

# FISHERIES OVERVIEW

By Greg Power

# 2007



The most common late winter question asked of Game and Fish Department fisheries staff would have to be: How good will fishing be this year?

The itch of open water anglers, especially during bouts of nice weather, becomes extreme in February and early March as spring nears. Expectations are built and

plans made for hitting the nearly 300 North Dakota fishing lakes and reservoirs, and everyone wants to know how good fishing will be. That's part of the fun of fishing – building expectations, planning and anticipation.

Hopefully this issue of *North Dakota OUTDOORS* will provide some additional insight and help build realistic expectations.

Before looking ahead, we first need to review. Fishing this past winter was considerably better compared to the previous season. Ice fishing in 2005-06 was slow not only in North Dakota, but just about everywhere throughout the Great Plains, including Canada. Ice fishing in 2006-07 was not only much better than the year prior, but maybe even a little better than average. Perch opportunities (and good fishing) were fewer, but walleye and pike fishing was pretty good at many lakes scattered around North Dakota.

Not only was ice fishing this past winter respectable, but so was fishing last summer. Lake Sakakawea anglers caught 1 million walleye and harvested 500,000 fish. The

Missouri River provided a harvest of 110,000 walleye. Although not quantified, Devils Lake had fantastic fishing for walleye and northern pike, and at times for white bass and yellow perch. Smaller waters including Jamestown Reservoir, Lake Audubon and Stump Lake produced good results for anglers.

Predicting what fishing will be like in 2007 is comparable to forecasting the weather. A lot of variables go into "good" fishing, including angler expectations. However, there are some general trends worth noting. First, fish populations in most lakes remain relatively strong. While good fish populations do not necessarily translate into good fishing (catching), what is known is that lakes with few fish offer little promise for a successful outing.

Second, obviously fish need water. Unfortunately, water is becoming scarce. Six years of drought has crippled fishing in many counties in southwestern and south central North Dakota. Lakes and reservoirs have either reverted to nothing more than sloughs, or have gone dry. There is a real need for some late winter snow and significant runoff not only in these areas, but also statewide as drought has spread north and east across much of the state.

And last, lower lake elevations teamed with hot weather caused higher than typical fish die-offs in summer. On the flipside, North Dakota waters haven't experienced much for winterkill the past few years because of a lack of snow. Without a heavy blanket of snow, the sun is able to penetrate the ice, allowing underwater plants to produce oxygen.

Walleye angling opportunities in 2007 on the Missouri River System should be good. Devils Lake is in great shape, with good walleye and pike populations awaiting anglers. A sampling of other lakes in good condition for various fish species includes Stump, Audubon, Jamestown, Garrison Diversion Unit Canal lakes, Dry, Antelope, Alkaline, Northgate, Odland, Short Creek, Sheep Creek, Fish Creek, Spiritwood and Goose.

While many anglers believe that since Game and Fish Department fisheries staff work with North Dakota's fishery resources,



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*Mitch Kraft, Minot, with a nice catch of Missouri River walleye. Kraft and other North Dakota anglers hope for similar success in 2007.*

we dictate whether fish will be caught. That's far from the truth. There are things we know, but much we don't. For example:

- We do know going into spring that despite growing drought concerns, most lakes in the state still have healthy fish populations.
- We don't know whether fish will bite for the approximate 200,000 anglers (including children) who will fish North Dakota waters in 2007.
- We do know that access – and the amenities at most of these fishing waters – will be good.
- We don't know what the weather will be like this summer. Will the drought continue? Only time will tell. Such is life in North Dakota where temperature extremes last year varied 150 degrees Fahrenheit.

Most importantly, we know that fishing is a wholesome and relaxing recreational activity everyone should consider. Good numbers of walleye, pike, perch, crappie, trout, bass and other species can be found across the state. The makings for good fishing await anglers.

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*Predicting what the walleye fishing will be like for 2007 is sort of like predicting the weather. To a certain degree, it's anyone's guess.*