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OUTDOORS

DNR fisheries to hold input meeting for Mukooda, Little Trout lakes

DNR STAFF REPORT

DNR fisheries to hold public input meeting for Mukooda, Little Trout lakes

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources will hold an open house to provide information and receive public input on the proposed special regulation to close Mukooda and Little Trout lakes to lake trout harvest.

The open house will be held from 7-8 p.m. Sept. 24 at the Crane Lake Fire Hall, at 7400 Handberg Road, Crane Lake.

An emergency closure was implemented in January on Mukooda Lake to protect the remaining numbers of a unique strain of lake trout from overharvest. The proposed special regulation would make

“Lake trout abundance for both lakes has been declining for several years and has gotten to the point where we no longer feel the population can support a harvest season.”



Kevin Peterson
International Falls area fisheries supervisor

the temporary measure permanent on Mukooda Lake and extend the same regulation to Little Trout Lake. Both lakes are located within Voyageurs National Park.

The proposal to close Mukooda and Little Trout lakes is based on creel survey estimates and observations of fishing pressure.

“Lake trout abundance

for both lakes has been declining for several years and has gotten to the point where we no longer feel the population can support a harvest season,” said International Falls area fisheries supervisor, Kevin Peterson. “The lake’s habitat supports slow natural reproduction and efforts to boost the lake trout population through stocking have

not been successful.”

DNR staff will continue to monitor fish populations in the lakes until improvement allows lake trout harvest to resume.

Catch and release angling for lake trout is still allowed during the regular angling seasons. Anglers will still be allowed to transport lake trout legally taken from other waters across Mukooda Lake as long as they do not stop to fish.

Persons interested in providing written comments on the proposal can send them to DNR Area Fisheries Office, 392 Highway 11 East, International Falls, MN 56649, or by email to kevin.peterson@state.mn.us. Questions can be directed to Kevin Peterson at 218-286-5220. Comments will be accepted through Oct. 6.

In search of nature’s undertakers

BY HARLAND HIEMSTRA
DNR Information Officer

Chris Smith is on a hunt for buried treasure.

A short hike off a road in the Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge, near Zimmerman, he drops to his knees next to a hole in the ground that’s been covered with chicken wire, plywood, and a concrete weight. As he removes the makeshift cover, a sickeningly sweet stench wafts out. Smith, a nongame wildlife biologist with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, wrinkles his nose as he reaches into a buried five-gallon plastic bucket and pulls out the deflated carcasses of two very dead, very rotten rats.

Secured from a local reptile food vendor and aged several days in the back of his work truck, the pungent rodents are bait for the objects of Smith’s search: the American burying beetle, a federally listed endangered species that used to be found across the eastern half of the country. Now it’s known to survive in only five states. Black and orange and sometimes nearly 2 inches long, it hasn’t been seen in Minnesota since the late 1960s.

The ripe carrion Smith buried the day before in what’s known as a “pitfall trap” attracts a variety of burying beetles from anywhere within about a half-mile radius. He sifts

through a shallow layer of sand at the bottom of the bucket, removing beetles one by one, calling off their scientific names so that his colleague, Erica Hoaglund, can enter the information into an electronic tablet. “Nicrophorus tomentosus, Nicrophorus orbicollis, marginatus, another tomentosus...”

The burying beetles often are found in even numbers – an adult male and an adult female — due to a type of hands-on parenting that’s rare in the insect world. The parents work together to bury the dead animal to get it away from competing scavengers. They chew up a portion of the carcass and form it into a large ball to make a nest for the larvae, which they feed by regurgitating chewed-up, liquefied flesh – much as bird parents feed their chicks.

Why, one might ask, spend time and money studying a critter seemingly made to tickle a person’s gag reflex? Because, as disgusting as they may seem, detritivores such as burying beetles – nature’s undertakers – play an important role in an ecosystem, breaking down dead animals to recycle nutrients and energy. And it’s that ecosystem and its health that’s really the main point of concern.

“The biggest reason to study the entire ecosystem as opposed to just charismatic mega-fauna is to

understand how ecosystems function, and how all the parts work together,” Hoaglund says. “What we want to preserve and protect is these ecosystems, not just a particular species.”

If an organism goes extinct, more may be lost than just that particular species. One theory regarding the American burying beetle, for instance, surmises that its decline is at least partially tied to the extinction of the passenger pigeon, which may have been just the right size to serve as a host, and it existed in large numbers, making it a readily available food source. In another example of ecological interdependence close to home for Minnesotans, the red parasol moss last year was added to the state’s list of endangered species because it grows only in old moose dung, and moose populations are declining.

Hoaglund explains ecosystem diversity by referring to a ladder: lose one or two rungs, and the ladder still might be serviceable. Lose a few more, and the ladder will fall apart. The biological equivalent is the extinction of too many species and ecological collapse.

“Even if you don’t value the creepy crawly things, something you do value may depend on them,” Hoaglund says. “Flowers need insects for pollination; songbirds rely on bugs for food.”

So far Smith and Hoag-

lund haven’t turned up any American burying beetles at any of the pitfall traps they’ve buried around the Sherburne refuge and the adjacent Sand Dunes State Forest. They may, however, have found a species of burying beetle never before reported in Minnesota at another central Minnesota survey site at Camp Ripley, near Little Falls; the discovery is pending positive identification. Their work also is providing information on what other types of burying beetles are present in the area, baseline information that would be needed should it be decided to try re-introducing the rare bugs into Minnesota, as has been done in a few other states.

Both Hoaglund and Smith work for the DNR’s Nongame Wildlife Program, which aims to protect, maintain, enhance, and restore native nongame wildlife resources, helping more than 700 species of Minnesota wildlife thrive. It is funded largely by donations, especially those made when Minnesotans file their state income taxes and voluntarily contribute to the program by checking a special donation box, a feature often referred to as the “chickadee check-off.”


More information about the DNR Nongame Wildlife Program can be found online.




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