

Fishing Update for Opening Day 2018

For Florence County Facebook Page

About a week ago I would have told you to get your tip ups dusted off for opening day of the gamefish season in Florence County, but that doesn't seem to be the case anymore. Winter turned right into summer this week and lake ice is rapidly deteriorating. While some local waters may hold ice through the weekend I am suspecting that the majority of the Florence County waters will indeed be open for business by Saturday.

As most of us know Florence County offers a wide variety of fishing opportunities for gamefish. Walleye seems to be the target gamefish for most anglers this time of year and many of you will be chasing "old marble eyes" this weekend. I get a lot of calls from anglers wondering where we are stocking walleye every year because they want to improve their chances of catching walleye...while I appreciate their passion and their willingness to educate themselves on our fisheries, these inquiries have me believing that there are some major misconceptions of the walleye fisheries in Wisconsin. There are basically three different types of walleye fisheries in Wisconsin; 1) populations with strong natural reproduction (that we do not stock), 2) populations that have very limited natural reproduction (stocking is necessary to maintain a sizeable population), and 3) waters that do not have the ability to naturally reproduce (these waters are completely dependent on stocking). While the state of Wisconsin has great fish hatcheries that create an amazing product, the stocking of walleye can rarely replicate what the naturally reproducing populations are capable of. For example, in Florence County, the best stocked walleye waters create adult populations that tend to max out at a density of about 1 adult walleye/acre, while naturally reproducing populations tend to produce adult walleye populations in the 3 to 8 adults/acre range. So my advice to walleye anglers that are looking to have the best chances of catching walleye is to first look to waters with good natural reproduction of walleye followed up by those stocked water that have shown good survival indicated by our routine walleye surveys. For a number of different reasons Florence County has limited waters that currently have natural reproduction, my fisheries team is working hard to improve the few populations that are capable of naturally reproducing through habitat improvement and protection, fish community management and strategic stocking. However, these walleye rehabilitation projects take many years before the effects are seen by anglers. As of right now there are two populations with strong natural reproduction in Florence County, the Brule River Flowage is one, which has a solid walleye population at approximately 3 adults/acre. The other population is found in Patten lake. Patten Lake is an interesting story, walleye abundance dropped to an all-time low of just under 1 adult/acre in 2011. But a walleye rehabilitation project conducted during the summer of 2011 has allowed this population to pull of impressive year classes of walleye since 2011. It takes a number of years for walleyes to mature (and get to the legal length limit), so this population is still in the recovery stage, but is likely in the 2 to 3 adults/acre range currently. In the years to come this population should grow tremendously, likely to more than 5 adults per acre within the next 2-3 years. So even if you don't plan to fish Patten this year, keep it in mind for the future.

Florence County is also home to some of the best largemouth bass and northern pike fishing in the state. Both of these species will be open to harvest on opening day (5/5). For those looking to catch large numbers of northern pike I would recommend fishing Fay Lake, Twin Falls Flowage, Kingsford Flowage, Seidel Lake, Sea Lion Lake, and Long Lake. All of these waters have abundant pike populations.

For anglers that are willing to have less action, but want to catch large pike, the best places to catch trophy sized northern pike in Florence County are; Lake Ellwood, Brule River Flowage, and Kingsford Flowage. All of these systems have lower density populations (accept Kingsford Flowage) and you will have to work harder to catch a pike, but the average size is very good with fish over 40 inches captured every time we conduct surveys of these waters.

Largemouth bass tend to be more active when the water warms a bit, so bass fishing can be tough at the opener when we have late ice out. But anglers looking to have the best chances of catching largemouth bass should go to the higher density populations, which are; Cosgrove Lake, the Spread Eagle Chain of Lakes, Edith Lake, East Bass Lake, and Keyes Lake. Those trophy hunters willing to sacrifice some action for large fish should try some of the lower density populations, which are; Patten Lake, Fay Lake, and Sea Lion Lake, these lakes have very impressive size structure. Recently there have been some “consumptive” regulations put on some of the higher density bass populations in Florence County to try to increase angler harvest on overabundant populations. So you will notice that there is no minimum length limit on largemouth bass, however, fish from 14-18 inches cannot be harvested, and only 1 fish over 18 inches can be harvested each day, for the Spread Eagle Chain of Lakes, Cosgrove Lake, and Keyes Lake. If you are looking to harvest some largemouth these are the first places I would try.

This Saturday is also the opening day for trout fishing in Wisconsin. In Florence County brook trout are the most abundant but there are few streams that contain fishable brown trout populations. The best brook trout streams in Florence County are; Woods Creek, Wisconsin Creek, Lamon-Tanguie Creek, and LePage Creek. Besides the Brule River, and the lower section of Woods Creek (from Hwy 139 to where the stream meets the Popple River), all the streams in Florence County are managed under one regulation, which is an 8” minimum size limit and daily bag limit of 3 fish. The Brule River has a special regulation to match the Michigan regulation, and the lower section of Woods Creek is being managed with a 12” minimum size limit and daily bag limit of 2 fish, which has already shown great success by creating a high size structure population. There are a number of lakes that WDNR stocks with yearling trout (typically rainbow and brown trout) as a put and take fishery. This year’s late ice-out has made it difficult to get these lakes stocked prior to opening day. Currently we have a plan in place to get the yearling rainbow trout stocked into Edith Lake, Lost Lake, Sand Lake (town of Homestead), and Logger Lake (Forest County) by opening day, however, some of these stockings may not occur until later in the day on Saturday. The yearling brown trout destined for Lost Lake, and the yearling brook trout that will be stocked in Little Cub Lake (Forest County) likely will not be stocked until the week after the opener. The streams that we typically stock yearling trout in have already been stocked and are ready to go for opening day, these streams include the Pine River, Popple River, and Fisher Creek in Florence County. Sand Lake, located in the Spread Eagle Barrens, has also been stocked (since we stock that lake in the fall), and is ready for angling.

Hopefully these tips will help you on your fishing adventures this year. I wish you the best of luck! I always appreciate any feedback on your fishing experiences, as they can give myself a better idea of what anglers are looking for, and in turn can help with the management of our fisheries. So feel free to contact me via the email address listed below.

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