lake. Clear Lake in Waseca County is loaded with bluegills. Anglers looking for larger fish should head to lakes with lower bluegill numbers such as Roberds Lake, Lake Washington or Lake Mazaska.

The daily limit for sunfish at Lake Mazaska is five and the daily limit at Lake Washington and Shields Lake is 10. Please release big bluegills (greater than 9 inches), they ensure quality size and take many years to replace.

Almost all area lakes offer decent crappie fishing. For numbers of crappie, try Steele Lake, East Jefferson, or Clear Lake in Waseca County. Quality crappies can be found in good numbers at lakes such as Lake Washington, Madison Lake or German Lake. Lakes such as Duck Lake, St. Olaf Lake or Hunt Lake that have both black crappies and white crappies often produce the largest crappies in the area (and the state).

Catfish: The Minnesota River is the best bet for channel catfish and flathead catfish in the Waterville area. The stretch from Courtland to Henderson holds a variety of catfish habitat, especially woody snags. The Le Sueur and Blue Earth rivers are also excellent choices for channel catfish. If you prefer to chase channel catfish in lakes try Roberds Lake, Tetonka Lake or Cannon Lake.

Trout: A few options exist for those seeking trout in the Waterville area. Rainbow trout are stocked every spring at St. Peter Aquatic Management Area and in Wolf Creek within the city of Austin. There may also be some trout left over from the winter stocking at Hiniker Pond in Mankato.

If you prefer to fish moving water, check out Rice Creek, near Dundas, for brook trout. Rice Creek is loaded with

small to medium-sized brook trout and some large fish. Rice Creek is accessible to anglers via an angling easement. To learn more about angling easements and trout fishing in general, see [DNR trout webpage](#).

Other species: For those seeking something off the beaten track, the Waterville area offers a host of “other” fish. Lakes like German Lake and Lake Mazaska offer longnose gar. Lake Mazaska also sports a healthy population of big and hard-fighting white bass. The Upper Cannon River Chain of Lakes are a hotspot for anglers who want to catch emerald bowfin. The Minnesota, Le Sueur and Blue Earth rivers (as well as other, smaller rivers) are a bonanza for anglers looking for less sought-after species like various redhorse, white suckers, shovelnose sturgeon (catch and release only), and gar. Options are nearly endless for anglers or those looking to arrow a common carp.

For more information visit [DNR LakeFinder](#).

Windom area

Windom Area Fisheries – covering Cottonwood, Jackson, Lincoln, Lyon, Martin, Murray, Nobles, Pipestone, Rock and Watonwan counties.

The Windom fisheries management area is located within the prairie pothole region, which is characterized by shallow lakes with high ability to support plant and animal life. During the winter of 2025-2026, anglers reported excellent fishing as the widespread, abundant 2023 walleye year class reached an acceptable length for anglers to harvest. Like the previous year, the winter was mild with less than normal snowfall, resulting in a shorter window of time to ice fish. Excellent angling opportunities await the upcoming open water season potentially because winter angling was somewhat limited and winterkill did not occur throughout Windom area fisheries. For additional information regarding stocking, fish surveys, oxygen monitoring, contour maps, and other fish management activities, please visit the [Windom area fisheries webpage](#).

Walleye (six-fish limit with only one over 20 inches): The premiere lake for walleye in the Windom area is Lake Sarah. Angling should be very good for walleye 15 to 17 inches in length and larger walleye greater than 20 inches in length. A very strong 2023 year-class of walleye currently dominates the fishery with many 15- to 16-inch fish present.

Regionally, the 2023 year class of walleye is excellent with many fish in Lake Shetek, Okabena Lake, Talcot Lake, Big Twin Lake, Kansas Lake, Loon Lake and other lakes throughout southwest Minnesota. Several other lakes that should also be high on anglers list of places to try are Lake Shaokotan, East Twin Lake, Loon Lake, Dead Coon Lake, Iowa Lake (Martin County) and Flahtery Lake. Each of those lakes has had consistent production of year-classes since at least 2018 with an opportunity to keep a wide range of sizes of walleye. There is no shortage of good walleye fishing in the Windom area, especially during May and June, with Lower Mississippi Strain walleye from Lake Sarah, Tetonka Lake and Knife Lake egg take operations establishing in many lakes after stocking since 2015. Additionally, border water lakes with Iowa are open year-round with a three-walleye bag limit (no size limit). Lake Okamanpeedan (Tuttle Lake if you are from Iowa) and Little Spirit Lake can be very underrated options and a great way to start scratching the open water angling itch in 2026.

Northern pike (southern zone-two-fish limit with 24-inch minimum size limit): Northern pike angling is heating up in southern Minnesota. Since [zone regulations for northern pike](#) were implemented in 2018, southern Minnesota northern pike fishing has been limited to a two-fish daily bag limit with a minimum size restriction of 24 inches.

Additionally, a propagation program started in 2021 in the Windom area, has allowed for over 40,000 northern pike fall fingerlings ranging from 10-17 inches to be stocked into area lakes.

Lakes that appear to be reacting well to the zone regulations and stocking are Lake Shetek (not stocked, only regulation), Lake Shaokotan (not stocked, only regulation), St. James Lake, Bright Lake, West Twin Lake, Clear Lake (Jackson), Island Lake, Bingham Lake, Cedar Lake and Independence Lake. Opportunity for northern pike angling with fish over 24 inches is becoming more common. Look to the [Windom area fisheries webpage](#) for up to date information on numbers and sizes of northern pike caught since 2021.

Largemouth bass (catch and release season March 1-May 22 and harvest season May 23-Feb 28): Largemouth bass

are somewhat limited in the Windom fisheries area due to turbid water. Catch and release season runs from May 10-23. From May 24-Feb 22 anglers can harvest six fish combination with smallmouth bass when smallmouth season is open. Largemouth bass are more prevalent in clear water with submergent aquatic vegetation. However, several good options exist in southwest Minnesota. West Twin, Fulda Lakes the Fairmont Chain of Lakes (Amber Lake, Hall Lake, Budd Lake, Sisseton Lake and George Lake), St. James Lake and Mountain Lake are excellent options. Typically, largemouth bass in these lakes range from 8 to 19 inches with most in the 12- 15-inch range.

Crappies and sunfish: Crappies are very popular in southwest Minnesota and several options exist for crappie over 12 inches. The Fairmont Chain of Lakes and Cedar Lake in Martin County, Little Spirit Lake, Round Lake, and Loon Lake in Jackson County, East Graham Lake in Nobles County, Lake Benton in Lincoln County, Mountain Lake and Cottonwood Lake in Cottonwood County, and Goose Lake in Lyon County are all great options. Spring is the best time to target crappie nearshore, up to water temperatures of 70 degrees. The crappie limit is 10 per person.

Bluegill are like largemouth bass, hit-or-miss with lack of clear water and submergent vegetation required for long-term stable populations. However, several good options exist in the area for good bluegill fishing with Bingham Lake, Mountain Lake, Fulda Lakes, St. James and The Fairmont Chain of Lakes. Most bluegill are 5-8 inches, but some 9-inch bluegill might even be possible in the listed lakes. The bluegill limit is 20.

Muskellunge (June 7-Dec. 1; one-fish limit with 54-inch minimum size limit): Two muskie lakes are present in the Windom fisheries area, Fox Lake and the Fairmont Chain of Lakes, both in Martin County. Fox Lake has been a historically good lake for muskie fishing, but the population is down recently due to poor water clarity and quality in Fox Lake. However, large muskie over 40 inches should still be present and could result in excellent angling if the water clarity increases. The Fairmont Chain of Lakes was first stocked in 2016 and now has muskie over 40 inches. During spring electrofishing in 2024, muskie ranged from 35 to 41 inches. Angling should be good in the Fairmont Chain of Lakes due to good water clarity during June when the season opens on June 7.

Trout: Stream trout opener was April 11, 2026. Brown trout are stocked into two Windom area trout streams, Scheldorf Creek in Cottonwood County, which is 7 miles to the northwest of Windom. The other trout stream stocked is the Redwood River within Camden State Park in Lyon County. If navigating stream shorelines is a difficult endeavor, Brawner Lake, also within Camden State Park, is stocked with brown trout at the same time as the Redwood River. The stocked brown trout are typically 12-14 inches in length and average 0.75-1 pound each. Angling conditions in the streams are dependent on flow and typically remain good for several weeks after stocking. Brawner Lake was sampled in the fall of 2024 and still had brown trout present indicating survival to larger size is possible with some potential for fish over 16 inches, of which only one can be kept as part of the daily five-fish bag limit. Don't forget to purchase your trout stamp before fishing these options.

Other species: The Windom area is home to many species, but several others stand out and are targeted frequently by anglers. Yellow perch, yellow bass and channel catfish are three of those.

Yellow perch abundance is sporadic in area lakes, but some decent numbers are currently found in Lake Shaokotan in Lincoln County, Dead Coon Lake, Lake of the Hill, Wood Lake and Yankton Lake in Lyon County, and Iron Lake in Murray County. The perch daily bag limit is 20.

Yellow bass are a relatively newer species in the Windom fisheries area and have been present in the Fairmont Chain of Lakes, most likely via illegal introduction, since 2013. As of March 2026, yellow bass have a daily limit of 100 and no possession limit in the Fairmont Chain of Lakes, Imogene Lake in Martin County and Clear Lake in Jackson County. During sampling in 2025, yellow bass in the Fairmont Chain ranged in length from 6 to 10 inches with many over 8 inches. Yellow bass have also been observed or reported in Cottonwood Lake (Windom), Mountain Lake and Loon Lake in the Windom fisheries area, where the limit is the statewide regulation of 30 in possession. In combination with white bass, yellow bass are a very palatable fish and have been described as tasting like yellow perch or black crappie.

Finally, channel catfish are abundant in Okabena Lake in Nobles County, Big Twin Lake in Martin County and in the West Fork of the Des Moines River. They typically range in length from 14 to 18 inches and have a continuous season

with a daily bag limit of five with only one over 24 inches each day. Channel catfish are typically underutilized and under harvested in the Windom fisheries area so opportunities exist to have excellent angling, especially during July and August when water is warm and other species have stopped biting.

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.