

News Reel

Waterville Area Fisheries Newsletter

Spring, 2017

Open water opens busy season for Waterville Area Fisheries

When ice leaves the lakes, Waterville Area Fisheries staff leaves the office as the busy production and survey season begins.

First, northern pike broodstock are netted and taken to the hatchery for spawning. Geneva and Duck lakes will be targeted - 175 males and 120 females are needed to produce the 900,000 northern pike fry that will be stocked locally. After spawning, the broodstock are returned to area waters.

Netting of northern pike at Lake Francis will help specialists gather data for age and growth analysis. And by early April, the hatchery will get busy caring for walleye eggs - and muskie eggs will be incubating later that month.

Walleye fry will be stocked in ponds and local lakes mid to late April, and will also be shipped statewide into early May. Area kids' fishing ponds will be stocked

ABOVE: Northern pike production starts early in the spring at Waterville Area Fisheries. Andrew Scholten, hatchery specialist, sets a box trap to catch northern pike broodstock.

with panfish in April and May, and electro fishing in selected area lakes will help staff monitor largemouth bass populations.

Guests are welcome, come tour the facilities and see all the action - call to schedule a tour or visit, and see what's happening in the hatchery at Waterville Area Fisheries!

Contributed by Amy Roemhildt, newsletter editor, Waterville Area Fisheries

AREA UPDATE

- Craig Soupir, Waterville Area Fisheries supervisor

New newsletter to hook anglers

Hello, friends of south-central Minnesota lakes and rivers, and welcome to **NEWS REEL**, our new quarterly newsletter! We look forward to sharing updates of our fisheries activities, observations, and plans for area lakes.

Staff at the The DNR Waterville Area Fisheries office, located just outside Waterville on the shores of Lake Tetonka, work with citizens to conserve and manage the state's natural resources - to provide outdoor recreation opportunities, and to provide for commercial uses of natural resources in a way that creates a sustainable quality of life.

To accomplish this, we do a bunch of great things every year. We conduct annual surveys on lakes and streams, manage nearly 2,000 acres of publically accessible aquatic management areas (AMA's), conduct habitat inventory and improvement projects, develop fisheries management plans for individual lakes

and water resources, and conduct environmental review of public and private proposals.

We meet with lake associations and other groups to distribute fisheries information and collaborate with them on special projects. We operate the state's largest coolwater fish hatchery, where we raise channel catfish, northern pike, muskellunge and walleye. Fish raised here are stocked in hundreds of lakes locally, and statewide. Funding for

all of our projects come from fishing licenses purchased by anglers like you. So the more we communicate, the better we can meet our objectives of having really great fisheries resources in south-central Minnesota.

NEWS REEL will be posted on the Waterville Area Fisheries website. Hopefully you will enjoy it, as it answers questions and peaks your interest to ask new ones. We invite you to contact us and welcome

discussions that could serve as a springboard to guide future management activities. I look forward to your feedback and suggested topics for future issues. Contact our office by email at waterville.fisheries@state.mn.us or call 507-362-4223. Have a great spring, and remember to stop and see us!



Waterville Area Fisheries supervisor Craig Soupir is shown here loading muskellunge out of rearing ponds last fall, which were stocked throughout Minnesota in approved waters.

Time for Trout!

STREAM TROUT FISHING OPENER: April 15

As thoughts turn to opening day, remember: stream trout fishing in streams opens April 15! Many anglers in the Waterville area are familiar with the trout fishing available at Paul's Creek and Seven-Mile Creek near St. Peter. But, did you know there is a trout stream at the eastern edge of our area? Just outside of Northfield flows a small gem known as Rice Creek. Rice Creek is a cool, clear tributary of the Cannon River that is home to a self-sustaining population of brook trout. This is not typical trout stream country, but the creek is fed by shallow springs that supply enough cool water to support brook trout and also give rise to its alternate moniker – Spring Brook.

BROOK TROUT are a small member of the Salmonid family known for their beautiful coloration, willingness to bite, and excellent table fare. Brook trout are common in streams in the Northeast and New England as well as in the southeast region of Minnesota.

For many years it was believed the brook trout that call Rice Creek home were a native population and not the result of stocking. The fact that the brook trout of Rice Creek survived and reproduced on their own supported the idea of a native population. In fact, for many years, the Department of Natural Resources used adult brook trout from Rice Creek to spawn brook trout to stock in many other streams in southeast Minnesota. Even today, many brook trout populations in the southeast portion of the state can trace their genetic heritage back to Rice Creek.

However, there were always rumors of brook trout stockings looming in the background. One rumor had it that brook trout in Rice Creek were transplants from Wisconsin. Others claimed they were trucked in from the east coast – likely from hatcheries in New York, Maine, or Pennsylvania. Some residents of the area recalled a private stocking of brook trout around the year 1918. Genetic testing in the early 2000s confirmed the east coast hypothesis as the Rice Creek trout were deemed more similar to brook trout in upstate New York than southeast Minnesota.

Regardless of their origin, the Rice Creek brook trout population is a unique resource in the Waterville area worthy of attention from anglers and fisheries managers. While most of the creek is located on private lands, there is an angling easement covering approximately 1 mile of water upstream and downstream of the Decker Avenue Bridge. By all accounts, Rice Creek receives minimal fishing pressure and it is likely very few people outside the area have ever heard of it. This does not mean it is overlooked by fisheries managers and researchers, however.

The Waterville Area Fisheries office has records of surveys conducted at Rice Creek as far back as 1972 when the stream fell under the jurisdiction of the Lake City office. More recently, the stream has been the focus of a lot of attention from non-governmental organizations dedicated to maintaining or improving the water quality and brook trout in Rice Creek. Projects included water quality sampling, aquatic insect surveys, habitat surveys, and fish surveys.

The latest fish survey was conducted in August of 2016 by Waterville Area Fisheries staff. Four reaches of the river were sampled using a backpack electrofisher. The electricity produced by the electrofisher temporarily stuns fish and allows staff to dip them with a net and place them in a holding container where they quickly revive. All brook trout were counted, measured, and weighed before being released back into the stream. Brook trout were abundant in the lowest reaches of the stream and decreased moving upstream. In one 140 yard reach, DNR staff netted over 200 brook trout! That's approximately 2,500 fish per mile of river. Of course, those densities are not typical – trout numbers ranged from zero to 1,500 trout per mile in the other three reaches. The majority of trout sampled were between 5.5 and 7.5 inches long, with the largest brookie measuring just over 13 inches. Also, a large amount of fish around 3 inches were sampled. These small fish are likely less than a year old, since brook trout spawn



An average-size male brook trout from Rice Creek. Brook trout spawn in the fall and this fish is beginning to display his bright, mate-attracting colors.

in the fall, and are a great example of brook trout reproduction in Rice Creek.

RICE CREEK truly is a gem of the Waterville Area and would be considered a great trout stream no matter where you go. Rice Creek's location near the rapidly expanding cities of Northfield and Dundas makes it vulnerable to progress such as housing developments and industrial activities. Small, isolated ecosystems such as Rice Creek can be fragile, but with the list of groups, colleges, and the DNR keeping watch, hopefully this unique resource will continue to support a thriving population of beautiful, wild brook trout.



A large, female brook trout from Rice Creek measures 13.5 inches long.

Contributed by Brandon Eder, assistant area supervisor, Waterville Area Fisheries.

Trout Stocking

2017 Paul's Creek:

April 14	1,500 yearlings
April 21	1,500 yearling
May 5	1,000 yearlings
May 19	1,000 yearlings

2017 Seven-Mile Creek:

May 5 - 300 brown trout adults



Kip Rounds, fisheries specialist, releases trout at Paul's Creek near St. Peter - part of the nine-county area in southern Minnesota managed by Waterville Area Fisheries.

2017 FISHING OPENER MAY 13

Last summer's netting surveys conducted on area lakes by fishery specialists revealed healthy populations of fish, which proves encouraging for the 2017 fishing season. Many folks no doubt have their favorite lakes, but in case you don't, here's a list to help get you started. Keep in mind, these recommendations are based on sampling from 2016; there are many more options to explore!

Crappies *Crystal* and *Loon* lakes had tremendous numbers of black crappie during our summer surveys. Our nets showed many 9 inch plus fish and fishing was excellent last summer and fall. We've heard some reports of anglers catching crappies in *Elysian*, and our net lifts confirmed that there are a pile of fish over 9 inches to be caught. *Mazaska Lake*, near Faribault, is another good bet for crappies. We conducted a creel survey at Mazaska in 2016 and good catches of crappies were common.

Bluegills Look to *Mazaska* to also turn out some great catches of big bluegills. Nearby *Cedar Lake* had good numbers of bluegill during our summer survey and a creel survey there indicated anglers caught lots of them in 2016 (see sidebar). A sleeper pick for bluegill might be *Phelps Lake*, near Lonsdale. Spring ice-out assessments showed a large population of bluegill with many over 8 inches. Phelps winter-killed in 2014 as did a large number of other lakes. Many of those lakes were restocked with bluegill and will provide good fishing in 2017.

Creel Survey: Why all the questions?

Anglers fishing from Dec. 1, 2015 to Oct 31, 2016 on Madison, Cedar or Mazaska lakes may have visited with Waterville's creel clerk, Nik. He spent over 150 days counting and measuring angler catch. Thanks for answering his questions - it's for a good cause.

The creel study was spurred by the new zone concept for northern pike regulations. Anglers in the Southern Region are currently allowed three northern pike with only one being over 30 inches.

Newly-proposed regulations would allow anglers to harvest two northern pike that must be over 24 inches long. This raised some questions. How would the potential 24-inch minimum length limit be

Walleye Large lakes, such as *Madison* and *Washington*, are among your best bets for walleye in the area. Test netting during the summer of 2016 showed healthy walleye populations in both of these lakes and ice fishing for walleye at Madison was excellent. *Cannon Lake* has been a hotspot for walleye for a while and should be good again this year. Closer to Mankato, look to *Eagle Lake*, *Crystal*, and *Loon* for some eating size walleye. Walleye fishing was fast and furious this winter at rearing ponds such as *Henry*, *Mills*, and *Armstrong* and there should still be enough fish left to provide some open water action.

Northern Pike Two lakes in the Albert Lea area, *Geneva* and *Pickeral*, have seen a boom in northern pike populations following renovations and a new stocking strategy for shallow lakes that focuses on northern pike and yellow perch. Both lakes should provide excellent opportunities for northern pike. Other lakes to look to for northern pike include *Duck*, where we found a nice number of large fish and *Reeds Lake* which had record numbers of northern pike in our gill nets this summer.

Yellow Perch *Cannon Lake* has been a recent hotspot for yellow perch and should be again this fall. Geneva, Pickeral, and Cody are also worth a look for yellow perch.

Articles on this page contributed by Brandon Eder, assistant area supervisor, Waterville Area Fisheries.

accepted by anglers? How do dark house anglers feel about the regulation? How does the 24-inch minimum compare with self-imposed minimum lengths anglers already have? How important are northern pike to area anglers? How satisfied are anglers with the number and size of fish they catch in this area?

Four questions were selected to ask anglers during the survey: **1) How satisfied are you with the number of fish caught?** **2) How satisfied are you with the size of fish caught?** **3) How important is catching northern pike?** **4) What is the minimum length of northern pike you would harvest in 2017?** Survey results will be available this summer. Watch for more information, or feel free to call or email.

Creel survey results are in!

What's in YOUR creel?

Waterville Area Fisheries conducted a creel survey Dec. 1, 2015 - Oct. 31, 2016. A special thank you goes out to over 1500 area anglers who agreed when randomly asked to participate!

The survey:

- 778 interviews at Madison Lake
- 453 interviews at Cedar Lake
- 468 interviews at Lake Mazaska

NUMBER OF FISH CAUGHT				
Lake	Sunfish	Crappies	N. Pike	Walleye
Madison	39,000	14,000	6,000	4,800
Cedar	128,000	47,000	5,800	87
Mazaska	28,000	36,000	5,100	3,800

Most targeted: Panfish
(Sunfish, Crappies, Yellow Perch)

Most fish were released

- Madison Lake: 74 percent released
- Cedar Lake: 76 percent released
- Mazaska Lake: 63 percent released

Fishing close to home

Of the anglers surveyed, the distance traveled to fish was about 30 miles. Most traveled less than 20 miles.

Fun on the ice

Seventy percent of fishing on Cedar and Mazaska occurred during winter months!



Did you know?

A **CREEL** is a traditional small, wicker basket used by anglers to hold fish they have caught. A "creel survey" involves asking anglers who are coming off the lake, what they are fishing for, and what they have caught, among related questions. In other words, **"What is in your creel?"**

WATERVILLE AREA FEATURES:

Mills Lake

IN BLUE EARTH COUNTY

Walleye anglers usually don't think of the small, shallow lakes that are dotted across south-central Minnesota as fishing hotspots. Many of these lakes experience frequent winterkills that can make them void of any fish. This is the exact reason that lakes like Mills Lake of Blue Earth County are ideal for raising walleye.

Mills Lake is a small lake with a maximum depth of only 7 feet, which makes it highly vulnerable to low dissolved oxygen levels during the winter months – meaning winterkills are common.

Staff at the DNR Waterville Area Fisheries Office stock Mills Lake with walleye fry (about the size of an eyelash) after each winterkill, which grow exceptionally fast since the lake is mostly void of other fish. The following fall, the walleye are netted out as fingerlings (usually 4-8 inches) and stocked into area fishing lakes.

Here's the catch

Many of those walleye avoid the nets and remain in Mills Lake to continue to grow. These remaining walleye, referred to as "carryover," are usually 14 inches or longer by age 2. That's good news for anglers, because

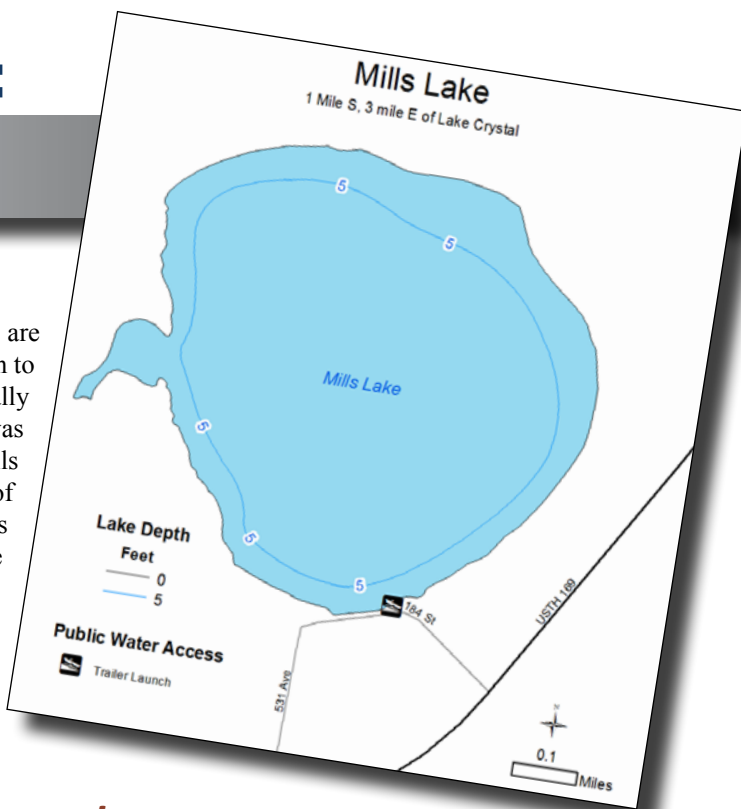
carryover walleye are not only large enough to harvest, but are usually eager to bite. This was the scenario at Mills Lake in the winter of 2016, when anglers swarmed to the ice to get in on the bite of hungry carryover walleye. The bad news - the hot bite usually doesn't last long before another winterkill occurs.

The good news:

Waterville fisheries managers will re-stock walleye after the winterkill and the cycle will continue.

Fisheries managers often refer to this as a "boom and bust" fishery. This is a great opportunity for anglers and fisheries managers to take

Tiny walleye fry, about the size of an eyelash, grow to fingerling size from spring to fall in Mills Lake.



advantage of shallow lakes that otherwise wouldn't be considered a fishery. Feel free to check in at the Waterville Fisheries Office to keep tabs on the status of Mills Lake, it may just be your next walleye hotspot.

Contributed by Kip Rounds, fisheries specialist, Waterville Area Fisheries.



Waterville area fisheries specialists check and re-set nets as they harvest walleye fingerlings from rearing ponds like Mills Lake. The fingerlings were stocked as tiny fry earlier in the spring. The fingerlings will be stocked in area fishing lakes.

- **1,145,000 walleye fry are stocked in Mills Lake after a winterkill**

- **Waterville staff netted about 7,077 lbs. of walleye from Mills Lake since the 2014 winterkill, all of which were stocked into fishing lakes.**

- **Mills Lake also had northern pike, black crappie, and black bullhead in 2016.**

To receive your complimentary copy of **NEWS REEL** or to submit topic ideas, contact Amy Roemhildt, newsletter editor, at amy.roemhildt@state.mn.us or call 507-362-4223 ext. 221.

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