

The early ice-out across Wisconsin lakes and rivers is good news for anglers venturing out for the May 5 inland fishing season opener: many game fish are done spawning or wrapping up and ready to take the bait, state fisheries biologists say.

“This has been the most extended spawning season I've experienced in nearly 30 years as a fish biologist,” says Terry Margenau, Department of Natural Resources fish supervisor based in Spooner. “This year the water temperatures hit 45 degrees and went backward. The result was a greatly protracted spawning period for fish in many lakes. Regardless, I expect that by the season opener fish will be active and feeding and we'll see a very good opener.”

The 2012 Wisconsin Fishing Report gives anglers a line on the size and numbers of fish populations in many of their favorite waters, but anglers may need to change tactics and where in that water body they fish.

Anglers may need to look in deeper water for walleye and in shallower water for bass than normal at this time of year, says Bob Hujik, fisheries supervisor for west central Wisconsin. “We got so warm and then everything stabilized and spawning dragged on,” he says. “But my gut is telling me our fish are still two weeks earlier than normal.

“The walleye are done spawning so they'll be feeding heavily and the bass waters warmed up and the fish are moving around in the shallows,” Hujik says.

Mike Vogelsang, fisheries supervisor based in Woodruff, agrees that anglers may have to change up tactics and look for fish in a little deeper water and near newly emerging weeds.

“Given that everything is about three weeks ahead, it would not be surprising if crappies are already in spawning mode so they may be an alternative fish to target if the walleye don't cooperate,” he says. “They will be found in shallow bays with weeds, or in areas of rushes which provide spawning habitat.”

Scot Stewart, district fisheries supervisor for southern Wisconsin, says that “fish populations are terrific in most waters.” Anglers should plan on fishing in the exact same waters they would normally fish in, but to expect fish to be advanced compared to a normal season.

Randy Schumacher, district fisheries supervisor for northeastern and southeastern Wisconsin reports that walleyes and northern pike are through spawning in northeastern Wisconsin.

Muskellunge have just begun their spawning cycle. Musky anglers fishing southern zone waters may still find some muskellunge in spawning condition.

Largemouth bass fishing should be excellent as abundant sunny days have increased their metabolism, Schumacher says. Look for largemouth on the northern ends of lakes especially over dark-bottomed weedy areas, he says. Bluegills and crappies should be taking advantage of these early spring zones of warmer water temperatures and early food production as well.

Trout anglers in northeastern Wisconsin will find a mixed bag of water levels with the Northwoods streams of Marinette and Oconto counties exhibiting flows below normal while streams in the central sands of Waupaca, Waushara and Marquette counties are closer to water levels expected for the spring opener, Schumacher says.

Lower water levels in the north may make some smaller trout streams harder to fish by concentrating trout in deeper pools and increasing their awareness of angler movement along stream banks. Trout anglers may want to check out recent trout stamp habitat projects on the Mekan River downstream of Highway 21 and the Waupaca River in the City of Waupaca.

In southeastern Wisconsin, the early ice out has contributed to vegetation growing early which gets insects growing early, Schumacher says. “The bass have been drawn into the shallows

earlier, especially when the sun is high in the sky. The bluegills and bass are feeding so it should be a really good opening day if anglers can find these patches of early growing vegetation.”

***Season dates and major new regulations affecting musky anglers and others***

The hook-and-line game fish season opens May 5 on inland waters for walleye, sauger, and northern pike statewide.

The largemouth and smallmouth bass southern zone opens May 5, while the northern bass zone opens for catch and release only from May 5 through June 15, with the harvest season opening June 16. Statewide, the harvest seasons for bass have a minimum length limit of 14 inches with a daily bag limit of five fish in total.

Musky season opens May 5 in the southern zone and May 26 in the northern zone. The northern zone is the area north of highways 77, 64 and 29, with Highway 10 as the dividing line. New this year is that the statewide minimum length limit for musky has increased to 40 inches from 34 in order to help boost natural reproduction. Research suggests muskellunge are more successful at producing young after their second or third year of maturity (up to 40 inches in length). The greater protection afforded by a higher length limit will allow more muskellunge to spawn more than once before they are vulnerable to harvest.

Also new this year, anglers must use a quick strike rig or a non-offset circle hook if they are fishing a minnow 8 inches or longer. When using a quick strike rig and a minnow 8 inches or longer for bait, anglers must immediately attempt to set the hook upon indication of a bite to avoid deep hooking the target fish.

The seasons for rock, yellow and white bass, panfish, bullheads and rough fish, catfish, cisco and whitefish are open all year. Check the 2012-13 Guide to Wisconsin Hook and Line Fishing Regulations” for special regulations listed by county, for regulations on the Great Lakes and boundary waters, and for tributary streams to Green Bay and Lake Michigan. The complete guide is also available at DNR offices and license agents.

***New discounted license seeks to lure back anglers***

New this year anglers who have never purchased a fishing license -- or who haven't purchased one in 10 years -- can get a discounted “first time buyers” license. Lawmakers created the discounted license earlier this year and both residents and non-residents can take advantage of this opportunity. Residents' discounted license is \$5 and non-residents' is \$25.75 for the annual licenses.

There are also incentives for anglers to get new people to go fishing.

Also, for the second year, anglers can buy a one-day fishing license that allows them to take someone out to try fishing, and if they like it, the purchase price of that one-day license will be credited toward purchase of an annual license. The one day license is \$8 for residents and \$10 for nonresidents.

“It's a good entry level license that lets you do everything but fish for trout and salmon, where stamps are required,” says Mike Staggs, Wisconsin's fisheries director. “It's a great way to introduce a friend or family member to the fun of fishing.”

The one-day license is good until midnight on the day it is purchased. People can buy these new licenses and the 20 other different fishing licenses DNR offers in three convenient ways:

Over the Internet through the online licensing center on the DNR website, at all authorized license agents and at DNR Service Center (Hours for service centers vary; check the DNR website for service center days and hours of operation; DNR Service Centers are not open on Saturdays), or by calling toll-free 1-877-LICENSE (1-877-945-4236).

Wisconsin residents and nonresidents 16 years old or older need a fishing license to fish in any waters of the state. Residents born before Jan. 1, 1927, do not need a license and resident members of the U.S. Armed Forces on active duty are entitled to obtain a free fishing license when on furlough or leave.