

Southern Region Fishing Outlook for 2024

Reminders for a great season

Welcome to the 2024 fishing season! These fishing outlooks contain a wide range of fisheries information compiled from 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 <u>DNR area fisheries pages</u>. We hope you have a great fishing experience. And we also encourage you to take a kid fishing or introduce someone new to fishing!

Check the DNR fishing webpage

The DNR has a <u>fishing page</u> to help answer angler questions. The page links to <u>LakeFinder</u>, 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 <u>trout streams</u> <u>throughout Minnesota</u>. The fishing page includes the online versions of the Minnesota fishing regulations booklet in multiple languages. The regulations booklet is available in print anywhere <u>DNR licenses are sold</u>.

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 <u>DNR website</u>.

Fish consumption guidance

Anglers can find fish consumption guidance on the <u>Minnesota Department of Health website</u>. Anglers should check for site-specific advice that pertains to the water they're fishing. If eating fish from a variety of waters or a specific water isn't listed, anglers should follow the statewide guidelines. The MDH website has both site-specific and statewide guidance on eating fish.

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.

Outlook by areas

Southern Minnesota lakes are often overlooked as a destination for great fishing in the spring, although the anglers who live nearby tend to know of the excellent opportunities that await them. Anyone can experience good angling by boat or bank-angling given the numerous waters in this part of the state that host fast-growing fish. Sometimes the best kept secrets for fast-action keeper walleye are found in southern Minnesota.

The 2024 season started out as one for the record books with a warm winter, late ice formation, and early ice-out on our lakes in March. No fish winterkill was observed this past winter; however, in the winter of 2022-2023, many shallow lakes had partial to severe fish winterkills. The upshot of those winterkill events is that the fishery recovers rather quickly, producing keeper size panfish and walleye within two years. Put pins in those lakes for trying later this year and in 2025.

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 represents some of the "top-12" walleye fishing prospects for the spring of 2024:

- Lake Hanska (Brown County) a long and narrow lake that has been a walleye destination.
- Big Swan Lake (Meeker County) a great walleye resource in the Hutchinson area.
- Minnesota River (from Granite Falls to Mankato) great walleye fishing some up to 28 inches.
- Traverse Lake (Traverse County) a walleye factory for all sizes. 2 lines on border lake.
- Wakanda Lake (Kandiyohi County) a shallow lake providing good walleye action each spring.
- Long Lake near Willmar (Kandiyohi County) shallow lake, high walleye population of all sizes.
- Koronis Lake (Stearns County) one of the most popular Spicer area lakes with quality walleye.
- Fox Lake (Rice County) boasts high numbers of walleye for this lake between 15-19 inches.
- Lake Benton (Lincoln County) big water, very high numbers of walleye 18 inches and larger.
- Kansas Lake (Watonwan County) shallow lake and abundant walleye, most over 15 inches.
- Round Lake (Jackson County) ever popular opener lake that kicks out many walleye.
- Flaherty Lake (Jackson County) this is the walleye sleeper pick of 2024 in southwest Minnesota.

Hutchinson area

Hutchinson Area Fisheries

Covering Brown, McLeod, Meeker, Nicollet, Redwood, Renville and Sibley counties

Angling in 2024 should continue to be strong in the Hutchinson Area. Walleye angling should continue to be excellent at Belle, Washington, Big Swan, Marion and Hanska. Pike anglers will do well at Star, Jennie, Collinwood, Ripley and Betty, with chances for some memorable pike at Minnie-Belle with its protected slot limit. Bass anglers will have enjoyable days when they get into the fish at Minnie-Belle, Stella, Washington, Francis and Ripley. The Minnesota River is an incredible fishery that deserves more attention from anglers. If 2024 stays dry, bring family and friends down to the river for some shore fishing on exposed sandbars. If 2024 is wet, launch your boat, navigate carefully, and fish around in different locations for phenomenal walleye and sauger fishing, world class catfishing, or just toss out a gob of nightcrawlers and be amazed at the diversity and size of your catch.

Walleye

Last year's walleye jaw tagging efforts on Marion continued to show the recent and long-term trend of prosperity within the lake's walleye population. Some 1,300 adult walleye were tagged and by the end of the summer, a strong bite out of the gate during the open water period resulting in nearly 150 tagged fish reported as harvested. With poor ice conditions, many of those tagged walleyes are still out there as well as a couple of young year classes (2020, 2022) that are ready to create great fishing. Marion's walleye population has thrived off natural reproduction alone of late; the lake was last stocked in 2019. Belle Lake continues to be the old reliable walleye producer. Like Marion, Belle's walleye population has blossomed in the absence of stocking. Big Swan Lake has been a local hot spot for walleyes for a few years now and that trend should continue in 2024. A healthy-looking yearling cohort of walleye is about to start its third growing season and will be an ideal fit for your frying pan. Early reports from last winter on Washington were strong and should translate to good fishing in 2024. The has ideal spawning habitat, and its connection to Manuella and Stella (upstream) helps connect a mix of habitat types. Minnie-Belle is the site of this year's Hutchinson Area DNR walleye tagging study that helps estimate the population, examine adult spawning population genetic ancestry and estimate angler harvest. Minnie-Belle has an abundant walleye population with a mix of large fish and some smaller eaters. Hanska has been a walleye factory in Brown County. Regular fry stocking has resulted in strong year classes almost routinely developing.

Northern Pike

If you want a chance at the largest northern pike in the area, Minnie-Belle Lake is the easy choice. Minnie-Belle has two decades with a 24-to-36-inch protected slot limit that works to keep medium- and large-size pike 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 DNR crews this past spring during ice-out netting. The other place for big pike is Erie. Erie is not a very large lake but has deep water and a great mix of submerged vegetation that provides excellent habitat. If you catch a large pike on Erie or other lakes in the Hutchinson area, consider releasing the fish to provide top-down predator control of smaller pike and to give another angler the opportunity to catch that same fish when it is larger. While Collinwood Lake suffering a partial winterkill in the winter of 2022-2023 was unfortunate, it had little impact on the northern pike population. As a result, pike numbers are booming! If you want more great pike action, try checking out Star, Round, Jennie, Ripley or Betty lakes.

Bass

Washington and Stella grab all the attention for bass fishing in the Hutchinson Area, and for good reason. This pair of connected lakes offers loads of docks, scattered rocks, bulrush beds and submerged vegetation lines 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 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 numbers of largemouth bass, check out Minnie-Belle and Francis. Some real lunker largemouth can be found on Jennie, Erie and Greenleaf lakes. To get away from the crowds, check out some smaller lakes like Dunns, Stahl's or Sleepy Eye lakes.

Sunfish

A pair of lakes in the Hutchinson area have historically supported some very nice sized sunfish, something of a rarity for the area as well as uncommon across the state. Minnie-Belle and Ripley have produced some plate-sized sunfish and now have a 5-sunfish bag limit in order to protect and increase the number of quality, large-sized sunfish. Both lakes have green sunfish, bluegill sunfish and pumpkinseed sunfish, as well as hybrids of two bluegill species, which can make for some giant sunfish. While the population dynamics are slightly different, both Washington and Jennie can kick out some huge sunfish. They can be hard to find, but these lakes are places to seek giant bluegill. Union, Clear by Watkins, and Francis are great places to find a mix of size and numbers. If action and keeping young or novice anglers busy is the goal, check out Stahl's. One thing anglers can do to preserve large sunfish opportunities for future generations of anglers 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 males 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

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, Belle has been a popular lake early in the year, but of late has not had high abundance of black crappie. Marion has a lot of black crappie between 10 and 14 inches which should provide some excellent angling this year. Swan Lake sees large natural population variability in its black crappie population. Presently at Swan, the population is fair but the size is very good. Big Swan has some large crappie, both black crappies and the partial kill may reduce some of the competition among crappie, temporarily boosting growth and growing larger sized crappie. Dunns and Richardsons are good for both numbers and size and contain both black, white, and hybrid crappie. Washington and Stella have good numbers and size on black crappie. While Clear Lake by New Ulm took a partial winterkill last year, some of the crappie survived and should grow big crappies entering the 2024 season. Steadiness of crappie angling is no easy thing to hold onto, but Clear by Watkins has been a steady producer for a number of years now, both in the open water and ice angling periods.

Bullhead

While requests for bullhead fishing lake recommendations have dropped dramatically from their height of popularity in the 1970s and 1980s, a few people still want to find bullheads for sentimental fish fries or even for bait for flathead catfish on the Minnesota River. If you want to catch a mess of bullheads, give Cedar, Long by Grove City, and Hoff lakes a try. You can also do well on Otter and Campbell reservoirs in the Hutchinson city limits.

Other species

Other options in the Hutchinson area include Little Mud Lake by Watkins for rainbow trout. Rainbows are stocked every spring and fall. Betty, Marion and Swan lakes are all locations anglers can target channel catfish. In addition, the Minnesota River is the place for world class fishing opportunities for channel catfish and flathead catfish. Fort Ridgley, Spring (Hindeman), Ramsey and Seven Mile creeks are all opportunities to catch stream trout in the Hutchinson area. All four streams are stocked in the spring with both rainbow and brown trout, except for Seven Mile which is only stocked with brown trout.

Minnesota River

Overview

The Minnesota River is an important and unique fishery that flows over 300 miles across southern Minnesota. Minnesota River anglers primarily catch and harvest channel catfish, freshwater drum and walleye (and sauger), but the Minnesota River is one of the most diverse fisheries in the state that also provides opportunities for catching trophy-sized flathead catfish and unique riverine species such as buffalo, gar, redhorse and sturgeon.

Two-line regulation

As of July 1, 2023, anglers fishing on the Minnesota River downstream of the Granite Falls Dam and in the Mississippi River downstream of St. Anthony Falls may fish with two lines during the open water season. This regulation also applies to all backwaters within the floodplain, and all tributaries downstream of the first road, bridge or dam crossing to the confluence with the Minnesota River, except for designated trout streams.

Access

Shore fishing access is available at numerous state parks, county parks, city parks, national wildlife refuges, wildlife management areas, aquatic management areas and public water accesses. Watercraft can launch at more than 50 state, county, and city owned public water accesses. Always use extreme caution when boating on the Minnesota River and remember to wear a life jacket. Consult the <u>DNR Recreation Compass</u> to learn more about shore fishing and boat access locations and use the <u>cooperative stream gaging</u> to check water levels before heading to the river.

Upstream of Granite Falls Dam

The Minnesota River from Granite Falls Dam upstream to Ortonville provides good channel catfish, freshwater drum, white bass and walleye fishing. In fact, some days it may only take several minutes to catch a meal's worth of fish. Popular shore fishing locations include below Lac qui Parle Dam and below Big Stone National Wildlife Refuge Dam. Granite Falls Dam is a significant barrier to fish passage and therefore many large-river fish species such as Flathead Catfish, Sauger and Paddlefish are not found in this stretch of river.

Granite Falls Dam to Mankato

This stretch of the Minnesota River provides outstanding fishing for channel catfish, flathead catfish, freshwater drum and walleye. Catching a 45-pound flathead catfish or 28-inch walleye is always a possibility. Walleye fishing in this portion of the Minnesota River is typically best during spring and fall. Many anglers fish tributary mouths and rocky habitats during the spring and areas around deep holes during late fall. During summer months, fishing near log jams and current breaks provides the best chance at catching a monster flathead catfish, especially at night. Great shore fishing can be found downstream of Granite Falls Dam, at several Renville County Parks, and along the banks of Minnecon and Riverside parks in New Ulm and Sibley and Land of Memories parks in Mankato.

Mankato to the Mississippi

This stretch of the Minnesota River provides some of the best opportunities for fishing the river from a boat and you don't have to motor far to find big fish. With the help of catch-and-release angling, flathead catfish live a long time

in the Minnesota River and some exceed 50 pounds. Walleye and sauger are both abundant in this portion of the river and the fall fishing can be great depending on water levels. The lower 17 miles of the Minnesota River downstream of the Highway 169 bridge are the most navigable by larger boats--but watch out for barge traffic.

Ortonville area

The Ortonville Area Fisheries staff oversees fisheries and habitat management in Traverse, Big Stone, western Lac qui Parle, western Swift, western Yellow Medicine, and northern Lincoln counties.

Popular lakes include Big Stone, Lac qui Parle and Traverse. The Minnesota River and smaller lakes and streams also provide numerous additional angling opportunities. Due to the shallow, productive nature of these lakes and streams, 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 these lakes and streams using gill nets, trap nets, seines and electrofishing. The data are used to make management decisions and are also available to anglers in survey reports which are useful for deciding where to fish.

Low oxygen levels in the winter of 2022-2023 caused some degree of fish kill in several popular lakes. Substantial winterkills occurred in Artichoke, East Toqua, Long Tom and Long lakes. These lakes were restocked with walleye and other gamefish in spring 2023. Enough adult walleye and yellow perch were stocked into East Toqua to create an immediate fishery; however, it will take several years to grow quality-sized fish in the other lakes.

Fish species

Walleye

Most area lakes are routinely stocked with walleyes; however, good natural reproduction does occur in several lakes and streams. Walleye are most abundant in Traverse, Big Stone and Lac qui Parle lakes. Oliver, Del Clark and Hendricks also have quality populations. Although "eater-sized" walleyes (13-17 inches) are most common, plenty of larger walleyes can be found throughout the area's lakes as well. Walleyes are also present in the Minnesota and Pomme de Terre rivers and fishing for them can be very good, especially during spring and fall.

Yellow perch

Yellow perch angling is very popular locally and there are several options. Big Stone is a perennial favorite with high numbers of perch, many from 8-10 inches. Hendricks has large perch, but numbers have declined recently. Perch and Del Clark lakes have good numbers of perch, but most were less than 8 inches. Lake Traverse has lower numbers but some of the largest around.

Crappie

While walleyes and yellow perch are common in the area, fishable populations of crappies are not. An exception is Lac qui Parle which has produced a quality crappie population for many years. When the bite is on, good catches of 12- and 13-inch crappies can be common. Big Stone and Traverse have lower, but increasing, numbers of crappies and angling for them can be good, especially in the spring.

Bluegill

Lakes with bluegill populations are somewhat limited in the area, though their numbers are increasing. Improved water clarity has led to increased vegetation in Big Stone and Traverse, which has provided better bluegill habitat. In the last several years bluegill have become an important species in the Big Stone fishery. In Traverse, bluegills can be locally abundant. In both lakes anglers have a chance to catch a trophy.

Bass

Largemouth and smallmouth bass numbers have increased substantially in the area. 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 fish over five pounds are caught. Smallmouth bass are present in Traverse and Oliver. Traverse has a substantial amount of rock and Oliver has abundant flooded timber, cover types that commonly hold fish.

Northern pike

Although northern pike are not abundant in area lakes, those present grow very fast. Del Clark is the best prospect for numbers of pike, with the potential for a trophy. Perch, Traverse, Hendricks, and Lac qui Parle also have decent numbers with some over 30 inches. Big Stone has a lower abundance of pike but the population has been relatively stable and large fish are present.

Catfish and bullhead

Lac qui Parle and Traverse lakes, and the Minnesota River, all have high numbers of channel catfish. Catfish grow fast and fish longer than 30 inches are sampled every year. Most lakes have low numbers of bullheads except Big Stone and Lac qui Parle which have decent numbers of large bullheads, and Hendricks that has high numbers of 8-to-10-inch 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." Sheepshead can be caught in Lac qui Parle and Big Stone, whereas the best bets for white bass are Traverse, Big Stone and Hendricks. Both species can routinely be caught from many reaches of the Minnesota River as well. They are good to eat and are becoming more popular with anglers. Excellent recipes for preparing drum can be found on the internet.

Lake sturgeon

Lake sturgeon were historically present in Big Stone Lake but had disappeared around 1950 likely due to winterkill, summerkill and barriers to spawning migration. Habitat improvements led to their reintroduction in 2014 and 4,000 fingerlings have been stocked annually since then, except for 2020. The stockings have been successful and will continue until a self-sustaining population has been reestablished. Lake sturgeon are frequently caught by anglers with some measuring over 50 inches recently. A catch-and-release-only sturgeon season exists in the Minnesota portion of Big Stone Lake that opens June 16. Consult the <u>Ortonville Fisheries webpage</u> on the DNR website for additional information on the fishing resources in the area.

Spicer area

Spicer Area Fisheries

Covering Kandiyohi County and portions of Stearns, Lyon, Chippewa, Lac Qui Parle, Swift and Yellow Medicine counties

The majority of lakes managed as fishing lakes in the 7-county fisheries area are found in Kandiyohi County, but the Spicer fisheries management area also includes lakes near Paynesville (Rice and Koronis), Benson (Camp and Monson) and south of Granite Falls (Wood, Cottonwood, School Gove, Lady Slipper and Tyson).

The fisheries area can provide quality year-round shore and boat angling opportunities for species such as sunfish, crappie and yellow perch, and beginning on May 11, walleye, northern pike, and bass (bass are catch and release only until May 25). Don't forget about the opportunities that other fish species present for both fun and table-fare such as freshwater drum, bullhead, and carp. Be sure to check out our virtual map of these shore-based locations available by request at <u>spicer.fisheries@state.mn.us</u>.

Walleye

Lakes where recent fisheries netting or electrofishing surveys show current excellent populations include Big Kandiyohi, Carrie, Cottonwood, Diamond, Eagle, Green, Koronis, Norway, Minnetaga and Wakanda. The shallower (i.e., warmer) lakes or shallow bays of deeper lakes may be the preferred locations to fish this year at the beginning of the season as the recently spawned-out adult walleye seek warmer water to recover and feed. Also consider targeting inlets coming from shallow or rapidly warming wetlands. Slip bobbers or the classic jig and minnow may be the ticket.

Bass

Just about every lake starting a few miles north of Willmar in Kandiyohi County is worth angling for largemouth bass with East Solomon, Long (by Willmar), Florida and Norway being particularly good. Smaller lakes with quality bass populations include Monson, Camp and Bass. Lakes with excellent smallmouth and largemouth bass angling are Koronis, Rice, Nest, Eagle and Green. Smallmouth bass angling on Big Kandiyohi Lake has recently become popular.

Sunfish

Lakes where recent fisheries surveys show excellent populations of quality sized bluegill include Florida, Long (near Hawick), Nest, George, Elkhorn, Diamond, Green and Bass.

Crappie

Diamond Lake has another massive year-class of crappie ready (9+ inches). Also look to Foot, Rice (near Paynesville), Long (South) and Ringo lakes for some of the best area current crappie populations. If searching for a trophy, look to Nest Lake where 14-16 inch "slabs" occur.

Northern Pike

Look to East Solomon, Koronis, Rice, Diamond, Florida, Green and Nest for the best combination of numbers and size right now.

Yellow Perch

Cottonwood Lake (near Cottonwood, MN) and Wakanda are the places to be for larger yellow perch right now. Traditional fisheries area lakes that have historically produced "jumbos" are Big Kandiyohi, Long (Willmar) and Minnetaga. Tyson Lake south of Wood Lake, MN also has decent sized perch right now.

Waterville area

Waterville Area Fisheries

Covering Blue Earth, Dodge, Faribault, Freeborn, Le Sueur, Mower, Rice, Steele and Waseca counties

What a difference a year makes! After suffering through one of the longest, snowiest winters in memory in 2022-2023 we have just lived through the shortest, warmest winter in Minnesota recorded history. Tetonka Lake was covered with ice for 141 days in 2022-2023 – the 4th longest duration since 1981. But, in 2023-2024 ice covered Tetonka Lake for only 56 days — the shortest duration by 23 days. Tetonka Lake was declared ice-free on March 3, 2024, beating the previous record early ice-out by 11 days.

What the lack of winter and record early ice-out means for anglers is anybody's guess. Anglers may encounter anything from typical early season conditions to conditions that more closely resemble early summer. Prepare for Plan A but have Plan B and C ready to go. Here we provide a brief snapshot to get anglers ready for Opening Day 2024, breaking down popular lakes in the Waterville area by species. For more information on recent sampling done by Waterville Area Fisheries check out our <u>Fishing Outlook</u>.

Walleye

Loon Lake, near Lake Crystal, was surveyed in 2022 and produced nearly 15 walleye per gill net. Over half of the walleye sampled at Loon Lake were greater than 14 inches and a handful were greater than 24 inches. A strong 2021 year-class should boost walleye numbers for anglers in 2024.

Fountain Lake was also surveyed in 2022 and produced about 14 walleye per gill net. About 70% of walleye sampled in 2022 were greater than 14 inches.

Fox Lake, near Faribault, consistently finds itself on this list of opener possibilities. Fox Lake was surveyed in 2023

and produced almost 12 walleye per gill net. All walleye sampled at Fox Lake in 2023 were at least 15 inches and averaged just over 19 inches. It doesn't get much better than that for anglers.

Clear Lake in Waseca has had walleye numbers ranging from almost 8 per gill net to over 11 per gill net in each of the last three surveys dating back to 2015. A creel survey conducted in 2021 showed only 13% of anglers at Clear Lake were targeting walleye even though walleye sampled in a survey that year averaged over 17 inches in length. Clear Lake is popular among largemouth bass, crappie and bluegill anglers but may be a good option for anglers looking for a lake with unpressured walleye.

Natural reproduction of walleye has recently been high in lakes which the Cannon River flows through. Lakes like Gorman, Sabre, Tetonka and Cannon all have excellent numbers of walleye and are popular early-season destinations. Anglers should be aware of low water levels on most of these lakes which may make launching boats and navigating riverine portions of the lakes difficult.

Northern pike

Northern pike numbers are strong at many Waterville area lakes, and in most cases, many fish are longer than the 24-inch minimum length limit. Lakes with high northern pike numbers include Fox (near Faribault), Lura, Freeborn and Madison. Lakes with large northern pike include Madison, Freeborn, Tetonka and Duck. Remember the Southern Zone northern pike regulations are two fish daily and the 24-inch minimum length limit. Also, St. Olaf Lake has a 30-inch minimum length limit special regulation.

Largemouth bass

The Waterville area offers fantastic largemouth bass fishing. For fast action, anglers should check out lakes with high bass numbers such as St. Olaf or Fountain. Lakes with low to medium densities of bass such as Cannon, Cedar and 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, Cedar, Straight and Minnesota provide an opportunity for anglers to catch smallmouth bass. Smallmouth bass are also present in Tetonka Lake although in low numbers.

Crappies and sunfish

Many small lakes in the area hold large numbers of mid-sized sunfish. Anglers looking for numbers should check out lakes such as St. Olaf or Reeds. Anglers looking for larger fish should head to lakes with lower sunfish numbers such as Lake Washington, Fountain Lake or German Lake. The daily limit for sunfish at Lake Mazaska is five and the daily limit at Lake Washington and Shields Lake is 10. Please release large, male sunfish because they help keep population sizes larger and large sunfish take many years to replace. Large male sunfish can be identified by prominent and elongate black ear tabs on their gill covers and bright orange breast colors.

Almost all area lakes offer decent crappie fishing. Pick a lake and give it a go. For larger fish try lakes like Lake Washington, Lura Lake or Hunt Lake.

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 around downed trees in the water. 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, Tetonka or Cannon lakes.

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. Refer to the <u>2024 Fishing Regulations</u> for trout season information.

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's 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, hard fighting white bass. 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. There are also extensive options for bowfishers looking to arrow a common carp. For more information visit the <u>DNR LakeFinder</u>.

Windom Area

Windom Area Fisheries

Covering Cottonwood, Jackson, Lincoln, Lyon, Martin, Murray, Nobles, Pipestone, Rock and Watonwan counties

General outlook for the Windom area

The Windom fisheries management area is located within the prairie pothole region, which is characterized by shallow lakes with high ability to support plant an animal life. During the winter of 2023-2024, anglers reported good fishing, but the amount of time to fish was limited because of the mild winter. Fishing should be good this spring as winter angling was limited and no winterkill occurred that we know of at time of writing this report. For additional information regarding stocking, fish surveys, oxygen monitoring, contour maps, and other fish management activities, please visit the <u>Windom area fisheries webpage</u>.

Walleye

Lake Benton (2,857 acres) Lincoln County

Walleye angling should be hot this year at Lake Benton, one of the bigger waters in the Windom fisheries management area. The 2023 fish survey indicated a highly abundant walleye population at 24.8 per gill net, well above average for this lake type. A wide range of sizes were present, as lengths ranged from 5 to 27 inches, with good numbers of walleye 18 inches or larger. The opportunity for hooking into a trophy is not out of the question as walleye up to 27 inches were sampled. A slip bobber with a leech off rocky points and shorelines early in the season should put a few walleyes on the stringer. Expect public water accesses to be busy, but the size of the lake should give anglers plenty of room to pursue the wily walleye. There are multiple shore fishing locations on Lake Benton to pursue walleye as well. Curly-leaf pondweed, an invasive species, is present in low abundance Lake Benton. Anglers can help stop the spread of invasive species by draining water and cleaning all vegetation off of the boat and trailer before leaving the access.

Lake Sarah (1,176 acres) Murray County

Lake Sarah is a perennial walleye hotspot, being one of the only lakes in the Windom area that has a self-sustaining walleye population. The catch rate of walleye in 2021 was 38 per gill net, which should provide some phenomenal fishing in 2024. Lake Sarah still boasts one of the best walleye populations in the area. Multiple strong year classes of walleye are present, which should provide good angling opportunity. During egg take operations in the spring, many 25-plus inch walleye were observed, with fish up to 12 pounds being captured. Expect the best walleye fishing to be from mid-May to mid-June, and then again in the fall. Zebra mussels were detected in Lake Sarah during the fall of 2018, so it is very important to clean your gear and not transport water from Lake Sarah to other waterbodies. Make sure to plan ahead, as this walleye "factory" will likely be busy on the opener. Keep in mind there are also opportunities for shore fishing from both the DNR access and Sunquist Park on the west end of the lake.

Kansas Lake (398 acre) Watonwan County

Kansas Lake provides the potential to get a limit of walleye in short order, as this lake is absolutely loaded with walleye. In the 2021 survey, walleye were sampled at a rate of 53.5 per gill net, which is off the charts! Not only are

they very abundant, nearly all of the sampled walleye were longer than 14 inches. The walleye population currently in Kansas Lake has the potential to create memories that will last a lifetime!

Dead Coon Lake (547 acres) Lincoln County

Dead Coon Lake should be your destination for an action packed 2024 opener. The 2021 walleye catch rate on Dead Coon was 17.3 per gill net and 17-18 inch walleye dominated the 2021 catch. Last year it had a huge year class of naturally reproduced walleye in fall as well. Dead Coon Lake should be a destination that isn't terribly busy on the opener. This is a good lake to consider if opener weather is troubling, given the size of the lake along with the fish population.

Currant Lake (394 acres) Murray County

Currant Lake is loaded with walleye, having a catch rate of 33.3 per gill net in 2021. With a couple of year's growth, there should be a good number of walleye of harvestable length, with walleye up to 24 inches being sampled. Murray County operates Swenson Park on Lake Currant if you are looking for shore fishing opportunities or even overnight camping. If you are looking to get away from the crowd, Currant Lake may be a good option for the 2024 opener.

East Stay Lake (221 acres) Lincoln County

One thing is for certain, anglers will not be able to STAY away from East Stay Lake if they give it a try this spring. The waters of East Stay Lake are literally crawling with Walleye. The survey conducted in 2020 netted 26 walleye per gill net. Not only are there a lot of Walleye, they are large as lengths ranged from 7.6 to 26.4 inches and averaged 18.8 inches. Lots of shoreline to fish even if you don't have a boat at your use.

Round Lake (929 acres) Jackson County

This ever-popular walleye lake may be poised to give up some fish on the 2024 opener. In the 2023 survey, walleye were captured at a rate of 20 per gill net. Many of the walleye sampled were larger than 16 inches, so there should be good opportunity to harvest some fish. If walleye aren't biting, Round Lake also boasts a good crappie population which should provide another angling opportunity. If you like a good fight, try catching some white bass that have also taken off in Round Lake. White bass (some are approaching 16 inches) are feisty fighters and are good to eat.

Talcot Lake (678 acres) Cottonwood County

Talcot Lake has given up a lot of walleye in the last couple of years, with good bites being reported several times over the last couple of years. The excellent walleye bite was not a surprise, as the 2020 survey indicated an abundant walleye population, as the gill net catch rate was 25 per gill net. Lengths of walleye were nice averaging 15.6 inches. Talcot Lake could be busy on the opener given the recent success that anglers have had out there. Additionally, there is ample opportunity for shore fishing on the county park on the south of the lake.

Loon Lake (679 acres) Jackson County

Extensive stocking efforts in Loon Lake have the walleye population in great shape, with good walleye fishing being reported several years in a row. Likewise, the survey in 2020 indicated an abundant population as the gill net catch of 24.3 was the second highest catch ever recorded on Loon Lake. Lengths of walleye ranged from 9 to 24 inches and averaged 15.6 inches, with the majority of walleye being between 13 and 17 inches. The good fishing should continue into 2024, thus, expect the lake to be busy when the opener rolls around.

Lake Okabena (785 acres) Nobles County

Located in Worthington city limits, Lake Okabena provides ample recreational opportunity for area residents if they don't have a boat or prefer shore fishing. Lake Okabena should provide good walleye fishing this spring as the gill net catch rate was 16.7 during the 2022 survey, which is the highest catch rate in nearly a decade. Additionally, many adult walleye were observed while electrofishing for fingerlings during the fall of 2022. Average length of walleye in the 2022 survey was 15.5 inches with many of the walleye being longer than 14.0 inches in length.

Clear Lake (415 acres) Jackson County

Throughout the years, Clear Lake has been local walleye anglers' go to lake. While the survey catch rate was low, many nice walleye were observed during fall electrofishing in 2023. Angling pressure is typically high on Clear Lake;

however, given Clear Lake's record of producing a quality walleye fishery, it is likely that some fish will be caught when the season opens in 2023. Plan ahead, as it is likely that Clear Lake will be busy on the opener. Decent amount of shore fishing opportunities exist on the north side of the lake as well as the DNR public access.

Secondary options for walleye

Flaherty Lake (464 acres) Jackson County: 34 per gill net in 2023; average length was 15.1 inches.

Imogene Lake (185 acres) Martin County: 16.0 per gill net in 2021; average length was 17.2 inches.

Little Spirit Lake (572 acres) Jackson County: Walleye angling is open year around on this Iowa-Minnesota border water! Although open year-round it does have a 3 fish limit. Indeed, this border water does have more to offer than world-class bullhead fishing; it currently boasts a top-notch walleye population. The 2020 gill net catch rate was 19 per gill net with fish ranging from 10 to 26 inches and averaging 15.8 inches.

Yankton Lake, (403 acres), Lyon County: 16 per gill net in 2022, average length of 17.9 inches.

Mountain Lake (241 acres) Cottonwood County: 14 per gill net in 2022; average length of 17.5 inches.

Bean Lake (162 acres) Cottonwood County: 17.5 per gill net in 2020; average length of 18.6 inches.

Wood Lake (373 acres) Lyon County: 24 per gill net in 2020; average length of 11 inches.

Northern pike

Remember the northern pike regulations that were new in 2018. The DNR adopted a zone management approach that divided the state into three zones: Southern, North-Central, and Northeast. The Southern Zone limit has a possession/daily limit of two and a minimum size limit of 24 inches (Pike under 24 inches must be released). See the 2024 Minnesota Fishing Regulations for more information.

Lake Shaokotan (996 acres) Lincoln County

Lake Shaokotan will be a popular destination for the Minnesota fishing opener. If you're looking for steady action with the chance to catch a limit of pike, Shaokotan is the place to do it. Pike are abundant in Lake Shaokotan with a 2021 catch rate of 7 per gill net. Northern pike sampled in 2021 ranged in length from 20.3 to 31.5 inches, with good numbers of pike over 24 inches available. If pike aren't cooperating, you might want to try your luck at catching some of Shaokotan's walleye, which were sampled at a rate of 8.3 per gill net in 2021 and were large, with many of the walleye exceeding 20 inches in length.

St. James Lake (252 acres) Watonwan County

There is no shortage of Pike in St. James Lake (12.5 per gill net in 2021), making it an ideal destination if you are looking for steady pike action. Strong natural reproduction in this lake sustains this robust pike population. Lengths of pike ranged from 16 to 30 inches and averaged 24.8 inches. Pike fishing in St. James Lake has the potential to be fast and furious when the Minnesota opener rolls around.

Island Lake (163 acres) Lyon County

Northern pike are on the prowl in Island Lake! In 2023, northern pike were captured at a rate of 2.5 per trap net. In 2023, most of the pike sampled were between 23 and 33 inches. It is safe to assume that there are some dandies swimming around in this body of water.

Additional opportunities for northern pike:

Bingham Lake, (269 acres) Cottonwood County. 8.3 per gill net in 2022, averaged 24.2 inches.
Cedar Lake (710 acres) Martin County. 4 per gill net in 2018, averaged 25.4 inches.
East Stay Lake (221 acres) Lincoln County. 7 per gill net in 2020, 20 to 30 inches with an average of 26 inches.