



Illinois River Is Untapped Bass Hotspot

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Few, if any, Illinois waters can boast the diverse aquatic habitat found along the Illinois River. Along with the actual river and its navigational pools, the Illinois River watershed includes tailwater habitat, lakes, sloughs and numerous smaller tributary streams.

Totaling nearly 87,000 surface acres, it seems odd that relatively few Illinois bass anglers spend much time fishing the Illinois and its many associated backwater areas.

Bass fishing on this river was once limited to a few local anglers who were particularly good at keeping secrets. The real bass boom didn't occur until nearly two decades ago when the Bass Anglers Sportsman's Society brought their first ever BASSMASTER SuperStars tournament to Peoria. It was this event that brought the river national exposure as a bass fishing location.

Since then, the central portion of the Illinois River has become something of a bass tournament haven. The site has seen numerous national, regional and local competitions.

Still, there is much more to this ageless river. Beginning at the junction of the Kankakee and Des Plaines rivers in Grundy County, the Illinois meanders to the southwest some 273 miles until it finally enters the Mississippi River near Grafton.

Along its way, the Illinois is pooled by five navigational dams located at Dresden Island, Marseilles, Starved Rock, Peoria and LaGrange. In addition, the Mel Price Locks and Dam on the Mississippi at Alton pools the lower 80 miles of the Illinois River.

Many of the lakes and sloughs along the Illinois contain little or no current. During the summer months, these backwater areas are often filled with various types of aquatic vegetation. The weed-choked areas often offer some of the Illinois best largemouth fishing, particularly in the late spring.

The many islands create chutes and side channels which can also offer excellent fishing for largemouth and smallmouth bass. Unlike the sloughs and lakes, however, side channels and chutes usually have some current during normal river stages.

Even with its constant current, the main channel of the river yields quality fishing for largemouths and smallmouths throughout the year. Anglers often concentrate their fishing efforts to the various manmade and natural obstructions that provide these fish some protection from the constant current.

Despite some increase in angling pressure, the Illinois River's bass population seems to be doing quite well.

This year, anglers should enjoy more good bass fishing. With several good yearclasses of bass now swimming in these waters good fishing is expected.

As might be expected, the northern reaches of the river contain the greatest smallmouth bass populations. Largemouth bass are found in greater numbers in the southern portions of the river.

According to biologists, anglers can actually find both species throughout the entire length of the Illinois, but the numbers vary. There seems to be an imaginary line through the middle of the Peoria Pool with smallmouth to the north and largemouth to the south.

But, this is no hill for the modern Illinois River bass angler. Traveling many miles in sleek boats is common among the legions of bass fishermen.

Bass anglers are now a very mobile bunch. Most are equipped with radios and will regularly pass through the locks to reach better fishing in the next pool.

Though not large by lake standards, river bass are football shaped and extremely hard fighters. The typical keeper-size river largemouth will usually measure between 14 and 15 inches.

In addition, there are some larger fish in the river, but you'll rarely see one weighing over six pounds. A four- to five-pound largemouth is a big fish for the river.

The typical Illinois River bronzeback is a bit smaller. Biologists say the average fish will measure about 12 to 14 inches.

Still, smallmouths weighing up to four pounds are caught this river each year. However, anglers rarely hear of Illinois River smallmouths weighing much more than that.