

LOCALNEWS

High water changes water use

Fish research, boating impacted

BY LAUREL BEAGER
Editor

Despite high waters on area lakes and rivers, anglers are giving it a go and finding the fish are biting. Kevin Peterson, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources area fisheries supervisor in International Falls, said this week the high water changes just about every aspect of water use in Borderland. Some boat ramps are closed or difficult to maneuver; debris is floating; and lack of traditional landmarks make travel tricky.

The high water has also forced the DNR staff to change the way the normal spring field work is handled. “Some of the work we do is close to the shoreline, and the shoreline is in a different place now,” he said.

Electrofishing last week on Rainy Lake was successful at sampling bass, but had to be conducted in places that may normally be above water, he said. However, knowing how the spring flooding will impact fish won’t be known for some time, he said.

“We’re really in uncharted waters, no pun intended,” he said. “The lake has not been this high since 1950, and we could test the 1950 flood if it keeps raining.”

However, he said fish could benefit from the flood. “It seems like with all the additional shallow areas that certainly warm up a little quicker and with some of the nutrients there flushed into the lake — all that will probably make for a pretty good growing season for fish,” Peterson said.

The whole aquatic food web appears to have kicked in following a quick warm up around Memorial Day, which followed a late ice out and late, cool spring temperatures. “But then the water came so fast and now there is no way of knowing (the true impact),” he said. “There are probably winners and

losers.”

The historic flooding will keep a lot of people busy for some time analyzing the impacts, he said. “The highs and lows help you compare, contrast and evaluate,” he said.

Peterson said DNR staff will begin shoreline seining in July to sample fish hatched in the spring. “We will begin as soon as the weather allows us to and that will give us our first indication of this year’s production,” he said.

That sampling is normally conducted on sand beaches on Rainy and Kabetogama lakes. Finding beaches that are not under water may be a challenge, he said. Local DNR staff will have a better sense of the success of this spring’s walleye and northern pike hatch, incubation and nursery periods at the end of July, he said.

Fishing, boating Anglers are reporting success for their efforts, he said. Since the walleye opener in May, Peterson said he’s been hearing good reports about Kabetogama Lake and other places.

“For folks that can get out and battle the conditions, it’s been good, but it’s just a real inconvenience for anglers, business owners and just about everybody,” he said. Even at resorts where visitors must pull their boats from the water every day because of dock damage and water issues, fish are being sought and caught. But the high water has brought all kinds of navigational hazards on the lakes and rivers, he said.

He reminded boaters No Wake Zones have been established on all lakes and rivers in Koochiching County to protect shorelines and sandbagged dikes protecting property. That means a boat may not travel at a speed that leaves a wake within 600 feet of the shore-

line. The high water makes lake travel difficult, he said. “Those of us that spend a lot of time on the lake have these little landmarks — certain rocks that you know. And a lot of rocks are not visible now,” he said. He urged boaters to be aware the shoreline is now closer than it was because of the high water. “There are new hazards and old hazards you can’t see,” he said.

The high water and cool, cloudy weather has kept water temperatures from warming as they normally would. He urged people to wear life jackets when in boats.

“The water is still cold enough that if you go in unexpectedly, you will have that involuntary gasp reflex,” he warned.

He experienced that reflex first hand recently when water edged over his waders, he said. “It really is involuntary,” he said. “If your head is underwater and that happens you’re going to drown. People should always wear a life jacket in these conditions. It really could save your life. It’s really a simple thing.”

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Mike Ward
VNP Superintendent

tours because we have to go slow not to create a wake,” Ward said. “And that’s difficult to do in a large boat. We’re trying to be sensitive to people’s property and we had one complaint.”

Two research projects in the park may be affected by the high water, but that will be determined by how long the water levels stay high. The rest of the projects are going along fine, he said. The annual eagle tagging work has been completed, he said.

The historic flood of 2014 comes at the end of the 15-year study of the rule curves established by the International Joint Commission. He said years of drought and flood make it difficult to weigh the changes the modified rule curve may have influenced.

More than 20 studies are ongoing in an effort to determine the impact of the last rule curve modification, and 18 of those studies have occurred in the last three years in the park, which Ward called impressive.

“We’re still giving tours, but that’s difficult and people are seeing less on the

well all the way up to the high water and closure of some of the sites, he said. A few people experienced a few issues, but park staff received a lot of positive comments about people reserving sites, he said. The 30 sites in the system — 15 on each basin — were about 80 percent full. “That’s how it’s supposed to work,” he said, laughing at the irony. “It did really work well at the end of the reservation period. The only negative comments at the beginning were that we didn’t get it open until April 1.”

Ward encourages campers to contact the park about information on camping in a specific area. “We want people to have a good experience even with this going on,” he said. “And I hear the fishing is going well.”

Other issues Meanwhile, he said the amount of damage to campsites and docks in the park won’t be known until the water recedes. “I suspect quite a bit of damage, as other people are experiencing,” Ward said.

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Flood making waves at VNP

BY LAUREL BEAGER
Editor

For Voyageurs National Park, the good news is the first summer of its campsite reservation and fee program went fairly well.

The bad news is flooding required most of the money to be returned as about 40 campsites — some on the system — were closed due to the high water. Campsites have submerged docks with few safe places left to land a boat.

VNP Superintendent Mike Ward said he left Borderland when ice covered park lakes to serve as acting deputy for the Midwest Region of the National Park Service in Omaha, Neb. He returned recently to find the lakes open, but wider and deeper because of the flooding.

The impact of the flood on the system was a bit disappointing, he said.

“We were really shooting for an amount of money (from the system) that would get us the ability to be really ready for next year in terms of moving all sites to the system,” Ward said. “We wanted to make sure there were no glitches and make sure it’s working right, but now it’s difficult to get information to folks that we’ve closed the sites and we need to get money back to them.”

Ward said some people are frustrated by the closure of their campsites and the return of their money. But he said safety concerns a major issue in the park.

The system worked fairly

well all the way up to the high water and closure of some of the sites, he said. A few people experienced a few issues, but park staff received a lot of positive comments about people reserving sites, he said. The 30 sites in the system — 15 on each basin — were about 80 percent full. “That’s how it’s supposed to work,” he said, laughing at the irony. “It did really work well at the end of the reservation period. The only negative comments at the beginning were that we didn’t get it open until April 1.”

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