

Prospects Hot for Big Lake Cats

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If predictions by Illinois Department of Natural Resource's fisheries biologists prove to be true, catfish anglers heading to Carlyle Lake are likely to have one of their best years ever.

“The channel catfish population at Carlyle Lake remains good,” said fisheries biologists. “Catfish catches during the fall sampling were good and these very same fish should again provide good angling.”

To say this year will be better than last is to make quite a statement. Last year, catfish anglers enjoyed phenomenal success. Still, biologists must look to the future before making their predictions.

“There is still a number of large fish in the population and these should provide excellent angling for big fish,” they said.

They say result from the population survey show catfish in the four- to eight-pound class were quite common. And, they also observed plenty of smaller three- to four-pounders.

“Some of the larger fish weighed seven, eight and ten pounds,” they added. “And, the condition appeared to be good for all.”

Carlyle Lake is also famous for producing monster flathead catfish. Unfortunately, last last year’s team did not pick up many of the flatheads. They said the flatheads appeared to be more scattered and difficult to sample.

But, they were not all that concerned about the missing flathead catfish.

“Flatheads typically exhibit exceptionally good reproduction and growth in Carlyle Lake,” they said. “And, we generally pick up many young fish during our surveys.”

They say Carlyle Lake flatheads should range between fish weighing less than a pound to those tipping the scales at more than 50 pounds.

The news from southern Illinois Rend Lake may even be brighter. Here, biologists are predicting another fabulous year for anglers seeking channel catfish.

“Natural reproduction and recruitment continue to be very strong, and are responsible for maintaining the large population in the lake,” said fisheries biologist Shaun Hirst.

He said the catch rate for channel catfish continues to be quite good. In fact, the population is now at one of the highest levels in more than a decade.

“The condition of these fish is fair and growth rates are good,” he added. “Channel catfish averaging one- to three-pounds should be abundant and larger fish up to six pounds common.”

“As a result, much of the increase was comprised of smaller fish,” he explained. “Due to these large year classes of smaller fish, the size structure of the population will likely decrease in 2021, but should continue to provide good fishing opportunities.”

Anglers can expect large numbers of fish under five pounds, with occasional flatheads up to 20 pounds. Best of all, the large number of smaller fish should keep the population stable and provide excellent fishing in years to come.

Unfortunately, the news regarding Lake Shelbyville’s catfish is not nearly as bright. Here, fisheries biologist Mike Mounce says only a limited number of channel catfish were collected in the 2020 population survey.

“The largest of those was still plenty big,” he said. “And, relatively few flatheads were collected,” he said. “Despite several recent long-duration summer floods, some coupled with turbid water, catfish recruitment at Lake Shelbyville and the Kaskaskia River above the lake has been poor.”

He says reports of moderate catches have come from fishermen on occasion. However, the fishing prospects for channel and flathead catfish at Lake Shelbyville in 2021 are only fair, at best.

Fortunately, each of these lakes hold promise of good fishing for several other species, as well. For instance, Rend Lake looks particularly good for crappie anglers and Lake Shelbyville may be the top choice for largemouth bass fanciers.

Therefore, anglers seeking other species also have choices. Catfish will certainly not be the only big lake species providing good action this year.