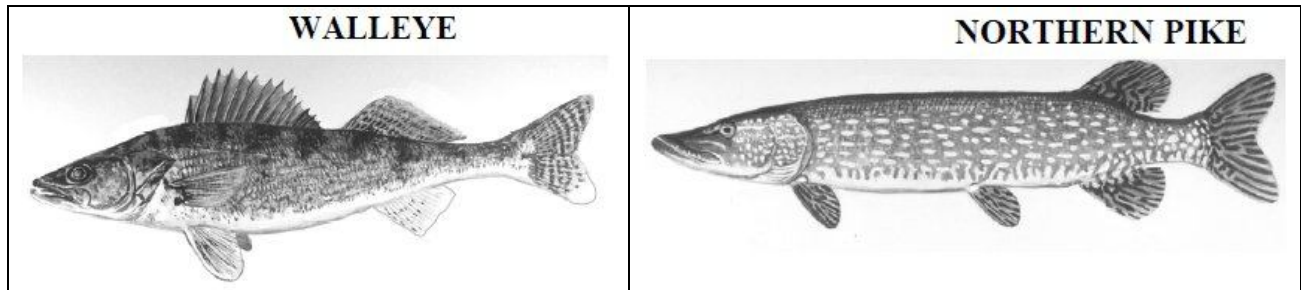


Fishery



Introduction

One conclusion of the 2012 Lake Management Planning Project was that we have a limited fishery. The high water clarity and low nutrient levels found in our lake result in a low biomass that is insufficient to provide the food chain necessary to support a large fish population. Also, BPL is a ceded territory lake, which adds pressure to the fishery.

One of the management goals resulting from the Lake Management Project was to determine what could be done to improve the fishery within the limitations of the lake by working with the WDNR and GLIFWC (Great lakes Indian Fish & Wildlife Commission) as needed.

Ceded Territory

BPL is in the ceded territory where, by treaty and court decisions, Native American tribes are able to exercise traditional fishing rights. For our lake, and many others, the tribes engage in spearing walleyes during spring spawning. The WDNR and GLIFWC work together to coordinate spearing declarations with bag limits for anglers in accordance with "safe harvest" levels derived from fish surveys and statistical models.

For many years walleye spearing quotas and harvest numbers for BPL were in the 130–140 range annually. In recent years, the spearing numbers have varied widely. In 2013, the tribal declaration sharply increased to a quota of 260 with 254 taken. WDNR was able to reduce the 2014 numbers to near historical levels with a quota of 160 with 154 taken. In 2015, the quota jumped again, to 220 with 220 reported taken. In 2016, the quota dropped somewhat to 178 with 178 reported taken. However, the 2017 number was 431 declared and taken. In 2018, the number dropped to 224 declared and taken. When compared to the WDNR 2016 adult walleye population estimate of 3244, annual reported spearing numbers have ranged between 5% and 13% of the estimated population.

Stakeholder Survey Responses

The 2012 Lake Management Report included results from a stakeholder survey that contained questions about BPL fishing quality. 76% rated fishing fair to poor and 48% poor to very poor. 57% said fishing had deteriorated over time and 23% felt there was no change.

Fish Surveys

WDNR periodically conducts spring fish surveys to assess the status of the principal fish populations of the lake. A survey was done in 2016 using fyke nets and electroshocking to count and measure fish for the first time since 2006. Surveys are timed to coincide with spawning periods when fish are easier to capture. The 2016 Spring Survey is available in the Fishery section of the BPL website.

WDNR also does creel surveys to estimate fishing pressure and harvest in a fish survey year. Staff is stationed on the lake throughout the year to count and interview anglers as to type of fish targeted, hours of effort, numbers caught and kept, as well as size. The 2016–2017 Creel Report is available in the Fishery section of the BPL website.

GLIFWC (Great Lakes Indian & Fish Wildlife Commission) conducts an annual fall young walleye survey (except in WDNR survey years). They electroshock the entire lake at the 3-foot contour, counting and measuring small walleyes and collecting scale samples for age. The count of age 0 (first year) and age 1 (second year) walleyes provides insight into how well natural reproduction is occurring. Results vary widely from year to year. In 2012 the survey showed 60 age zero fish per mile, 48 in 2013, 15 in 2014, 18 in 2015, 44 in 2016, and 53 in 2017. According to WDNR, these numbers indicate there is sufficient natural reproduction. The target number is at least 30/mile in at least 3 to 4 of every 10 years. BPL is meeting that goal and therefore WDNR sees no need for stocking.

GLIFWC also does spring walleye surveys using electroshocking around spawning beds. They coordinate with WDNR to avoid duplication in the same year. Their last survey for BPL was in 2012.

The 2014 Panfish Survey is posted in the Big Portage Lake section of the BPL website under Fisheries.

Walleyes

Our principal game fish is walleye and in the 2016 WDNR survey the adult walleye population was estimated at 3244, or about 5/acre, which is considered a good density. This result compared closely to 3184 from the previous survey conducted in 2006.

The size regulation in effect is the 14–18 inch no-keep slot (no walleye may be kept which are between 14 and 18 inches, with no minimum size and only one over 18 inches allowed to be kept). This regulation was established by WDNR in the 1990s on BPL as the best option for developing and maintaining a quality walleye fishery. However, only 5% of the adult walleyes measured were over the 14-18 inch no-keep slot in both the 2016 and 2006 surveys.

The 2012 GLIFWC survey found only 1% of walleyes were over 18 inches, but this can be explained by the differing survey techniques. GLIFWC concentrates only on the spawning beds and therefore catches more males. Females, which are generally larger, spend less time on the spawning beds.

The daily bag limit for walleye is 3 per angler for a ceded territory lake such as BPL and is no longer adjusted for individual lakes to reflect variations in annual spawning number.

The 2016-17 creel survey indicated that the walleye harvest was down sharply (75%) when compared to the previous survey in 2006. Fishing pressure directed at walleyes was also down (28%). Hours of fishing effort per harvested walleye tripled.

Smallmouth Bass

The 2016 survey estimated a population of 307, up 38% from the 2006 estimate of 220. In 2008, the minimum size requirement was raised from 14 inches to 18 inches and the daily bag limit reduced from 5 to 1.

Smallmouth bass catch was up sharply from 2006, but harvest was negligible. The catch was similar to walleye number despite an estimated adult walleye population 10 times the smallmouth population.

Largemouth Bass

Rare. The 2016 Spring Survey counted one largemouth, none in 2006.

Musky

None.

Panfish

The creel survey indicated that perch is the most sought after panfish on BPL. Perch catch and harvest were up sharply from 2006 as was fishing effort directed toward perch. Perch harvest was more than three times the walleye harvest.

A panfish survey conducted in 2014 confirmed that we have a low density of panfish. The principal reason is a lack of woody habitat. The result is not only a poor panfishing experience but also a limited forage base for gamefish. The recommendation was to add inshore habitat to improve abundance through measures such as tree drops. A program has been instituted to encourage shoreline landowners to participate in tree drops and fish sticks (multiple tree drops). The first tree drops took place in 2015 and continue in accordance with WDNR permitting.

Northern Pike

Northern Pike have always been present but in low numbers. The 2016 survey netted 32 but that number was too low for a population estimate. Only one was counted in 2006. The creel survey showed a Northern Pike harvest of 161, up sharply from near zero in 2006. Fishing effort directed to northern pike was up also up sharply.

The Bottom Line

BPL does not have conditions conducive to a large fish population and receives added pressure as a ceded territory lake. The lake has some fish, but not in great numbers and not very big. Of the primary game species, walleye are present in good numbers and smallmouth bass are increasing. However, the likelihood of catching a "keeper" walleye is a concern with only 5% of the adult population over the no-keep, 14–18 inch slot. At present it is questionable whether BPL can provide a positive fishing experience on a more than sporadic basis. Fishing hours in the 2016-2017 creel survey declined 10% from the 2006 survey overall with a sharp drop (28%) in hours directed toward walleye. Hours of fishing effort per harvested walleye tripled. Hours directed toward perch, as well as harvest numbers for perch, were up sharply. Northern pike fishing effort, catch, and harvest were up from very low 2006 numbers.