

# Another Big Year for Rend Lake Anglers

by Lee Keck

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If predictions by Illinois Department of Natural Resource's (IDNR) fisheries biologist Shawn Hirst prove to be true, anglers heading to southern Illinois Rend Lake are likely to have one of their best years ever.

As 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.

As an example, several decades ago crappie were among the most popular species at this lake. While crappie have always been an important species here, 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.

Hirst's 2020 Rend Lake fishing prospects lists his outlook as "excellent!" According to the report, the crappie population continues to do well.

However, data from the fall trapnet survey shows fewer fish, but this is not necessarily a bad thing. He says the 2019 catch rate for crappie (69 fish/net) was below the five year average catch rate of 79 fish/net.

"Still, of the crappie collected during the netting survey, 35 percent were over 10 inches and another 30 percent were between 9-10 inches," he added. "Of the crappie collected during the netting survey, 93 percent were white crappie."

He feels the fishing prospects for crappie remains excellent for the coming year. And he looks for bass fishing at Rend Lake should be average for 2020.

"During last fall's survey, bass were collected at a rate of 67 fish per hour which represents an almost 76 percent increase from the previous year's rate," he explained. "However, the lake water level was 405.7 feet which was only 0.7 feet above normal pool compared to 3.7 feet above normal pool level during the previous survey."

Historically the survey catch rates decline when the water level is significantly above normal levels. The average catch rate during the last five surveys is 56 fish per hour. Currently 22 percent of the bass population exceeds the 14-inch minimum length limit and 12 percent are greater than 15 inches. No spotted bass were collected in the 2019 survey.

"The main problem with largemouth bass in Rend Lake appears to be reproduction," he added.

"Reproduction is dependent on spring water levels which can vary dramatically at Rend Lake."

He says this results in the need for an annual supplemental largemouth bass stocking to offset poor reproduction years. Almost 397,000 bass fingerlings have been stocked in Rend Lake in the last ten years including 28,792 bass fingerlings last year. It appears that the 2018 and 2019 largemouth bass year-classes are above average and should enter the 14-inch creel in the next few years.

According to Hirst six hybrid striped bass (14-15 inches, 1-2 pounds) were collected in the fall survey. The number of hybrid striped bass remains low (none collected in 2017).

Since the stocking program was revived in 2008 a total of 210,981 hybrid stripers have been stocked into Rend Lake. Establishing an annual or semi-annual stocking regime is essential to developing and maintaining a quality fishery for this species.

He also says the 2019 catch rate for white bass was ten fish per hour which was more than double the five-year average catch rate of four fish per hour. Anglers can expect the catchable population in the coming year to be largely comprised of fish 12-16 inches and weighing 0.6-1.5 lbs.