

Why the elusive walleye is Minnesota's 'holy grail' of fish

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This summer, when the DNR shut down the walleye season on Lake Mille Lacs, the move sparked a crisis in the area's resort economy and an uproar in the angling community.

What exactly is it about walleye that drives Minnesota anglers into such a tizzy? There's not a simple answer.

Reason No. 1, said longtime Mille Lacs fishing guide Dickie Gadbois: It tastes really good.

"I don't care where you go in the United States," Gadbois said. "Walleye is on the menu. You don't see bass on the menu."

But it's not just the eating. Bragging rights are also involved, said Ben Kellin, who owns Ben's Bait and Tackle in Grand Rapids.

"People fish for a little glam, you know, and walleye is our glam fish," he said.

Guide Tony Roach said that's partly because walleye can be elusive. So there's a certain mystique about catching them, "especially if you're a kid growing up in Minnesota or in the Midwest.

"Walleye is kind of the holy grail of fish. They're challenging at times. There are times where they just almost become ghosts in the lake, where they're just really hard to find."

After a successful day of fishing on a small lake near Mille Lacs, Miranda Forsythe, of Council Bluffs, Iowa, said she'd just wanted to catch some fish on her vacation. But her husband, David, wanted walleye.

"He had heard they were bigger up here than where we're from," she said. "We fish a lot of farm ponds, so we're used to seeing a lot smaller fish than we caught here."

The walleye isn't unique to Minnesota. It's been stocked across the lower 48 states. Its native range spreads south all the way to Alabama. But it's concentrated in the Upper Midwest and Canada.

And in Minnesota, in particular, there are several shallow, windswept lakes like Mille Lacs and Vermilion and Leech that provide ideal habitat for walleye. Roach said they're known as "walleye factories."

"Year after year, they have the potential to produce millions and millions of walleye," he said.

"And that's something that you just don't see across the country."

Add up all these factors — the taste, the challenge, the quality of the fishing in Minnesota — and the result is walleye mania. When asked, many anglers can't even name a reason for their obsession with walleye. It's just what they've always fished for.

Make way for walleye

It hasn't always been that way, said Chris Kavanaugh, who oversees the DNR fisheries office in Grand Rapids.

"You look back in the '40s and '50s, northern pike were much more sought-after," Kavanaugh said. "But walleyes in the late '50s and early '60s started to get real popular with folks."

What changed was technology. A new, nearly invisible monofilament fishing line was much tougher for fish to see.

But the real game-changer was something called the "Fish Lo-K-Tor," a rudimentary fish finder released in 1957. Suddenly, the savory-yet-slippery walleye was within the average angler's reach — and its popularity soared.

In 1965, the Minnesota Legislature declared the walleye the state fish.

Now, a half-century later, anglers keep 3.5 million walleye every year. Nearly twice as many people fish for walleye in Minnesota as for other species. And they spend nearly twice the amount of time on the water.

To meet demand, the state tries to help nature out by stocking walleye throughout the state. This spring, the DNR hatched nearly 300 million walleye eggs and released the tiny fry — each only a third of an inch long — into 272 lakes.

Later this year, the agency plans to release 140,000 pounds of walleye fingerlings — walleye raised in rearing ponds until they reach 4 to 6 inches in length.

This massive effort, just for walleye, costs more than \$3.5 million a year. That's nearly half the state's total budget for stocking fish. And despite all that money spent, Kavanaugh acknowledged that the effect on the state's total fishery is limited.

"On a statewide basis, if you were to look at all the walleyes caught in Minnesota, about 85 percent of them are naturally produced," Kavanaugh said. "Only about 15 percent were the result of stocking."

Stocking works best in lakes that lack good habitat for spawning. It has also helped rebuild walleye populations on Red and Leech Lakes. So why not just stock more fish in more lakes?

"Because it can actually make things worse," Kavanaugh said — in two ways. First, stocking can displace fish with genetics native to a particular lake. Then there's something he calls "density dependence."

He explained it this way: "The more you put in, the less you get out. I use the analogy of a lush green lawn. Does it really make any sense to throw more seed out there? But if you've got a lawn with bare spots, there it makes sense."

Minnesota's bountiful, natural walleye lakes have spoiled the state's anglers. Guides recall a time when they'd land 50 to 60 walleye in a day.

Now they're catching fewer, and smaller, fish. The DNR conducted a landmark study on Lake Winnibigosh that found the average walleye caught by anglers in 1939 was over 2 pounds. By 1977, that had fallen to barely a pound.

Kavanaugh explained that walleyes take three to five years to reach 1 pound in weight. "If we remove them at a rate faster than a rate they can replace themselves, we start spending the principal, and not just living off the interest."

"It's not like it used to be," he said.

Many of the state's famous walleye factories don't produce the fish they once did. There are more anglers fishing with much better technology. Plus, the lakes themselves are changing. They're warmer and clearer, with new invasive species.

Red Lake was wrecked by overfishing. Leech Lake lost huge numbers of walleye to large birds called cormorants.

Many anglers around another well-known northern walleye lake, Lake Winnibigoshish, say fishing has sharply declined there, too. Cory Jahn has fished from a family cabin on Lake Winnie, as the locals call it, since he was a kid. He competes in walleye tournaments around the state.

"I used to go out there and never have a problem catching my fish to bring home to eat," he said.

"We hear the DNR say the fish are there, but for how much time we put in, it's pretty frustrating."

The DNR has resorted to stocking on some of these lakes, which helped fish populations recover on Red and Leech. And the agency recently announced it will launch a pilot effort to stock walleye fry in Mille Lacs next year.

"Walleye is No. 1"

The early end of the walleye season on Mille Lacs was the first ever on one of the state's most famous and productive walleye fisheries. Many on the lake blame the DNR for mismanaging the fish population. Others point fingers at tribal netting during the spawning season.

DNR biologists say the trouble on Mille Lacs is more likely due to a host of changes to the lake, from invasive species to climate change to better pollution controls. The water is clearer and warmer now. There's less food for young walleye, and it's easier for predators to find them.

If Minnesota is crazy for walleye, the Mille Lacs area may be the craziest. Not one but two towns on the vast lake's southern shore sport giant fiberglass walleye statues.

"There's no doubt in my mind that walleye is No. 1 on this lake and will always be," said George Nitti, who runs Hunters Point Resort on Mille Lacs. He supports the DNR's plans to spend \$3.5 million on a new hatchery on the lake. That's despite warnings from agency biologists that stocking likely won't help rebuild the walleye population.

"We need to spend money on fisheries, if we're going to take the fish out of these lakes that we are," said Nitti. "We need to be able to replace them and the food they eat. Plain and simple."

But others suggest a cheaper alternative, something downright blasphemous to some Minnesotans: Why not promote other species of fish in Mille Lacs?

Josh Miller from Mankato started visiting Mille Lacs six years ago to fish walleye and muskie. Now he targets smallmouth bass.

"With the size of fish you're catching here, and the world-class fishery that it is, you're pulling fish out of here that most people dream of," he said.

But guides and resort owners say shifting toward bass would require a change in philosophy. The vast majority of bass anglers fish purely for the sport, and release the fish. Walleye anglers are a different breed, Nitti said.

"Nine out of 10 want to bring some fish home, there's no doubt about it. If they can bring fish home, they're happy," he said.

With the walleye season closed, he's started a new promotion to keep business afloat. For every smallmouth bass a guest catches and throws back, the resort offers a frozen walleye fillet — from Canada.

"So people are still catching fish, but going home with a meal," he said.

Nitti hopes the effort will help lure visitors until winter. That's actually his busiest season, when thousands of ice anglers converge on Mille Lacs.

But he fears those anglers won't come if the walleye season doesn't reopen in December. The DNR will make that decision after it assesses walleye numbers this fall.

"If they shut down this lake in the winter," Nitti warned, "this area will become a ghost town."

Map: Minnesota's walleye statues

No other state in the Union has as many walleye statues as Minnesota.

There are at least five of the hulking fiberglass or concrete walleye scattered across Minnesota's lake country: There's a 15-foot walleye in Garrison; another just down the shore of Lake Mille Lacs in Isle, one in Rush City; and two more on the border waters, Willie the Walleye in Baudette and the Kab Walleye, near Lake Kabetogama.

Doug Kirby said that's a lot of themed statues for one state, and he would know. Kirby keeps a database of roadside attractions, and studies the odd sculptures dotting small town curbs at the Roadside America website.

"So many walleye would speak to a lack of originality," he said, "Except they're all different statues."

The Kab Walleye, for example, wears a saddle. Tourists are encouraged to ride the fish for an improved photo op. The Garrison Walleye was hauled around during annual parades for years. They're all a little different, and that's what interests Kirby.

A few years ago, he traveled to many of the Minnesota walleye statues.

"We rate them on uniqueness," he said, "and the quality of the photo op."

For the saddle alone, he figures the Kab Walleye is one of Minnesota's best. But all of the statues serve an essential purpose. Kirby said a community's statutes reflect its priorities. Based on the statues alone, he said Minnesota must be crazy about walleye.

<http://www.inforum.com/news/3834243-why-elusive-walleye-minnesotas-holy-grail-fish>