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Posted March 19, 2006

Lower Fox yields big walleyes

By Ed Culhane
Gannett Wisconsin Newspapers

DE PERE — The ice has just cleared, but some hardy anglers are chasing heavy, trophy-sized walleye from Lake Michigan — wild-born predators that grow large feeding in Green Bay before migrating up the lower Fox River to spawn.

For this migration, the spillway at De Pere, 7 miles south of the mouth of the river, is the end of the line, making the fast water below the dam one of the hottest walleye fishing spots in the Midwest.

The river sediments are heavily polluted with PCBs, which makes it unsafe to eat many of the fish caught here, or too many of them, but most of these anglers are after excitement and maybe a trophy, not fillets.

"It's a great place to get started, to have some fun at the beginning of the year," said walleye enthusiast Brian Downie of Hortonville. "It gets your juices flowing for the rest of the reason."

On March 11, Downie and a partner caught more than 36 walleyes



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It may be March, but plenty of anglers are hitting the area below the dam on the lower Fox River at De Pere in search of trophy-sized walleyes. Darrell Toliver/Special to the Press-Gazette

About the lower Fox's walleye season

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in the lower Fox. Downie came back the next day with a partner, Darrell Toliver, only to find the water running higher, clouded by runoff. They had to work hard to catch six fish. On both days, all the walleyes were spawning females, all between 17 and 23 inches. Anglers consider these to be medium-sized.

Mostly they threw heavy jigs, tipped with shiner minnows, upstream. When the jig hit bottom in 2 to 7 feet of water, they would lift it gently and let the current wash it along the river bottom. Often, the walleye were hooked at the end of the drift.

"These are good-looking fish compared to what they used to be," Downie said. "They're fat fish. They're shaped like Nerf footballs. They must have a tremendous source of food."

This is precisely the case, fisheries biologists say.

The bay and the lower river are thick with forage fish. The predators, which include catfish and muskie, are showing exceptional growth rates. They are heavier, by length, than most other fish of their species.

"We have millions of suckers," said Kevin Kapuscinski, a fisheries biologist with the state Department of Natural Resources.

"We have suckers and carp and shiners and all the usual suspects for forage, but then we also have gizzard shad."

Massive hatches of gizzard shad in recent years are helping to fatten the large population of walleyes in Lake Winnebago, but the presence of so much living food can make for hard fishing. From time to time, you'll hear an angler complain that the DNR planted the shad years ago.

Biologists say this isn't so. While shad are not native to Lake Winnebago or the lower Fox, there are records of shad turning up in nets as far back as the 1950s.

One theory: Shad from the Mississippi River slipped into the upper Fox River, via the Wisconsin River, before the locks and canal at Portage were sealed.

But the 35-year-old federal Clean Water Act, not the shad, accounts for the great fishing, Kapuscinski said. Before regulations and controls were put on industrial and municipal discharges, there were no walleyes or muskies in these waters.

Spawning walleyes are protected by early-season regulations — from March 2 to May 5 this year — limiting an angler's catch to one fish a day with a minimum size of 28 inches. For the rest of the season — from May 6 of this year to March 4, 2007 — the bag limit is three fish with no minimum size. The idea is to give anglers a chance at a trophy fish during spawning. The size limit is removed for the remainder of the season so anglers interested in eating walleyes can target the smaller ones, which are safer to eat.

What about eating walleyes?

Guidelines, issued annually by the state, say it's safe to eat one meal of walleye a month from a fish less than 16 inches long. For lower Fox River walleyes between 16 and 22 inches long, don't eat more than one meal every two months. Walleyes from the lower Fox River longer than 22 inches should not be eaten.

About the lower Fox's muskie season

The muskie fishing season doesn't open on the lower Fox River until Memorial Day weekend, on May 27. The bag limit is one and the minimum size is 50 inches, preserving the trophy status of these waters.

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"Walleyes were actually extirpated from the southern bay," Kapuscinski said, "as were the muskie. But with enforcement of the Clean Water Act, we got suitable water quality."

In 1984, the DNR stopped stocking walleyes in the lower Fox. There no longer was any need.

"We've had wild success here," Kapuscinski said.

"This is a self-sustaining, trophy fishery."

Ed Culhane writes for The Post-Crescent of Appleton. E-mail him at eculhane@postcrescent.com



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