



Another big year for Rend Lake anglers

by Lee Keck

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The Illinois Department of Natural Resource's (IDNR) fisheries biologist Shawn Hirst is predicting another big year for Rend Lake anglers. In fact, they are likely to have one of their best years ever.

As the new fisheries manager in charge of the sprawling Rend Lake complex, each year he is charged with announcing the coming year's fishing prospects for this location. While his predecessor's outlook has been bright for the past few years, this year looks even better.

As an example, several decades ago crappie were among the most popular species at this lake. In fact, crappie had always been an important species here and anglers came from several nearby states to enjoy the excellent action for this species.

Then, came a couple of decades of anglers catching mostly smaller fish. This sent most crappie fishermen to other more productive waters. However, that has now all changed and the quality crappie fishing is back and better than ever.

The 2018 Rend Lake fishing prospects lists his outlook as "improved for certain species!" Best of all, crappie are one of those species. According to the report, the crappie population has improved in size from last year.

Data from the fall 2017 trapnet survey show the size structure of the population improved somewhat from last year. Last year, the portion of the crappie population comprised of fish over ten inches in length rose to just below 20 percent, while the percentage of fish eight-to-ten inches in length also improved.

Since the larger sized crappie distribution is now very near the target of 20 percent of the total population, it is improved significantly from the previous year, increasing by 45 percent.

Equally important is the number of eight- to ten-inch crappie," he added. "Although still high, the size structure of the population suggests mortality and growth rates are both high enough to prevent the population from stunting."

For 2018, according to Hirst, crappie measuring ten- to 12-inches in length and averaging 1/2 to over one pound will be abundant enough to provide some quality angling opportunities. He says crappie eight-to-ten inches in length are also abundant and will also contribute to the creel.

Fortunately, the number of crappie over 12 inches in length remains stable. And, the condition of all sizes of crappie remains near the target range.

Still, crappie reproduction was strong in 2017 for the fifth consecutive year. The length and creel regulations enacted in 2002 have had a significant impact on the size structure of the population.

“In the more-than-14 years since the regulations went into effect, the crappie population has improved dramatically and remains relatively stable,” he added. “Regulations will remain unchanged in 2018, but the population will be monitored closely.”

There is even more good news, particularly for those who enjoy fishing for white bass. The report states that the number of white bass collected in the fall 2017 electrofishing survey rose significantly. Anglers can expect the catchable population in the coming year to be largely comprised of fish 12-16 inches in length and weighing up to 1.5 pounds .

Hirst says white bass fishing should be good in 2018. Anglers can expect the catchable population to be largely comprised of fish up to 16 inches in length and weighing up to two pounds.

He feels the fishing prospects for channel catfish remain excellent for the coming year.

“Natural reproduction and recruitment continue to be very strong, and are responsible for maintaining the large population of fish in the lake,” he explained. “The catch rate for channel catfish increased for the third consecutive year and remains excellent.”

According to the data, the condition of these fish is fair and growth rates are good. In the coming year, channel catfish from one-to-three pounds should be abundant and larger fish up to six pounds common.

“This lake remains one of the premier channel catfish waters in southern Illinois, and should remain on your list of places to fish for channels in 2018.

It is largemouth bass where most folks find their excitement. Hirst says the size structure of the bass population has remained quite good over the past year. He says that data from the most recent population survey show all population indices still remained within the target goals and the condition of all sizes of fish is excellent.

He also said the excellent bass body condition is the direct result of another large shad population. With the abundant food supply, he feels bass growth rates should be excellent and this should help to improve the size structure of the population even further in the coming year.