



Nearly Time For Downstate Sauger

by Lee Keck

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Mention an Illinois sauger and walleye fishing trip and most Illinois anglers automatically assume your plans include an expedition to certain northern waters. Traditionally, the upper reaches of the Mississippi and Illinois rivers, the Rock River

and the Kankakee River have produced most of the state's best action for these species. But, the past few decades have shown downstate anglers wishing to cash in on this action no longer need to venture to the northernmost reaches of the state. In recent years, the lower pools of the Mississippi River have become something of a mecca for anglers in pursuit of these toothy creatures.

The late-winter months seem to offer the best walleye and sauger action in these waters. As winter draws to a close, spawning time for these highly prized sportfish is very near. An instinctive urge to migrate upstream brings concentrations of walleye and sauger to the tailwaters below each navigational dam along the Mississippi River.

During years with normal water conditions, anglers have found the sauger and walleye fishing below Lock and Dams 24 at Clarksville and 25 at Winfield nothing short of superb. So good, in fact, numerous trophy-class sauger and walleye each year have been hauled from these waters.

Though the lower pools have always provided limited fishing opportunities for walleye and sauger, a virtual bonanza was discovered following the recent flood years. Word spread quickly about the excellent action being experienced in these tailwaters.

It was at this point that many anglers began to suspect what fisheries biologists already knew, recent floodwaters had delivered a wealth of new fishing opportunities to the lower pools of the Mississippi River.

The good winter action has since continued. When conditions are right (river at near normal pool), anglers have reported outstanding catches of walleye and sauger from the tailwaters below these lower navigational dams. Two- to three-pound sauger are common with occasional catches of walleye up to seven pounds.

Anglers now begin fishing these waters in early November and enjoy great action until the spring runoff finally forces them to abandon their efforts. Adding to the excitement, the sauger and walleye that he caught are not just small fish.

During the winter months, walleye and sauger seldom venture far from deep water. Most are caught within 12 inches of the bottom. Due to the constant current, a heavy lure is required to stay within the strike zone.

Depth control plays a key role in this type of fishing. There are certain holes below each navigational dam that walleye and sauger find attractive. It is virtually useless to fish very far from these locations and expect to catch anything.

Deep water is the key to most angling success. Many regularly catch fish from depths of 40 feet and even pull occasional saugers from holes more than 60 feet deep.

Generally, a three-quarter-ounce jig works best under normal fishing conditions. In swifter current, anglers must use lures weighing up to one-and one-half ounces.

Bucktail jigs seem to work exceptionally well, but some anglers also use plain, lead head jigs with three to five-inch plastic grubs. Most of the time, they tip the jig with a minnow as an added incentive.

Most critical to success is attaching a stinger hook to the jig. The 'stinger' used by many is a small treble hook attached to the jig by a short monofilament leader. Sauger and walleye are light biting fish and a strike can be difficult to detect when fishing at these

depths. The stinger hook greatly improves the catch ratio.

The trick is to methodically work the deep holes using a vertical presentation. Motoring upstream to the upper reaches of the hole, then slowly drift downstream with the current, vertically jigging the lure just off the bottom.

The strike may feel like nothing more than added weight on the line. The best advice is to set the hook even if you think a fish is only looking at the bait.