

Another Year of Great Fishing Expected for Lake Erie in 2003

From
The Ohio Department of Natural Resources
Division of Wildlife

Anglers can again expect to find some of the nation's finest and most diverse fishing opportunities this year on Lake Erie, according to the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) Division of Wildlife.

"Whether targeting the lake's famous walleyes, plentiful perch, hard-fighting smallmouth bass or steelhead trout, great fishing opportunities are available this year on Lake Erie," said Roger Knight, Lake Erie fisheries program manager for the ODNR Division of Wildlife. "Fishing should be good to excellent for most species this year," said Knight. "With a large charter boat fleet, numerous boat ramps and marinas, and shoreline access to the lake and its tributaries, anglers should take advantage of the fishing experiences that Lake Erie offers."

Walleye

An abundant 2001 walleye hatch will enter the Lake Erie fishery this year. As a result, state fish biologists expect this season's anglers to reel in plenty of good walleye catches. The plentiful two-year-old fish from the 2001 hatch will measure 13 to 15 inches. Anglers can also expect to catch a good number of fish from the 1999 hatch that will measure 16 to 18 inches. Anglers should anticipate 20 to 26 inch catches

from the 1996 and 1998 hatches, as well as some fish from earlier hatches now in the Fish Ohio category at more than 28 inches. The reduced bag limit for Ohio anglers remains in effect at four walleyes during March and April and six walleyes the remainder of the year.

"Long cold winters normally benefit young walleye by helping reduce the numbers of other fish species - such as gizzard shad, alewife and white perch - who compete for the same food sources as the walleye," said Knight.

More important to a successful walleye spawn, he added, is warm and mild spring weather. Knight said it is worth noting that it was the combination of cold winters and mild springs during the 1980s that helped produce that decade's now world-renowned Lake Erie walleye fishery.

"We actually have just as many spawning walleyes in Lake Erie today as we did in the early 80s," said Knight.

Yellow Perch

The excellent perch fishing anglers have experienced since the mid-1990s should continue through 2003 and beyond. Limit catches of large yellow perch, common across the lake last year, should

again be attainable on many trips. Many of these excellent table-fare fish will be in the 9 to 13 inch range with August, September, and October being the peak harvest months. Conservative regulations for sport and commercial fishermen and improved spawns have helped Lake Erie's yellow perch stocks to gradually recover after low levels in the early 1990s.

This season, thanks to an excellent hatch in 1996, anglers should continue reeling in fine catches of perch measuring 10 to 12 inches. Added to the catch will be perch from the 1998 and 1999 spawns, measuring 8 to 10 inches. Catch rates should peak in September and October and rival those of 2002. Ohio's daily bag limit for yellow perch remains at 30 fish per angler.

Smallmouth Bass

Fishing for Lake Erie's third most popular sport species should remain good to excellent during 2003. Smallmouth bass anglers can expect to land smallies from 1995, 1996, 1997 and 1998 classes now ranging in size from 14 to 18 inches. Typical catches will be in the 14 to 18 inch range and weigh 1.5 to 3.5 pounds. Fishing should be good at many of the traditional spots especially in the spring and

fall. Successful spawns over the past decade have provided excellent smallmouth bass fishing opportunities across Lake Erie. Anglers target smallmouth bass from spring through fall with the best action occurring in May, June and September. If recent trends continue, anglers will see catch rates similar to that of 2002. Hot spots should include the Lake Erie islands area, Western Basin Reef Complex, Sandusky Bay, Ruggles Reef, and harbor breakwalls from Cleveland to Conneaut. The daily bag limit for smallmouth bass is five fish with a minimum size length of 14 inches.

Steelhead Trout

On the open lake, anglers should look for peak steelhead action on the waters off Lorain to Conneaut throughout June and August, with catches measuring 19 to 28 inches. Many charter guides now offer steelhead charters as an alternative to traditional walleye charters. Once Lake Erie's steelhead move into central basin streams in the fall, these feisty fish provide additional angling opportunities for wading stream anglers throughout the fall and winter months. The Division of Wildlife maintains this popular fishery by releasing approximately 400,000 steelhead trout each spring in the Vermilion, Rocky, Chagrin and Grand rivers and Conneaut Creek.

Fishing conditions on Lake Erie can change hourly. Adjusting fishing methods according to current conditions is key to the best success. Anglers should take into account such factors as season, cloud cover, water clarity, boat traffic, wave action, and

amount of prey fish present. Electronic equipment to mark fish is advisable. Once a school of fish is located, anglers should try various techniques including drifting, trolling, and jigging at various depths in the water column.

For a recorded Lake Erie fishing report, call 1-888 HOOKFISH. For additional information on lodging, charter boat services, and local launch ramps, contact one of the following lakeshore visitors bureaus:

*Ashtabula County Convention & Visitors Bureau 800-337-6746
Lake County Visitors Bureau 800-368-5253*

*Convention & Visitors Bureau of Greater Cleveland 800-321-1001
Lorain County Visitors Bureau 800-334-1673*

*Sandusky/Erie County Visitors Bureau 800-255-8070
Ottawa County Visitors Bureau 800-441-1271*

Greater Toledo Convention & Visitors Bureau 800-243-4667

*Ohio Division of Travel & Tourism
800-BUCKEYE*

LAKE ERIE FISHING: A LOOK BACK AT THE 2002 SEASON

Fishing for walleye, Lake Erie's most popular game fish, was very good throughout last summer at select walleye hot spots. Limit catches of walleyes ranging in size from 14 to 24 inches were common during periods in July and August. Some of the best 2002

western basin walleye locations included the Kelleys Island area, the Reef Complex, along the Camp Perry Firing Range boundaries, and the area from West Sister Island, along the Toledo Shipping Channel up to the Michigan state line. In the central basin, good areas included locations off Huron to Vermilion.

In 2002, anglers caught a total 700,000 walleye on the Ohio waters of Lake Erie, significantly less than the previous year's 1.2 million fish. Catch rates for private boat anglers peaked in August at approximately one walleye for every two hours of fishing, slightly less than the previous year. Charter boat anglers had better catch rates that peaked in July at more than one walleye for every two hours of fishing, down from one fish every one and a half hours in 2001. The annual catch rate in the western basin in 2002 was one walleye every two hours. The annual catch rate in the central basin was about one fish every three hours.

The largest percentage of the 2002 walleye harvest were three-year-old walleyes from the 1999 hatch measuring 14 to 18 inches. Other year classes of fish that made a showing were from the 1996 and 1998 hatches ranging in size from 20 to 24 inches. The current state record walleye was caught off Cleveland in November 1999 and weighed 16.19 pounds, a remnant of the large 1986-year class. Walleyes can live to be more than 20 years of age. On the down side, the cold, wet, windy weather in the spring contributed to a very poor hatch in 2002, which means the numbers of 14- to 16-inch fish will

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.

For additional news online, check out the ODNR Press Room at ohiodnr.com

For Further Information Contact:

Tim Bader, ODNR Division of Wildlife
(440) 352-4199
-or-
Andy Ware, ODNR Media Relations
(614) 265-6882

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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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