



Hot times ahead for bass anglers

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With normal weather conditions, we'll soon see 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 are already testing their favorite fishing lakes for the early season bite. For those who have anxiously awaited the arrival of spring, February 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 as many as 50 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.

Biologists say Baldwin is definitely one of our finer, yet overlooked, bass fishing waters. They look for Baldwin Lake to provide some of the area's finest fishing again this year.

Though not heated, Rend Lake is yet another location promising excellent bass fishing this year. Biologists say large numbers of bass up to 16 inches can be found in the lake, and plenty of fish up to 18 inches also exists.

During the annual population sampling, they also picked up a number of larger fish weighing five and six pounds. All of the bass appeared to be in excellent conditions, no doubt from feeding on shad."

Still, anglers seeking quality largemouths may wish to consider some of the many smaller lakes that dot the downstate landscape. These lesser-known waters range in size from 20 to 1,500 acres and are also some of the first to produce good action.

"I suspect many these smaller lakes may yield bass fishing that is unequaled anywhere in the midwest," said Illinois Department of Natural Resource's Chief fisheries biologist Dan Stephenson. "Many of these waters contain bass populations that are well above the statewide average."

Results from recent electroshocking surveys only prove Stephenson's statements. 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," he explained. "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."

And this situation is typically reflected in the angler's catch. Nearly every fishing tournament held at this lake sees numerous quality fish weighed and released back into its waters.

Woody cover often yields much of Gillespie Lake's better early spring bass fishing. However, aquatic weeds seem to play a greater role in the summer fishing. Summer anglers often fish the edges and pockets within these weeds to catch largemouths. Fall anglers find a variety of techniques to yield good fishing.

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.

In fact, many of these lakes also have horsepower restrictions and special fishing and boating regulations. It is always best to check with the site before planning a trip to one of these destinations.

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.

Early spring finds many veteran Glenn Shoals Lake anglers probing the shallower waters at the north end with jig and pork combinations and spinnerbaits. Summer anglers often find better success working plastic worms near cover in the south end. Autumn anglers focus their attention to the deeper channel banks and fish with crankbaits or topwater lures.

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 annual 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.dnr.illinois.gov.