



Hot times ahead for bass anglers

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Though this winter has been a bit cooler than normal, the return of normal weather conditions will soon bring the beginning of the spring fishing season.

During the early weeks of the March, the final remnants of ice typically disappear from most northern waters. And, downstate anglers begin testing their favorite fishing lakes for the early season bite. For those who have anxiously awaited the arrival of spring, March is truly a time for rejoicing.

This month also finds local bass anglers gearing up for some of the finest largemouth fishing of the entire year. During the next few weeks, bragging-size bucketmouths swarm to their shallow water haunts to prepare for the annual spawn.

Knowledgeable anglers know that now is the perfect time to point their bass rigs toward one of the many powerplant cooling lakes found in this part of the state. These waters not only hold good populations of largemouth bass, but are also home to plenty of trophy-class fish.

The Baldwin power plant cooling reservoir in Randolph County certainly rates among the top choices for hotwater bass anglers.

According to biologists, the lake has an 18-inch minimum length limit and populations of largemouth bass continue to thrive in these heated waters. With its large numbers of 12- to 18-inch largemouths, it is the perfect lake for anglers who regularly practice catch-and-release fishing.

Those fishing these waters realize the action can be fast and furious, particularly in the early spring. Anglers often catch and release dozens of bass per day from this popular site.

In fact, Baldwin Lake is the ideal location for anglers who simply enjoy catching fish. And, population surveys continue to show good numbers of largemouth bass in the 12 to 18-inch category.

As a heated lake, fishing is a year-round activity at this site. In fact, some of the very finest bass action occurs when other lakes are still ice covered.

Though not heated, Rend Lake is yet another location promising excellent bass fishing this year. Biologist Shawn Hirst says survival and recruitment of the bass spawn from 2016 was good. This resulted in good numbers of fish between eight- to 12-inches in the 2017 fish population survey.

And, bass numbers are still relatively high and anglers will find good numbers of bass measuring 14-inches-and-greater in length.

In fact, the Rend Lake bass population exhibits strong year classes in the 12- to 17-inch length range, with lesser numbers running around 18- to 20-inches in length. Here, a 15-inch fish averages well over two pounds.

During the fall sampling, biologists picked up larger fish weighing a little over five pounds. Six-pound bass exist in the lake and have been collected numerous times.

Most of the bass appeared to be in excellent condition due to an abundant shad population.

Good fishing for this species is again expected in 2018. A 14-inch minimum length limit and six-fish per day creel limit applies.

Biologists also feel many of our state's smaller lakes may yield bass fishing that is unequaled anywhere in the country. In fact, many of these waters contain bass populations that are well above the statewide average.

Results from recent electroshocking surveys only prove this claim. Fisheries biologists have uncovered a number of little-known, out-of-the-way honeyholes containing superb populations of bragging-size largemouths.

Macoupin County's Gillespie New Lake is a perfect example of a small lake with a big bass population. Fall population samplings at this lake regularly yield an extraordinary number of largemouth bass, and a good proportion of these fish are often above the three-pound mark.

Like many of the state's smaller waters, Gillespie New Lake is a community-owned reservoir. Though only 270 acres in size, the lake is quickly gaining fame as one of the finest bass fishing waters found in the entire state.

As is the case in most community-owned lakes, there is no charge for fishing. However, a local watercraft registration fee must be paid before a boat can be launched.

This is also the case at Montgomery County's Glenn Shoals Lake near Hillsboro, another nearby site offering excellent potential for a quality bass outing. While small compared to the state's sprawling Corps of Engineer impoundments, this popular city-owned reservoir annually yields top notch bass fishing.

Electrofishing samplings at this location indicate good bass populations. In fact, local bass anglers hold this lake in high regard, particularly for quality fish.

Downstate anglers can choose from a variety of smaller and larger waters boasting good populations of quality bass. Not to be overlooked is the sprawling Crab Orchard Lake in Williamson County. As with many other sites, weed growth is a key to finding Crab Orchard largemouths. A spinnerbait or plastic worm fished in and around the aquatic weed beds can yield some superb catches.

Without a doubt, local bass fishing is one of the best-kept secrets in the angling world. With a little research, anyone can take advantage of the excellent bass angling opportunities found throughout the state.

The Illinois Department of Natural Resources offers a free publication listing many of the top bass fishing locations in the state. The latest edition of the Illinois Fishing Information booklet may be viewed online at www.ifishillinois.org.