



SANDRA JOHNSON

*Tim Johnson,
Bismarck, and
Missy, with a
Missouri
River walleye.*

NORTH DAKOTA FISHING REPORT CARD

By Greg Power

Winter was tough, not only on fish and wildlife, but on anglers who couldn't get on the ice as often as they would have liked.

Still, the entire 2008-09 fishing season can't be judged on the last few months alone. This annual fishing review comes at a good time to look back, kind of like a report card at the end of a school year, to see how our valuable fishing resources are doing.

Habitat (2008 Grade – B-)

Of North Dakota's 285 fishing waters, about 10 failed last year because of a lack of water and/or poor water quality. The amount of water in the state's lakes is weather driven, and the eastern half of the state is doing much better than the western side. Because of a 5-8-year drought, we continue to slowly lose lakes west of a line running from northwestern to south central North Dakota.

On the other hand, lakes in the east, especially around the Devils Lake region and in the extreme southeastern portion of the state, continue to thrive thanks to very wet conditions. In 2008 we even added a few new lakes in this portion of the state.

In terms of water quality, North Dakota maintains a passing grade. We've seen some improvements in the last two decades, fueled by changes in farming practices.

Future challenges – Mother Nature dictates how much and where we receive water. Going into spring 2009, there is a good chance for improvement in this area, as most of the state had good snowpack, thus increasing the potential for beneficial runoff.

Regarding water quality, we will be challenged in the next year as a lot of good cover buffering lake shores and watersheds has disappeared due to the loss of Conservation Reserve Program acres. The Game and Fish Department's Save Our Lakes program will continue to address lake problems where possible.

Access and Opportunity (2008 Grade – A-)

In 2008, two dozen lakes received new fishing piers and/or docks in an effort to get shore anglers out past the weedlines.

More community lakes have also come on line with the intent of providing fishing opportunities closer to towns, big and small. River access improved a bit, although there is still room for improvement. Lastly, approximately 15 lakes across the state received new and/or improved boat ramps in 2008, thus increasing boating access.

Future challenges – Ongoing excess nutrients and aging issues at most lakes will increase the need for more access beyond the weedlines. In addition, Missouri River System boat ramps have faced years of radical water fluctuations and many are in need of major reconstruction. Some of these access sites will be addressed in 2009.

Water levels also have the potential to adversely affect Devils Lake shore and boating access if the lake approaches 1,450 feet above mean sea level. Lastly, the Department will continue to provide input to other planning and regulating entities to increase fishing access.

Fish Abundance and Health (2008 Grade – B+)

Many anglers have said in recent years that the good days of fishing are now. From a historical perspective, they may be right. North Dakotans have been very fortunate for the past 10 years or more for the number of varied and quality fishing lakes available.

Of particular interest is the number of relatively new walleye lakes scattered across central and eastern North Dakota. Tens of thousands of walleyes were harvested last summer in lakes that generally did not support much of a fishery at the beginning of the decade.

Unfortunately, trout and panfish populations have experienced some difficult times, in part due to excessive mortality caused by double-crested cormorants in 2008. Northern pike numbers have declined, but are still strong in many waters, especially in eastern North Dakota. Channel catfish, largemouth and smallmouth bass and white bass populations continue to thrive in several water bodies.

As has been the trend for decades, fishing on two of the "big three" fisheries remains first-rate. The Missouri River/Lake Oahe and Devils Lake provided outstanding fishing in 2008, while Lake Sakakawea continued to endure game fish in poorer condition.



FRED RYCKMAN

Improving access on the Missouri River System and other North Dakota waters is a priority with the North Dakota Game and Fish Department.

Future challenges – The state of Sakakawea’s fishery is well documented. What is badly needed is more water and a good rainbow smelt (forage) year-class. This year has the potential to offer both.

Another issue that likely will need attention shortly after ice-out is restocking lakes where winterkill occurred. As of mid-winter, easily a half-dozen and possibly many more lakes are candidates to suffer winterkill, given the heavy snowpack and water quality profiles.

Management (2008 Grade – A-)

Looking back at 2008, stocking goals for most lakes were met for most species, and in a few cases, goals were exceeded. Once again, fish production at Garrison Dam National Fish Hatchery was outstanding. Approximately 8 million walleye and 1.5 million northern pike were stocked in North Dakota waters in 2008. The only stocking shortcoming was the lack of yellow perch fingerlings, especially those targeted for the final installment of a three-year stocking evaluation at Devils Lake.

All of the higher quality (priority) lakes were sampled by fisheries biologists for both adult fish population status and reproduction success. These surveys help fisheries managers determine what, if any, management actions are required. Specific studies were conducted on a few water bodies, including some creel surveys, a river/stream fish survey, and long-term paddlefish monitoring. Regulation evaluations were ongoing in select lakes, and a few “new” lakes were surveyed and landowner access easements obtained.

Future challenges – Nearly 12 million walleye, pike and yellow perch fingerlings have been requested for 2009 stocking; all efforts will be made to meet this request. Aquatic nuisance species measures will continue to receive attention in 2009, as will the Devils Lake carp issue.

Addressing winterkill lakes, especially if they are numerous, will be required. Dam repair and in-lake/watershed water quality issues will also be a priority, as many dams and reservoirs are aging.

We understand Mother Nature has been very kind to most of North Dakota’s fishing resources in the

This youngster inspects his jig between casts on Pipestem Reservoir in Stutsman County.



BRANDON KRAZ



FRED RYCKMAN

North Dakota's paddlefish snagging season opens May 1. Based on overall harvest, the season can close early, which has been the case the last five years. This photo was taken at Sundheim Park, along the west bank of the Yellowstone River.

past 10-15 years, and as we enter 2009, we hope to build on this foundation. Realistically framing angler expectations with the different fisheries' abilities to produce fish is the ongoing goal of our fisheries staff.

In its simplest form, we recognize a passing grade will be achieved if we can maintain fishing as a wholesome and relaxing recreational activity. Given the current scale and depth of the nation's economic woes, fishing seems like a pretty wonderful distraction. With good numbers of walleye, pike, perch, crappie, trout, bass and other species found across the state, the makings of a healthy distraction await.

GREG POWER is the Game and Fish Department's fisheries chief.



CRAIG BIRKLE

Most anglers would agree that good old days of fishing in North Dakota are today.