



Time for Illinois River Sauger

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Like the anticipated return of Capistrano's swallows, the annual Illinois sauger run is an event anxiously awaited by anglers throughout Illinois. And, the past few weeks have been particularly good for those who enjoy catching these toothy fish.

While relatively high waters plague much of the Mississippi and lower Illinois rivers, conditions are a bit more favorable on the Illinois River near Utica. Here, anglers have been enjoying superb action for quality sauger since mid-March.

One particular hotspot has been the waters just below the beautiful Starved Rock Lodge. But, it's not just the good fishing that brings hundreds of hopeful anglers to this area.

The scenery along this particularly scenic stretch of water is almost breathtaking. It's difficult to believe this is the very same river that many people consider fit only for commercial barge traffic.

In fact, this portion of the Illinois River is considerably different than its lower stretches. The water typically runs clearer and faster. The area contains good populations of a variety of sportfish, including sauger, white bass, smallmouth bass and catfish.

As soon as the ice disappears, dozens of boats can be seen from almost any point on the river. And, dozens more can be found at virtually every well-established fishing hole.

Once word gets out that the sauger have arrived, the nearby communities see a remarkable increase in the number of vehicles towing boat trailers. It's common to see trailer license plates from a number of nearby states.

The weekends bring long lines and full parking lots at the typically empty boat ramps.

And, judging by the crowds at local bait shops, it's obvious these small commercial operations temporarily become among the most lucrative businesses in town.

Any local angler will admit that the sauger run is a big deal here on the Illinois River. Word quickly spreads once the sauger action heats up and everyone knows that now is the best time to catch them.

Though the actual run has only just kicked into full gear, most anglers are already enjoying excellent success.

Typically, the best sauger fishing occurs right after ice-out. This year, however, the sudden arrival of warmer-than-normal temperatures brought some of the best fishing this past week.

Once the bite turns on, good fishing can be found only a short distance from any one of several boat ramps found along this stretch of the river. Here, anglers merely need to join ranks with a dozen or more boatloads of joyful sauger anglers already busy filling their six-fish daily limits.

In fact, the good spots are not hard to find. Anglers only need to look for the other boats.

The most common strategy is to use five-sixteenth ounce jigs tipped with fathead minnows. The fairly simple technique is to slowly drift downstream bouncing the jigs off the bottom.

Veteran sauger anglers say the real trick is to stay in contact with the bottom. These fish often hug the bottom so you only need to raise the lure a few inches.

Most fish measure about 17 inches and weigh slightly less than two pounds. Though bigger fish can be found, a one and one-half pounder is a typical size for an Illinois River sauger.

Currently, most of the fish are coming from 10 to 12 feet of water. Though this will vary each day depending upon water clarity and sun, saugers will generally hold at the same depth. When the sauger run is fully underway, it often takes only a few hours to fill a daily limit.

If the river remains at normal pool and reasonably clear, the good early spring sauger fishing often continues for a month or more. The males are generally the first to show up and the slightly heavier females follow about a week later.

The time is definitely upon us for great sauger action. Best of all, sauger are not only fun to catch, they're also delicious.