

Winter is top time for fishing at Rend Lake

by Lee Keck

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Fishing usually falls off sharply at most locations as winter shows its ugly and cold face. However, it seems to be just the opposite at southern Illinois' Rend Lake. In fact, fishing during the winter months seems to produce some of the biggest fish of the year.

Mike Hooe is the fisheries manager in charge of the sprawling Rend Lake complex, each year he is charged with announcing the coming year's fishing prospects for this location. While the outlook has been bright for the past few years, this year looks even better. And, this winter could see plenty of trophy-sized catches.

As an example, several decades ago crappie were among the most popular species at this lake. In fact, crappie have always been an important species here and anglers came from several nearby states to enjoy the excellent action for this species.

Then, came a couple of decades of anglers catching mostly smaller fish. This sent most crappie fishermen to other more productive waters. However, that has now all changed and the quality crappie fishing is back and better than ever.

Hooe's 2017 Rend Lake fishing prospects lists his outlook as "much improved for certain species!" According to the report, the crappie population has changed very little from last year. This is definitely something that will benefit winter anglers at this lake.

"Best of all, the size structure of the population should improve even further in the coming year," he said. "Crappie reproduction was strong in 2016 for the fourth consecutive year."

However, data from the fall 2017 trapnet survey show the size structure of the population remained stable from last year. In 2015, the portion of the crappie population comprised of fish over 10 inches in length rose to 14 percent, while the percentage of fish eight-to-10 inches in length improved.

While the larger sized crappie distribution is still below the target of 20 percent of the total population, it is improved significantly from the previous year, increasing by 40 percent.

Equally important is the 58 percent increase in the number of eight-to-10 inch crappie," he added. "Although still high, the improved size structure of the population suggests mortality and growth rates are both high enough to prevent the population from stunting."

He says with stable growth rates, the size structure of the population should improve even further in the coming year.

This winter, according to Hooe, crappie measuring ten- to 12-inches in length and averaging 1/2 to over one pound will be abundant enough to provide some quality angling opportunities. He says crappie eight-to-ten inches in length are also abundant and will also contribute to the creel.

Unfortunately, the number of crappie over 12 inches in length remains stable and relatively low. And, the condition of all sizes of crappie remains near the low end of the target range.

Still, crappie reproduction was strong in 2016 for the fourth consecutive year. The length and creel regulations enacted in 2002 have had a significant impact on the size structure of the population.

“In the more-than-15 years since the regulations went into effect, the crappie population has improved dramatically and remains relatively stable,” he added. “Regulations remain unchanged in 2017, but the population will be monitored closely.”

It is largemouth bass where winter anglers will see the greatest improvement lies. Hooe says the size structure of the bass population has improved over the past year. He says that data from the most recent population survey show all population indices still remained within the target goals and the condition of all sizes of fish is excellent.

“The percentage of the population exceeding the 14-inch minimum length limit increased 36 percent,” he said. “Currently 38 percent of the adult bass population exceeds the 14-inch minimum length limit.”

He also said the excellent bass body condition is the direct result of another large shad population. With the abundant food supply, he feels bass growth rates should be excellent and this should help to improve the size structure of the population even further in the coming year.

Winter fishing at Rend Lake is typically best during those warmer days. It seems like the warming effects of the southern Illinois sun awakens these fish and action can often be fast and furious.