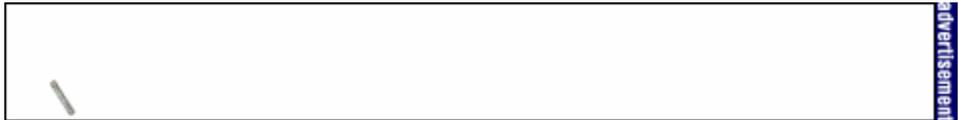


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Steve Pollick | Article published January 27, 2002

Low water bad news for boaters, shouldn't affect walleye spawning



Steve Pollick

As the spring and summer fishing seasons approach, fishermen may have more concerns than fish do when it comes to Lake Erie and its tributaries.

The lowest water levels in 40 years on the Great Lakes and a dry, mild, nearly ice-free winter are combining to change the walleye angling and spawning landscape, both in the western basin reef complex and in major tributaries.

Boat-anglers may face bent props and scraped hulls if they are not careful in watching their lake charts. Areas they once flew over during the high-water cycle may have exposed or barely submerged rocks this year. And anglers may have to alter their fishing tactics somewhat to accommodate changes in where fish congregate around underwater structure.

But walleye, thanks to centuries of adaptation to life in Lake Erie, have learned not to put all their eggs in one basket, according to Roger Knight, supervisor of Lake Erie fisheries research for the Ohio Division of Wildlife.

He notes that the spawning reefs west of Bass Island are vast and varied, and while low water levels may not favor optimum spawning conditions on shallower "humps," there are many acres of rocky habitat still available for spawning. Ideal spawning depths are 9 to 15 feet.

Newly recognized spawning grounds, such as in Maumee Bay, may be of greater importance this year as well, Knight said. That may be especially so, given that river-running walleye stocks could have tough sledding at spawning if timely rains do not increase flows and fill the streams.

Little ice cover has been available to minimize evaporation, and no ice and snow are locked up in the river watersheds for a surge of spring runoff.

Low stream-flows generally are not desirable for optimum walleye spawning because they leave some spawning beds exposed, Knight noted.

Not that he is pessimistic about the upcoming spring season. "A lot can happen between now and then," he said.

Of the two major walleye streams in northwest Ohio - the Maumee and Sandusky rivers - Knight is more concerned about the latter.

"The Maumee has had a strong stock of fish for a long time," he said. He also noted that the river has ample and diverse spawning habitat for walleye under most conditions.

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The Sandusky, however, is limited to a few acres of spawning beds upstream from Fremont, where the old Ballville Dam prevents upstream movement of fish to miles of habitat. A 30-year-old flood-control project decimated prime spawning grounds in the city's downtown area.

Ironically, the biologist said, one study showed that too much flow was detrimental to newly hatched fry, which find heavy, muddy current a serious challenge.

The best view to take, he thinks, is to consider that walleye have been in the Lake Erie system for 5,000 years and have lived through far greater swings in water levels than those that are inconveniencing man today.

Inconvenience indeed. Low water in the streams may crowd fishermen into smaller areas, and too much crowding is discouraging at best and a "zoo" at worst.

While timely rains may help the streams, little can be done to bolster the low levels of Lake Erie because of its tremendous volume. About 90 per cent of the water in Lake Erie comes from the upper lakes via the Detroit River, so how much it rains or snows here has little effect on the lake level.

On the lake, the low water may affect fishing more than spawning, inasmuch as walleye are light-sensitive and may be more "spooky" in some familiar shallow fishing zones. Chances are, successful anglers will be the ones who slip into an area quietly, keep their noise to a minimum, and avoid noisy packs of fishing boats, according to Knight.

On the other hand, the lower and clearer water may be good for sight-feeders such as smallmouth bass, yellow perch and white bass. All of them chase and feed on round gobies, the infamous and abundant alien pest-fish. More light in clearer water may stimulate feeding forays into shallows.

Fishing on the lake was excellent in 2001 for walleye, perch and smallmouth bass, primarily because ideal weather conditions prevailed for much of the season. Good stocks of fish did not hurt, either, but favorable weather is key. Anglers took about 1.2 million walleye, somewhat more than the prior two years.

Walleye numbers will be down somewhat from 2001, when the abundant 1999 stock provided lots of 14 to 16-inchers. More than one walleye in three taken last year was from 1999. Because the 2000 stock was just fair at best there will be far fewer of these 14 to 16-inchers. But plenty of 1999 fish, now 16 to 19-inchers, remain in the stock.

Good numbers of fish from the very strong 1996 stock, 22 to 24 inches in size, will be in the mix along with 27 and 28-inch fish from 1991. By late summer, Knight said, the "spikes" from 2001 will be appearing as 10 to 13-inchers.

The conservative lakewide creel limits of just four walleye a day in March and April and six the rest of the year remain in effect under a long-term interagency agreement.

Yellow perch fishing again should be excellent, as in 2001. "The perch story is incredibly successful," Knight explained. "We're essentially back to where we were in the late '80s in the central basin and we're getting there in the western basin. It's been a phenomenal recovery, unlike elsewhere in the Great Lakes."

He attributes the good perch news to better hatches - very strong in 1996 and again in 2001, and decent ones in 1998 and 1999 - in conjunction with lakewide, interagency cooperation on conservative commercial quotas and

sport creel-limits. The 30-perch daily creel limit remains in effect, inasmuch as Ohio sport anglers took their quota of perch in both the central and western basins.

Most perch will be 7 to 9-inchers from 1998 and 1999, and 10-inch-plus fish from 1996.

Smallmouth bass fishing again should be good under the conservative daily creel limit of five bass, 14-inch minimum.

The bass populations lakewide are stable, but some areas may be impacted by fishing pressure, Knight acknowledged. Biologists will be taking a hard look at the impact of pressure, with an eye to more conservative rules for 2003 if surveys show that pressure must be eased to conserve the stocks.

So far the conservative limit and size minimum have halved the annual bass take, keeping it in the 50,000 to 60,000 range the last two years. The question biologists are facing is whether that is low enough. Six of seven bass are said to be released after being caught.

"Conditions on the lake are favorable for [production of] smallmouth bass," Knight said. Gobies, which are aggressive egg-predators on bass nests while being a major bass forage-fish, remain the wild card.

Biologists, in cooperation with some fishing guides, are continuing to tag and release smallmouth in an important, long-term study to continually upgrade bass management.

Steve Pollick is The Blade's outdoor writer. E-mail him at spollick@theblade.com.

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