

Lake Nokomis Fisheries Update

Like many of you, one of the best things our family did was buy our cabin on Lake Nokomis. We enjoy water sports in the summer, snowmobiling in the winter, and a good cup of coffee on the dock every morning... There is no place I would rather be...

The other activity we really enjoy on Lake Nokomis is fishing. Over the past nine years, we have been blessed with some great fishing. Between 2002-2007, we experienced some really great days of fishing on the lake. We kept a few, released a lot, and we recorded some nice fish on the center post of our cabin. It's an archive of our good days on the water, dating back to 2002 when we bought our place. Walleyes, big perch, a few heart pounding northern and musky strikes, some scattered smallmouth bass, and a few sunfish kept us busy. As with fishing, some days are better than others, but we could always count on a few good days every summer.

Unfortunately, the extended drought and extremely low water levels between 2007-2010 caused a lot of change, and many of you who fish the lake noticed a couple big differences. The first was a lot less target species (walleyes, sunfish, crappies, etc...), and a lot more bullheads. Because of this change, I volunteered to do some homework with our local DNR Fisheries Manager (Dave Seibel) and understand what's exactly going on in the lake.

First off, our lake is a flowage which creates a couple general conditions. The water levels fluctuate throughout the year, which helps some species while hurting some others. Walleyes, northerns, and smallmouth bass usually do well in a flowage because of the amount of underwater structure and changing conditions. On the contrary, panfish (sunfish, crappies, and perch) do worse, because their spawning cycle in the summer coincides with the drawn down of water level in the lake. However, the panfish we do have are usually larger and healthier due to the lack of competition from other small fish. Therefore, in healthy years with solid lake levels, we will typically have a solid walleye, northern, and bass population, and will have a decent amount of panfish throughout the lake.

Unfortunately, with the lower lake levels over the past four years, the summer water temperatures elevated, and an overly successful bullhead hatch occurred. In addition, the traditional panfish hatch was much lower than normal because the abrupt draw down of the lake uncovered many spawn beds prior to the hatch. What we have seen is a bloom of bullheads. Now, while I am not a big fan of bullheads, they do keep the kids happy off the dock during family reunions, and they are one of the preferred forage species (food) for walleyes, muskies, bass, and northerns. Some are OK, but we clearly have too many.

From his experience, the DNR fisheries manager believes that the gamefish are feeding aggressively on the bullheads, resulting in a reduced walleye catch by fisherman. In addition, the bullheads are very opportunistic, so they tend to out-compete other species to live bait, giving the impression that the bullheads are the only fish out there due to their speed to your bobber. However, the reality is the other fish are there, we simply need to rebalance the lake by getting the bullhead population back in control.

Overall, he believes that sustained water levels for the next 2-3 years will let the gamefish feed aggressively on the bullheads, allowing the lake to naturally rebalance. As well, sustained water levels in June and early July would allow for a big natural panfish hatch to occur, which has the potential to re-populate sunfish and crappies in the same timeframe. With panfish, 1-2 good spawn cycles can quickly re-populate the lake. The good news is Lake Nokomis is a healthy body of water with multiple incoming water sources, and has the ability to rebalance itself in 2-3 years if we have a few good years of sustained water levels, especially through the July timeframe.

Better yet, we are probably through the worst of the drought, and the lake is now in the rebound phase. Water levels shot up last July and sustained until freeze-up. We have had solid snowfall this winter, which will allow the lake to start at a healthy level this spring. The high water levels should support healthy spawn cycles for gamefish and panfish, which should start the recovery process in the lake. To ensure it does, the Department of Natural Resources will be doing a fish survey this spring (in 2011), as well as a second survey in the spring of 2012. If the lake continues to recover naturally, they plan to leave it alone. If it appears the lake is still out of balance after the 2012 survey, they will discuss options with the LNCC to artificially stock target species to speed up the recovery. Either way, we will have actual fish count data available so we can make good decisions. Once the survey data is available, we will publish it in this summer's LNCC newsletter.

In closing, I am not a fishing guide or hardcore tournament fisherman, just a family guy who owns a property on Nokomis like all of you. We are looking at developing a "Fisheries Committee" to work with the DNR on fish surveys, options to install a couple fish cribs, and to determine other ways to improve the fishing on Lake Nokomis. If you are interested in getting involved, drop me an email at Bob.Hobson@pepsico.com.

In the end, my goal is to be able to sit on the dock and catch a few sunfish with the kids, do a couple drifts and pick up a walleye or two with friends, and catch a lot fewer bullheads overall. To start, the best way we can all help the lake is to keep only what you plan to eat that day. When the first are biting, keep a few and let the others go. The lake has a little catching up to do after the drought, so every fish that goes back helps. With some sustained water levels, we are only 2-3 years away from the "good ole days."

Robert Hobson
Fisheries Committee Volunteer