

Central Lake Erie's Walleye Forecast Mostly Cloudy

by
Jeff Frischkorn

As Kevin Kayle wrestles with moving the Fairport Harbor Fisheries Research Station into its new headquarters, he also must find the time to play tag with the important task of monitoring the dynamics of Lake Erie's fisheries.

"We're still headlong into doing our data analysis and with our move, it's requiring a lot of juggling," said Kayle, supervisor for the Ohio Division of Wildlife's fisheries research unit. This unit has moved from its downtown Fairport Harbor location — which was housed in an one-time physician's office — to a much larger complex on High Street.

Kayle managed to stop long enough from tossing the rubber balls into the air to discuss what lies ahead for Lake Erie's fisheries. Of chief concern and interest for most Lake Erie anglers is the status of walleye and the opportunity to fill a cooler this summer. While the immediate forecast looks good, the future is casting something of a shadow over the fisheries.

"The 2002 year class of walleye was almost a total bust. That was due to the cold, wet spring that saw a lot of bad storms," Kayle said. Kayle did say that plenty of spawning walleye adults were present last spring but that condi-

tions were not good for both egg and juvenile survival. "But the thing that can help offset was that we had a good hatch the year before. And those walleye should come into the fisheries this year as 12 to 15-inch fish," Kayle said.

In all, Lake Erie's population estimates should project to be around 40 million. That figure is, however, a marked decline from the early 1980s and into the 1990s when the lake had a walleye population approaching 80 million fish, Kayle said. "These are numbers, however, which we've been seeing the past couple of years," Kayle said.

Kayle ascribes to the theory that a hard winter is good for the walleye fisheries. Good hatches often follow a hard winter, especially if a spring is graced with good weather. Much of productivity is due to the physiology of the fish, Kayle says.

Likely too, a hard winter means a thump on bait fish populations as well as for egg-eating species such as white perch. While fewer white perch can mean greater walleye egg survival, a smaller baitfish population can help fishermen. With less bait, a walleye is more inclined to "hit a spoon that is dragged in front it," Kayle said.

As for yellow perch, a poor hatch also was encountered last year, Kayle said. "This population is being offset by a good 2002 year class, but these fish should be only 6 to 7 inches by fall," Kayle said. "We do have several other good year classes of perch that are producing, and will continue to produce, good catches. People just might have to sort through more fish."

Perch recovery efforts through conservative fishing regulations and the imposition of strict quotas by all Lake Erie stake-holders is helping to improve the species' population, Kayle says.

"We could, though see regression if we have a couple more years of bad hatches," Kayle said.

Among the brightest spots for Lake Erie is the recovery of its stock of white bass. As it was for 1999 and 2001, the white bass hatch for 2002 was good, Kayle said.

"The white bass fishing's as good as it's been in many years; it's just that they're not being sought by as many fishermen. That could change as more and larger white bass are caught," Kayle said.

Smallmouth bass populations are likewise strong. Good numbers of

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be fewer in 2004. However, a strong 2001 hatch, as well as contributions from the 1996 and 1999 hatches and conservative harvests on a lakewide scale, should make for an exciting 2003 fishery and also carry over to 2004.

Yellow Perch

Many top perch-jerking locales across both basins kept perch anglers busy and pleased. Ohio perch anglers filled coolers with 6.6 million yellow perch, a 20 percent increase over the 2001 harvest of 5.5 million. Angler pressure for yellow perch also improved from 1.6 million in 2001 to 2 million fish in 2002. Catch rates hit their highest levels during the traditional peak month of September, with anglers catching nearly four fish per hour, down slightly from 4.2 fish per angler hour in 2001.

Smallmouth Bass

Last year angler pressure for smallmouth bass was an estimated 340,000 angler hours, down from 400,000 angler hours in 2001. The decline is most likely due to bad weather and lake conditions in May, a traditional smallmouth bass fishing month. Creel interviews reveal that most bass anglers practice catch and release with six out of seven smallmouth bass released after being landed. The state record smallmouth bass, taken in June 1993 by an angler fishing off the Bass Islands, weighed in at 9.5 pounds. The world record is 10 pounds, 14 ounces.

Steelhead Trout

Central basin anglers experienced good steelhead fishing during August and September of last year. The steelhead harvest in 2002 jumped 41 percent from 29,000 in 2001 to 41,000. The popularity of Lake Erie's steelhead fishery continues to increase as more anglers discover this exciting sport fish in Ohio waters.

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age 5 and older, Kayle said.

"The one thing that we continue to monitor is the survival of young bass. Our concern is the changing food web that involves the invasive round goby, but they are being incorporated in the bass' diet and so we're seeing faster growth rates with smallmouths," Kayle said.

Of course, the wildlife division's steelhead stocking program will continue to pour dividends into the lake's fisheries, Kayle says. "We set a record last summer for the number of steelhead taken from the lake: Just over 40,000 trout," Kayle said. "Steelhead saved a lot of charters last year and should do so again this year, absolutely."

Kayle said his staff is also looking at the lake's population of fishhook fleas. The concern is that the fishhook flea will be carried into new waters. This transportation will come about by those fishermen who fail to take precautions in cleaning fishing lines and downrigger cables, Kayle said. "The fishhook flea was discovered for the first time last year in the Central Basin," Kayle said. "We want to keep an eye on it."

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