

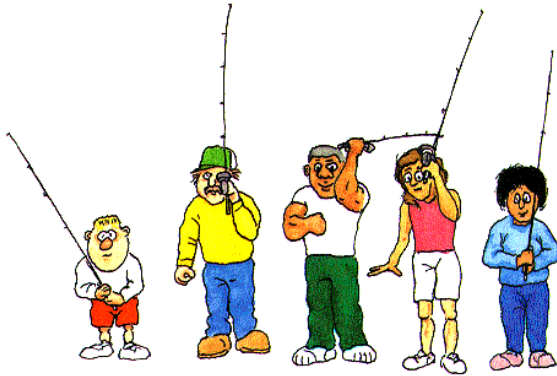


## WISCONSIN NATURAL RESOURCES

April/May 1997

### Forecasting fishing hot spots

*A loose guide to places worth wetting a line  
in throughout the fishing year.*



Illustrations by  
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Like weather predictions, fishing advice is SO much better in hindsight than in forecast. First, you have to consider the source. The only anglers truly willing to talk about fishing hot spots are those who are still spooling up with new line, checking their waders for holes, or searching for chits with

their soon-to-be in-laws. Before the season, before every outing, fishing is all anticipation and opportunity. Only time will tell if you correctly matched where the fish might be to where you intend to cast a line.

It's a rare occasion when the cosmos shines and anglers get the ideal weather, great structure, the right bait, the right light and the perfect position to consistently catch fish. When it happens, it humbles the fishers, and worse than that, it make them speechless, not so much out of a sense of awe as the full knowledge that these conditions are fleeting. The anglers who has found a true honey hole where the walleye are stacked like cordwood, the bass bite every crawler on the drop and the perch hit your ice fishing jigs as fast as the line pays out, get remarkably mum. They savor the moment...and they hope to God no one saw them so they can come back and savor it again tomorrow.

So how can we compile reasonable fishing advice? The same way meteorologists make their forecasts: we look at the variables, gauge past performance and take an educated guess. Just remember, you get what you pay for, and this is free!

Here we share general advice for throughout the fishing year, but you will be much better served by an accurate account of recent fishing conditions. If you are traveling a distance to go fishing, call ahead. Talk to the resort owner or a fishing buddy close to the area to learn what's biting and where. Take the time to find a few local bait shops and find out what anglers have been catching. Bait dealers hear a lot as anglers and guides load up on grubs, crawlers, minnows and hellgrammites. The bait shop manager knows very quickly when the perch prefer waxies, the walleyes have switched from minnows to leeches and the salmon are hitting black-and-pearl colored plugs. They also have a pretty good idea which lakes and streams are producing fish and when you are better off picking blackberries than casting for crappies.

The Department of Natural Resources also compiles a weekly summary of outdoor conditions reported during the previous week. It is updated every Wednesday and available 24 hours a day. You can hear a three-minute recording at (608) 266-2277. An expanded summary is also updated weekly at the DNR's web site, <http://www.dnr.state.wi.us>. Click on the item titled "News, Notices and Events." The next screen will offer the listing titled "Outdoor Report."



Also make sure you are ready for the outing. Late fall and early spring fishing can be fabulous in Wisconsin, but you have to dress for the weather, your boat has to be safe and stable in the conditions you will face, your waders need to be patched and your gear has to work smoothly to enjoy the experience.

If you are going to fish new territory, by all means buy a good hydrologic map ahead of time that shows the lakes or rivers you intend to fish. It's an invaluable time saver to plan your fishing strategies, pick your launch sites and plot out different waters you want to try. A few of the map companies in Wisconsin produce annotated maps suggesting areas worth fishing at different times of the year. These suggestions lay an excellent foundation to plan your trip.

If your vacation/fishing schedule is more flexible, you can plan your trip around natural fishing peaks. For instance, the three strains of rainbow trout (steelhead) that move from the Great Lakes back to the streams where they were stocked will migrate in predictable seasons. Likewise each fish species spawns at a predictable time of the year and some of their behaviors and feeding patterns are predictable. Read about their natural life cycles, talk to other anglers and gauge your trips accordingly. If you can only fish a few times a year, fish these peaks to increase your confidence and your chances of catching fish. Hiring a guide can also be an excellent way to learn a new body of water, pick up some tips and learn some new strategies for enjoying fishing experiences.

With all that as an opener, pull up a chair and let's talk fishin.' Here's advice from the last three years of weekly reports phoned in by DNR staff.

Select your season!

- [Early to mid-January](#)
- [Late January to early February](#)
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### **Early - mid January**

Assuming it's been a normal year and we can all safely walk on water, start your January ice fishing for panfish during daylight hours. Take along a depth finder and a map so you can locate rocky structures, bars and points that rise from surrounding deeper waters. Fish from the shallower points out toward deeper waters to locate fish. Ice anglers tend to cluster when they find fish. If you are fishing a new body of water, try your luck where you see clusters of shanties or places where lots of holes have been drilled in the ice.

Bluegill and crappie often prefer shallow bays, channels and places with modest currents if you are lake fishing; sloughs and backwaters if you are working a river. Perch are more scattered in winter and lake anglers often have to move every 15 minutes or so until they locate a feeding school.

Later in the afternoon, move into shallower water (less than 10 feet) and set up a line of tip-ups running towards the shallow shores where walleye and northern may cruise by the shallows in places that provide access to deeper water

Some hot spots during these weeks in the last few years included Mason Lake in Adams County, Lake Koshkonong in Rock County and the Gile Flowage.



A whopper! DNR Photo, © 1997

### **Late January into Early February**

The most consistent action was reported on shallower points, bays, stump fields and backwaters of river flowages. Consider setting some tip-ups for northern and panfishing on the Gile Flowage in Iron County, the Holcombe Flowage in Chippewa County, the Chippewa Flowage in Sawyer County, the Turtle Flambeau Flowage in Iron County, the Willow Flowage in Oneida County, Lake Koshkonong in Jefferson County, Lake Wisconsin in Sauk and Columbia counties, and the Eau Pleine Reservoir in Marathon County. Try fishing for splake off the mouths of the Onion and Sioux rivers in Bayfield County. Or take on a walleye hunt on the Mississippi River below Lynxville.

### **Mid-February**

This is a great time to fish northern on river sloughs and the shallow weedlines of smaller lakes. Fish smelt or shiners on tip-ups set in 3-6 feet of water. Don't overlook the backwaters and bottomlands on the Mississippi River from La Crosse clear down to the state line. For an unusual experience, consider the annual ice season for lake sturgeon on Lake Winnebago, which runs only for a few weeks during February. If you are heading to northwest Wisconsin, set tip-ups on Shell, Long and Spooner lakes for northern. If travels take you to Vilas County, try the Eagle River chain of lakes. Near Madison, try the points and bars of Lake Mendota for perch.

### **Late February- Early March**

Some of the best ice fishing of the season occurs as the ice starts to thin out. Remember that the game fish season closes on most inland waters from March 1 through the first Saturday in May. In late February, set tip-ups in shallow weeds for northerns and walleyes. Lake Mason in Adams County, lakes throughout the Eagle River and Woodruff-Minocqua area and westward across the northern counties are all good bets for late season northerns before the end of February and panfish into early March. Lac Vieux Desert in Vilas County often produces slab crappies at this time of year. Also consider trying your luck walleye fishing on rivers just below dams. BE CAREFUL. Don't take chances on these waters once the spring melt waters start to flow.

### **Late March - April**

As the ice gives way, smelt spawn at night along the shoreline of Lake Superior and Lake Michigan. Seiners and dipnetters who hit it right can haul in buckets of these tasty little fish. Try smelting near the harbors of Superior, Ashland, Bayfield, and the Lake Michigan ports from Door County south to the state line at Kenosha. The next month is an excellent time to try your luck fishing from the harbors, piers and tributary streams of the Great Lakes for brown trout and steelhead. Fish with spawn sacs or colorful spinners or yarn flies for some great fishing action.

### **Early May**

As the ice recedes, the waters warm and many fish spawn. Use your thermometer to determine where to start the fishing season. You want to fish where shallower waters will warm up first - smaller to medium-sized lakes, backwaters or sloughs that warm up before the main channels, and tributary streams to wetlands and larger bodies of water where fish will spawn first.

Walleyes will spawn on shallow rocks in low light conditions. Once the spawning run is over, they feed voraciously. Panfish action will also pick up dramatically. Bluegills and crappies will clear off spawning beds in the weeds of shallow bays. From mid-May through early June, cruise the bays and backwaters looking for dished-out clear spots where fish are defending their spawning beds. Northern will also move into the shallow grass and marshes to spawn in April and May. Northerns start to feed aggressively when bait fish start to spawn in late spring. They are sight feeders who cruise the shallow weeds, sedges and reeds looking for bait fish.

Shallow lakes and shallow areas of flowages are best bets in the early season. The action will pick up in larger lakes and deeper rivers later in May and into early June in typical years. All lakes containing decent populations of panfish and game fish will go through this same spawning/warming cycle and all will have a flurry of fishing activity in May and into early June. On calmer days, try your luck on shallower flowages and shallow systems like the Lake Winnebago chain. On river systems, start the season in the shallower bays and tributary waters and move into the main channel by the end of the month. The action just below dams in the early fishing season can be dynamite.

Late in the month, the lower Wisconsin Riverway will start producing smallmouth bass, walleye and catfish action.

May is also a superb time to fish trout. Spring snow melt brings a flush of food, insect hatches and oxygen to trout waters. Consider some of the excellent trout streams throughout southwestern Wisconsin in Dane, Iowa, Riceland, Sauk, Grand Crawford and Monroe counties. Mid-state, try the many trout waters in Adams, Portage, Langlade, Waushara, Waupaca and Shawano counties. To the northwest, fish the myriad trout streams off Lake Superior from the City of Superior to Ashland.

### **Late May**

Musky action starts to pick up statewide. In the last two years, excellent action was reported on the Tiger Cat Flowage, Callahan Lake and Lac Court Oreilles in Sawyer County. Also try the Chippewa Flowage in Sawyer County, Lake Wissota in Chippewa County, the Turtle-Flambeau Flowage in Iron County. Bass action should start picking up by month's end. Just like walleye, the bass will spawn earlier in small lakes and shallower river marshes where the water warms up first. Plan your strategy accordingly by fishing smaller lakes, backwaters, inlets and shallow bays before you move on to bigger open waters.

Walleyes are moving from their post spawn period into summer feeding patterns. They spend a lot of time learning and orienting themselves to the weed beds that are greening up for the season. Try slip bobbers baited with minnows and leeches suspended near the weedline tops and breaks. Walleye fishing will remain best at low light conditions of dawn and dusk. Work along the inside edges of weedbeds that give fish access to deeper water. Walleye action should be equally good on river sloughs where the water is shallow, warm and the weeds green up first. Poke around the weedy edges for panfish in the morning and northern in the midday sun. Most of the river systems really turn on in late May and early June. Try your luck on the Wisconsin River in Lake Dubay and Lake Wisconsin.

The Black River near Black River Falls also produces nice catches of walleye, smallmouth bass and panfish this time of year.



Perch. Photo by Don Blegen, © 1997

Panfish are likely still spawning on larger bodies of water (lakes bigger than 500 acres). Look for beds near the shoreline and in shallow bays. On flowages, look for downed timber, brush and rock piles that provide refuge in 6-15 feet of water.

On the Great Lakes, brown trout and coho are cruising for bait fish. Typically you can take fish in the warmer top 25-30 feet of water fishing in 30-80 foot depths. Shore fishing is also productive from piers and breakwalls as the trout follow bait fish into warmer nearshore waters.

Trout streams are just warming up for the season. Scattered hatches of caddis flies and mayflies can provide hot action. Plan a trip to western Wisconsin and give the Rush River, Elk Creek and the Kinnickinnic River near Eau Claire a try.

### **Early to mid-June**

Bass anglers should set their sites for southern Wisconsin lakes and rivers as the bass season doesn't open in northern Wisconsin until the third Saturday in June. Check your fishing regs for dates and bag limits. Larger lakes in northern Wisconsin are just getting going for the season. Fish walleye in the pre-dawn light, switch over to bass fishing about 10 a.m., Expect to catch northern in the shallow waters and panfish at rock piles and humps at midday. At early evening until dark, the walleye action should pick up again.

Try fishing some of Wisconsin's great chains of lakes to link up with plenty of fishing opportunities – the Eagle River/ Three Lakes chain in Vilas and Oneida County, the Minocqua chain in Oneida County, the Chetek Chain in Barron County, or the Pike/Round Lake chain in Price County.

### **Late June into early July**

This is a wonderful time of the season to pick a few "bugs" and head for the waters for perch action. Perch love hellgrammites and this is the season when large schools of perch will hit 'em heavy. Also take along some worms or small minnows just in case the crappies are hitting. Try Madison's

Lake Mendota, Lake Nagawicka in Waukesha County, the Castle Rock and Petenwell Flowages of the Wisconsin River, both Butternut Lakes (Forest County and Price/Ashland county line), Pelican Lake in Oneida County or Shawano Lake in Shawano County.

### **Mid-late July**

It's the right time of year to try bass fishing with plastic worms and shallow-running crank baits. Make a visit to the Mink River Estuary and Rowley's Bay near the tip of Door County. Crappie action was reported as hot in western Wisconsin rivers like the Yellow and Paint Creek. Catfish action is good on the Wisconsin River using stink baits and cut baits. Try bass fishing on the Mississippi River backwaters of pools 9, 10 and 11. Troll walleye on Lake Winnebago or the Rock River. In southeastern Wisconsin, trout and salmon are typically in nearshore areas in the early morning hours, then quickly move offshore to cooler waters.

### **Early August**

It's the dog days of summer, and you have to be creative to do well. You might try smallmouth bass fishing on the Flambeau and Chippewa rivers. Vilas County waters have reported decent bass action in this time period. On the Mississippi River, cast for crappies and bluegills in pools 10 and 11 near Cassville. Farther north, try walleye fishing on the St. Croix, casting nightcrawlers in the late afternoon and evening. River flowages can produce decent bass action and the salmon fishing from Lake Michigan shores and piers is pretty good when the wind blows from the west.

### **Mid-August**

Lake trout fishing from the Door Peninsula south to Algoma gets fruitful. Smallmouth bass fishing was also good at the stone quarry and Rowley's Bay in Door County. Trolling the Lake Michigan harbors near Kewaunee and Manitowoc ports produced mixed bags of brown trout, coho salmon and lake trout. Walleye are hitting well on the Menominee River below the Hattie Street Dam. Bass fishing was productive on Lake Holcombe in Chippewa County. Bluegill and perch action was picking up on Dunn County's Lake Menomin. Fish the wingdams along the Mississippi River for walleye, the brush piles and snags for bluegills.



### **Late August**

Muskies are starting their late summer-early fall patterns. It's time to warm up your casting arm and pitch small bucktails and crank baits that can be worked along the top of the water near the edges of well-defined weed beds. Bass are hitting crank baits, spinners and leeches floated on slip bobbers at the inside edge of the weedline. Shawano Lake and the Wolf River seem consistent producers at this time of year, as is Okauchee Lake in Waukesha County and the Chippewa and Flambeau Flowages. Try the cranberry flowages for largemouth bass. Crappie and bass fishing was reported good on Iowa County lakes.

Trout and salmon anglers: Be sure to check with bait shops before you travel. This time of year, the fish remain in cooler waters. When the wind blows off-shore, the pier fishing can be excellent. Check it out at Sturgeon Bay, Kewaunee, Algoma, Manitowoc, point Beach, Two Rivers and Sheboygan. Otherwise, take your boats into 175-200 feet of water for some deep trolling.

### **Early September**

Perch anglers should try the weed beds at the Sturgeon Bay Ship Canal and the backwaters and stumps on major river systems – the Lower Wisconsin, the Black River, and wingdams along the Mississippi. Panfish and bass were hitting on Lake Holcombe near Eau Claire.

Smallmouth anglers did well on the middle stretches of the Wisconsin River. Near Marinette, the Menominee River produced bass between the railroad bridge and the Hattie Street Dam.

### **Mid-September**

Fall fishing is just starting. Salmon will begin moving from deep waters to the points, islands and river mouths in Lake Superior, Try Houghton Point to Ashland and the mouths of the Sioux and Onion rivers in Bayfield County. In Washburn County, bass fishing is still holding strong on smaller lakes. Cooler night temperatures trigger fall feeding and musky action on the Chippewa Flowage in Sawyer County, the Flambeau Flowage in Iron County, and Vilas County waters. Woodruff area waters reported excellent bass fishing and evening walleye action. The Lower Wisconsin River and Black River systems are still producing bass and walleye. Panfish action was good in shallow waters of waterfowl production areas, but be mindful of hunters.

### **Early October**

As lakes cool down and start to turn over, it's time to slow down your fishing techniques and start fishing the deeper water by mid-month. Darker, shallower lakes will turn over first, followed by deeper, clearer waters. Trout and salmon are just starting their move into Great Lakes tributary streams. Now's the time to start fishing the near shore area, the harbors, river mouths and pier areas.

Fishing is good on the Manitowoc River from the Rapids Road Bridge to Manitou park. Fishing on Racine County's Root River is picking up, too, as trout and salmon migrate upstream.

On the Mississippi River, crappies and bluegills are moving into the shallow backwaters. Fish them during the day and switch over to walleye fishing in the late afternoon, particularly below Lock and Dam #9.

Northerns are biting on Lake Waubesa south of Madison. Fish the inlets of larger lakes to find northerns as the water cools down. On the Rock River, nice catches of smallmouth bass were reported at Turtle Creek.

Walleye fishing continues strong on Lake Wisconsin using large minnows. Try the Whalen's Grade and Okee areas.

### **Late October**

Bundle up and try fall walleye outings on Minocqua-Woodruff area lakes. The Flambeau and Chippewa rivers in Rusk County are producing walleyes as is the Rock River at Lake Koshkonong.

As storm fronts approach, the musky action picks up as well. Eagle River anglers are taking muskies on suckers, jerk baits and deep-running crank baits.

Streams and harbor areas along the Lake Michigan coast are producing brown trout. Stiff winds can keep you off the water, but its worth a try from shore on the piers and breakwaters. Spoons as well as common baits like canned corn and spawn sacs are all producing fish. Chinook salmon are hitting dark flies on the Sheboygan Pike and Root rivers as well as Oak Creek.

### **Early November**

Musky action remains steady in the Ladysmith area. Fish big suckers slowly at dawn and dusk. Walleye action is still good on Lake Wisconsin at Whalen's Grade and Okee. Oconto and Florence County waters were producing panfish, northerns and walleye. By Marinette, steelhead, brown trout and splake were hitting on the Menominee River.

A bite on the pier. DNR Photo, © 1997



In southern Lake Michigan, the coho and chinook runs in Racine County were good above the Highway 38 bridge. Fish the downstream area for brown trout and steelhead. Throughout the month, try the piers and tributary streams from Milwaukee harbor south to the state line. Fish the Milwaukee River at Estabrook Park, in the harbor area, at veterans Park and McKinley Park for brown trout.

On the Rock River, fish late afternoons for sauger, walleye and crappie. On the Mississippi, walleyes may still be hitting below the dam at Dubuque. Fish shallower backwaters for late-season bluegills.

As the first ice forms on northern Wisconsin waters, the early evening walleye bite on tip-ups can be spectacular along shallow shores, but be extremely cautious on this thin ice.

### **Mid-November**

Keep trying the coastal shore and tributaries from Milwaukee and points south for brown trout.

If you can stand the cold and are prepared for tough weather, consider river fishing for walleye near the Hatfield Dam at Black River.

### **Early - mid-December**

If ice conditions are safe in northwestern Wisconsin, try panfish action on Big McKenzie Lake near Cumberland, walleye and crappie fishing on Lake Arbutus, or panfish and northern fishing near the Trempealeau area. Hardy trout fishers can continue to catch steelhead on the Root River and pier fishing near Lake Michigan harbors, as mild weather allows.

Big bluegills will take waxies and minnows. Try the Holcombe Flowage (Rusk County); Lake Noquebay, High Falls and Cauldron Falls flowages (Marinette County) and smaller lakes throughout Florence and Oconto counties for good bluegill bites as well. If you still haven't had your fill, the open water near the locks and dams on the Mississippi River still produces decent catches of walleye.