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DNR: Lake sturgeon continue recovery

Study shows Rainy River and Lake of the Woods population benefiting from cleaner water, effective regulations, vigilant enforcement

JOURNAL STAFF REPORT

A recent lake sturgeon population study in Lake of the Woods and the Rainy River illustrates the slow, steady sturgeon population recovery owing to cleaner water, effective fishing regulations and vigilant enforcement – a success story that one day will allow anglers the realistic expectation of catching 100-pound sturgeon.

"This strategy has worked very well," said Henry Drewes, northwest region fisheries manager with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, in a news release. "The fact that the lake sturgeon population has continued to expand in numbers, as well as in size and age distribution, under ever-increasing angling pressure is credit to those who worked together to bring about this recovery."

The population study assessed and estimated the number of lake sturgeon longer than 40 inches, part of an effort to gain more information and a better understanding of lake sturgeon status, population dynamics and movement patterns. Sturgeon longer than 40 inches can be sampled with confidence using available gear, and at that size the fish are approaching sexual maturity.

There are an estimated 92,000 lake sturgeon longer than 40 inches in the system, which compares to an estimated 59,000 fish in 2004 and 17,000 in 1989, said the news release.

"This is another high point in a continuing recovery success story," said Phil Talmage, Baudette area fisheries supervisor with the DNR. "Results of the latest study show there's a greater number of large lake sturgeon in the population than in 2004, when a similar study was conducted."

In mid-April, 2014, in cooperation with the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources offices in Kenora, Fort Frances and Thunder Bay and the Rainy River First Nations, DNR fisheries biologists from Baudette and International Falls began setting nets to capture and tag lake sturgeon. The study area included spawning sites on tributaries, all 82 river-miles of the Rainy River below the International Falls dam, Fourmile Bay, and a large portion of Big Traverse Bay on Lake of the Woods.

From June through mid-September, biologists used gill nets to recapture sturgeon at randomly selected sites on the southeastern portion of Lake of the Woods, and the entire length of the Rainy River.

"This was a very ambitious project given the size of the study area, the nomadic nature of lake sturgeon and the sheer number of fish required to make a statistically valid estimate," Talmage said in the release. "We are extremely pleased with the results of this effort."

Anglers who were fishing for lake sturgeon in the study area during the tagging phase helped by allowing biologists to tag sturgeon they caught. With angler help, DNR biologists tagged 1,291 lake sturgeon longer than 40 inches, then used that count and data obtained from the recapture efforts to estimate the total population at 92,000.

"We appreciate the cooperation from anglers who allowed DNR staff in boats to tag and release their fish," Talmage said. "These folks were a valuable part of our research efforts."

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Alisha Hallam, DNR fisheries specialist from Aitkin, and Tim Serre, DNR fisheries intern, pull in a lake sturgeon caught in a gill net. The sturgeon was tagged and released as part of a population estimate study conducted this past spring on Lake of the Woods and Rainy River.

Recovery, angling opportunities

The outlook for lake sturgeon hasn't always been so positive, said the news release. Over-harvest through the late 1800s and early 1900s decimated the lake sturgeon population in Lake of the Woods and the Rainy River. Despite reduced harvest, poor water quality played a major role in limiting sturgeon recovery.

Water-quality improvements directly linked to clean water regulations beginning in the 1960s set the stage for restoration of this unique fishery. Better water quality in the Rainy River initiated a dramatic response in lake sturgeon reproduction and survival, which became the basis for population recovery.

"The recovery of the Rainy River is one of the best examples of how clean water regulation positively influenced angler opportunities in Minnesota," Drewes said. "This is truly a unique opportunity that continues to improve for anglers."

Based on the research findings and the success of the recovery program, lake sturgeon populations should remain strong and anglers can expect more opportunities to catch larger fish in the future, according to the news release.

"One day, in the not so distant future, lake sturgeon in the 100-pound class will become a realistic expectation for lake sturgeon anglers," Drewes said.

To find more information on sturgeon fishing, including seasons and limits, see www.mndnr.gov/fishmn/sturgeon. More information on sturgeon in Lake of the Woods and the Rainy River can be found at www.mndnr.gov/areas/fisheries/baudette.

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VNP names a new chief ranger

JOURNAL STAFF REPORT

Voyageurs National Park has hired Ben Welch for the chief ranger position.

Welch replaces Chuck Remus who faced mandatory law enforcement retirement in late October. Remus will stay on in the new position of recreation fee specialist at the park, said park officials in a news release.

Ben Welch

"Ben brings a long list of experience, and the right characteristics to help the park and our communities continue to work towards successes," said VNP Superintendent Mike Ward.

Starting in 2002 as a Student Conservation Association intern at Arches National Park, Welch has worked at Capitol Reef, Theodore Roosevelt and Everglades national parks as an interpretive ranger. As a visitor and resource protection ranger, Welch has worked at Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, Redwood, and Yellowstone national parks. Most recently, he served as the east district ranger in Big Bend National Park.

Welch is looking forward to the opportunity to serve the visitors and other park stakeholders of Voyageurs National Park and to serve the community of International Falls and other communities of northern Minnesota, said the news release.

Although Welch said he thoroughly enjoys his work with the National Park Service, he is happiest when spending time with his wife Nancy and their 2-year-old daughter, Marin, and 1-month-old daughter, Sheridan.

"We look forward to welcoming Ben and his family to Voyageurs and our surrounding communities," said Ward in the release.

Remus served in the ranger division for more than 22-years at Voyageurs National Park, said Ward in the release.

"And while we will miss him in that position, we are very happy to keep his expertise and his great relationships working for the par," said Ward.

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Breakfast Specials
Mon.-Sat. $6.29 • Sunday $7.29
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Thurs. Blueberry Pancakes w/eggs & sausage or bacon
Fri. Biscuits & Gravy w/eggs & hashbrowns
Sat. Cinnamon Swirl French Toast with ham & eggs
Sun. Blueberry Cream Cheese Crepes with eggs & ham
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VNP CONDITIONS REPORT

For the first time in several years, ice conditions have allowed park staff to extend the ice road to the mouth of Cranberry Bay. From the Rainy Lake Visitor Center to the mouth of Cranberry Bay is seven miles, one-way. The road follows the purple snowmobile trail along Rainy Lake's Inside Channel and meanders its way between the many islands. When returning from Cranberry Bay, make the loop around Dryweed Island.

Cranberry Bay is a great location to leave your vehicle and experience winter in the park. Have a snowmobile? You can pick up the purple trail a short distance from the Cranberry Bay parking lot. Like to ice fish? Search out an old hot spot for ice fishing, now more accessible than in past years.

Don't have snowshoes or skis of your own? Borrow some for the day at the Rainy Lake Visitor Center, free of charge, though donations are welcome. At the end of the Rainy Lake Ice Road at Cranberry Bay, snowshoe around the islands and north shore of the Kabetogama peninsula. As Rainy Lake slowly froze, waves splashing against north facing shoreline created intricate ice formations against the rocks and trees.

For a longer adventure, trek east across the mouth of the bay and visit the Harry Oveson Fish Camp (about two miles one-way from the Cranberry Bay parking lot). Bring a map and prepare for any weather. Built in 1959, this location preserves the commercial fishing legacy of the region, and visitors can wander amid Harry's ice house, fish house and two-roomed home. Winter in a place like Harry Oveson Fish Camp reminds us of the people who worked the land, enjoyed the land, and called this place home across different seasons.

The most up to date winter trail conditions are available at www.nps.gov/voya.