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Walleye News and Fact File

Studies Focus on Fish-Eating Cormorants on Great Lakes

The double-crested cormorant has gone to the head of the bird class in expanding its population, gaining the attention of wildlife researchers and frustrating a great number of sport fishermen.

You know the cormorant, don't you? The feathered fishing machine is becoming more plentiful. Tens of thousands nest at the Great Lakes and the birds frequently are seen at inland lakes.

The large dark-colored cormorant, 30 to 35 inches long, has a tapered, streamlined shape with legs and feet set far back on the body. Cormorants are powerful divers and swimmers. They eat a lot of fish. What fish?

Sport fishermen fear they are consuming perch, walleyes and bass. The anglers probably would be pleased if the birds ate sheepshead and carp. Wildlife researchers are assessing the food habits of cormorants at the Great Lakes. Results of some of this research were outlined last week in Columbus at the 43rd Ohio Fish and Wildlife Conference. Michael T. Bur of the Great Lakes Science Center at Sandusky, a researcher, said as of last count, two years ago, nesting cormorants at the Great Lakes numbered 115,000 pairs. He said the population is growing at a rate of seven percent a year. Bur's research has been at West Sister Island. It's one of three Lake Erie islands where nesting cormorants are concentrated.

At West Sister cormorants were captured live and outfitted with a transmitter that allowed the scientists to track the birds' feeding habits. A percentage of the birds collected were examined to learn what they ate.

Shad, a baitfish, is the species most often consumed, followed closely by freshwater drum (sheepshead) and shiners, according to the study. Well down the

list in fish eaten were white bass, yellow perch and walleyes.

Bur did not speculate on why shad and sheepshead ranked first and second in the diet. It might be they are more accessible in deep waters offshore from West Sister.

Another research project at Lake Ontario cited disclosed that the yellow perch is the second leading food target of cormorants offshore from Little Galloo Island. Alewives, a baitfish, are the leading source of food for the Lake Ontario birds, Bur said.

Also learned at Lake Ontario is that the growing number of feeding cormorants may be associated with a decline in the population of smallmouth bass less than two years of age.

Little Galloo Island has become the home of about 10,000 nesting cormorants. Many trees on Galloo have died because the birds use twigs and leaves for their nests and bomb what's below them with their excrement, killing that vegetation.

Bur said the loss of trees at Galloo has required the cormorants to adjust. "Now they are nesting on the ground," he said.

The situation at Lake Huron, where other research has taken place along the north shore between St. Ignace and Detour Village, was not reviewed. Sport fishermen in that area blame cormorants for wiping out what was once considered the greatest perch fishing in the United States.

Cormorants are protected from hunting under laws set by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, but shooting the birds would not put a dent in their population, the researchers say.

What does work is oiling the eggs during the nesting period. The wildlife service granted a permit for an oiling test project at Lake Ontario and it worked.

Bur said he did not believe the service would honor

many requests for these permits.

Reprinted, courtesy of Southtowns Walleye Association. Article written by Jim Robey, outdoor columnist for the Dayton Daily News. Write him at Sports Dept., Dayton Daily News, appeared in April 2003 Fishline.

Study Shows Fish Cannot Feel Pain

A large-scale (no pun intended) study conducted by James D. Rose, a professor of zoology and physiology at the University of Wyoming, has concluded that fish do not feel pain. Awareness of pain depends on functions of specific regions of the cerebral cortex that fish do not possess. Previous studies that indicated fish can feel pain had confused “Nociception” – responding to a threatening stimulus – with feeling pain. For more information, refer to the complete article, *The Neurobehavioral Nature of Fishes and the Question of Awareness and Pain* from the journal *Reviews in Fisheries Science*, 2002, vol. 10, no. 1 pp. 1-38.

Lake Erie 2003 Harvest Quotas Set

Harvest quotas for the 2003 Lake Erie walleye and yellow perch fisheries have been set by the Lake Erie Committee of the Great Lakes Fishery Commission and will remain largely unchanged from the previous year, according to the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) Division of Wildlife.

This year, the entire lake’s annual harvest quota of walleye is again set at 3.4 million fish, while the yellow perch quota is up slightly to 9.9 million pounds. The Lake Erie Committee is made up of fisheries managers representing Ohio, Michigan, Pennsylvania, New York and Ontario. Each year this committee sets the Total Allowable Catch (T AC), which reflects the number of fish that can be taken from the lake without harming these populations.

“By pooling our resources to monitor and manage this great fishery, we’re cooperatively working to attain healthy fish populations and an equitable distribution of fisheries benefits among our member agencies,” said Roger Knight, ODNR’S Lake Erie Committee representative.

“Two years ago, we committed as a group to lowering

the walleye quota to allow this species at least three years to rebuild its population,” said Gary Isbell, fish management and research administrator for ODNR’s Division of Wildlife. Isbell noted that since 2001, the walleye T AC has remained at 3.4 million fish.

Each state is allotted a share of the total allowable catch, determined by a formula based on surface area within each jurisdiction. Ohio and Ontario receive the highest quotas because their waters encompass the highest percentage of the lake. Of the 2003 quota, Ohio’s share is just over 1.7 million, about 51 percent of the total. Ontario’s share is just under 1.5 million walleye, about 43 percent of the total allocation. The remainder is shared by New York, Michigan, and Pennsylvania. Ohio’s daily bag limit for walleye caught in Lake Erie and its tributaries will not change. Anglers may harvest four fish from March 1 through April 30, and six fish from May 1 through the last day in February per angler.

Sport fishing on Lake Erie is a catalyst that draws anglers from all across the nation and helps boost local economies all along the lakeshore.

“Last year, walleye fishing got off to a slow start because of the cold and rainy spring weather, but anglers saw improvement as the summer progressed,” said Isbell. “We anticipate anglers experiencing a better season this year, with good numbers of 19 to 22-inch walleye from the 1999 hatch, many 13 to 15 inch fish from the 2001 hatch, and some 24 to 27-inch fish from the 1996 hatch,” he added.

This three-year conservation effort for walleye follows the similar successful action taken by the Lake Erie Committee to boost the population of yellow perch. The perch population is improved to the point the Lake Erie Committee slightly increased the 2003 total allowable catch for yellow perch to 9.906 million pounds, up from 9.333 million pounds in 2002.

Yellow perch quotas for individual jurisdictions surrounding the lake are based on a different sharing formula than walleye, involving surface area and past fishing performance. Ohio’s share of the 2003 perch allocation is 4.3 million pounds - about two hundred thousand pounds above last year - and is allocated between sport and commercial fisheries.

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boat the boat drifts perpendicular to the contour or breakline. Occasionally the bow mount trolling motor will correct the drift or in some circumstances the kicker motor will have to be nudged into gear to compensate for gusty winds.

All in all the walleyes and bass can be easily caught on Lake Erie. By using some simple techniques of trolling and boat control it won't be long before you will be saying, "Oh Those Erie 'Eyes." Hope to see you on the water soon!

Article is reprinted from the February 2003 Fishline, a publication of the Southtowns Walleye Association

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"The sport fishing catch for yellow perch was tremendous last year and we anticipate it continuing," said Isbell. "Last year we saw a lot of 30-fish limit catches, and better angler success than in previous years. We should see a repeat of that success again this year."

Ontario will receive about five million pounds and Michigan, Pennsylvania and New York will share the remainder.

Ohio's daily bag limit for sport anglers remains at 30 perch per angler. Existing commercial fishery regulations also remain in effect

The Lake Erie Committee remains concerned about changes in the Lake Erie environment caused by aquatic nuisance species and climate driven impacts on lake levels. Spring weather patterns adversely affected walleye and yellow perch hatches in 2000 and 2002 and the committee anticipates major cuts in walleye and perch TAC in 2004 and 2005 to help offset these poor hatches. Work by the member agencies will continue through the summer to determine strategies for reducing harvest where necessary and for protecting Lake Erie's valuable resources.

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Consequently the commission is forecasting that agencies and anglers should prepare themselves for reduced catch limits in 2004, for both walleye and yellow perch.

"With our regulation cycle we're going to put forth our proposals for the 2004-2005 fishing season later this summer," Kayle said. "Right now, we're expecting changes, but we will be pouring over the data as well as the social and economic impact of any law changes before we decide what to do."

Pennsylvania's possible solution to its anticipated requirement to reduce the harvest next year may include an increase in the minimum size limit. That state's Fish and Boat Commission is exploring the possibility of increasing the size limit from the present 15 inches to 20 inches. Kayle also said he expects to see a series of public forums that will address the issue, allowing the fishing public to hear the division's arguments.

"The thing in our favor is that we haven't even come close to meeting our quota so we should still have some buffer that we can live off before we would have to make some serious cuts," Kayle said.

For this year Ohio's Lake Erie anglers will continue to live under a daily bag limit of 6 walleye if taken between May 1 and February 28, 4 fish if caught between March 1 and April 30. Ohio's yellow perch anglers can currently keep 30 fish per day.