

WILSON RESERVOIR 2015 FISHING FORECAST

WILSON RESERVOIR – The water level began 2014 at 5.8 feet below conservation. Drought persisted throughout the year and caused the water level to drop to 8.2 feet low by year's end. The previous record was 7.2 feet low in December 2006. There is not much flooded vegetation around the shoreline with the lowered water levels. **“Clean, Drain, Dry” will continue to be the phrase to remember for this year as we don't want to spread the Zebra Mussels around. Also, remember that it is illegal to have live white perch in your possession so put them on ice. We want to continue to encourage anglers to not return any live white perch back to the lake.**

BLACK BASS – Good. Wilson will continue to rank among the top 5 reservoirs in the state for both largemouth and smallmouth bass fishing. All black bass species (including spotted bass) are available in Wilson with good numbers over the 15 inch legal limit, and fish close to 5 pounds available. Lowered water levels and a lack of aquatic vegetation have led to poor recruitment over the past several years and most of the largemouth will be 12 to 18 inches. We did collect a handful of young bass that averaged 8 inches and are likely the result of the 39,000 large fingerlings we stocked in June 2013. Other young fish were observed, but not collected due to the high water conductivity which makes electrofishing difficult in Wilson. An additional 5,000 fingerlings were stocked in 2014. Largemouth body condition is poor to fair now due to a lack of bluegill and minnow production during the drought. Smallmouth bass numbers look good now, but were again underrepresented in the spring sample with only seven fish collected. We saw good numbers during our fall netting, however, with fish between 6 and 16 inches sampled, and the largest weighing 2 pounds. Smallmouth bass recruitment and body condition do not seem to be as affected by the low water levels, and both continue to remain strong. Anglers should again be satisfied with the number of black bass available in 2015, but will continue to notice a decline until water levels return and provide the necessary habitat for abundant largemouth bass and bluegill recruitment.

CATFISH – Good. Channel catfish are plenty abundant in Wilson and blue catfish numbers are stable. There are all size ranges and the larger fish look very chunky. Wilson dropped to #7 in catfish density when compared to other reservoirs in the state after coming in at #5 in 2013. Fifteen percent of the fish were 9-14 inches, 49% were between 15 and 20 inches, 33% were 21-25 inches, and 3% were between 25 and 30 inches. The biggest channel catfish weighed 12 pounds. There are a few flatheads showing up every year so don't be surprised if you tie into one of them too. We have been stocking blue catfish for 8 years (to provide another predator on white perch and zebra mussels), but because of the 35 inch minimum length limit those catfish will not be available for harvest for several years. Anglers have reported catching a few of these blues occasionally and we caught thirteen in our nets this past fall (22-27 inches), and sampled a 30 inch, 13 pound fish last summer.

CRAPPIE – Poor. Crappie numbers remain low even with the high water and flooded vegetation between 2008 and 2010 which proved beneficial to the largemouth bass and bluegill. There were several good angler reports this past year, however, so there are some fish to be caught out there. We did not collect any age-0 fish this year indicating poor recruitment of young crappie into the population. There are some adults, mostly 10-14 inches, at the current time with some of the crappie ranging up to nearly 2 pounds. Black crappie prefer the clearer waters on the lower end of the lake, white crappie are mostly found in the upper end. Crappie are scattered all over the lake but just not in any big concentrations. Anglers have some success catching crappie during the fall and winter months near the fish attractors by Minooka and Elm Creek, and around the marina.

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STRIPED BASS – Good. The catch rate for stripers this fall was up 33% compared with the 2013 sample, in large part because of young fish coming into the population. Body condition, however, was very poor with fish up to 18 inches in good shape, but fish between 21 and 29 inches were very skinny and growth rates have likely been suppressed. The population continues to be dominated by those 3 to 5 pounders, but there are still some big fish showing up every year based on angler reports. Our biggest striper in the fall sampling weighed 9.4 pounds, but anglers are still catching fish over 20 pounds each year. And of course, the state record striper (44 pounds) still stands at Wilson. We stocked 14,000 fingerlings in 2012 and collected a handful around 19 inches. The 2013 stocking consisted of 700,000 fry that showed up as 14 to 15 inch fish this fall. Fry and fingerlings were stocked in 2014 with many showing up between 7 and 10 inches. This is the first good striped bass year class since 2010 and anglers should be excited about the number of young fish coming into the population. The management plan includes stocking stripers heavily as a predator on the white perch and so far they have been doing a pretty good job. Wilson is the #1 striper reservoir in the state and should provide lots of exciting striped bass angling in 2015.

WALLEYE – Good. Total walleye catch exhibited an 18% increase compared with the last sample, and angling prospects for 2015 will remain good. The catch rate of walleye over the 15 inch length limit was similar to last year, but two good year classes were produced in 2013 and 2014 with natural reproduction that increased the number less than 15 inches by 71%. The 2014 year class is the best since 2008 and will provide a much needed boost to the walleye population. Most of these fish will be over 15 inches by fall 2015. The majority of the population is comprised of fish 3 years old and younger. A handful of fish up to 25 inches were also collected, but their numbers were few. Overall, 60% were 9 to 14 inches, 34% were between 15 and 17 inches, and 6% were over 18 inches. Anglers will notice similar numbers of legal size fish in 2015, but an increase in the number less than 15 inches. Body condition was good for smaller fish, but poor for the large fish. Natural recruitment continues to produce good numbers of young fish that have allowed for strong walleye harvest over the past decade and the total numbers will increase with continued production of these young fish. There is a **15 inch minimum length limit** in effect for walleye at Wilson Reservoir.

WHITE BASS – Fair. White bass numbers decreased slightly in our fall sample and numbers continue to remain down from the early years of Wilson. There is a diversity of sizes available with some very healthy fish in the 2-2.5 pound plus range and up to 18 inches. Fish condition was excellent this past fall and anglers will be happy with the quality of fish they catch. We continue to see some small whites coming on so they are spawning successfully but the numbers of smaller fish never seem to be very high. The white perch have certainly taken up a portion of the niche that the white bass used to occupy.

WHITE PERCH – Good. White perch numbers decreased slightly in 2014 with a 14% decrease compared with 2013 and numbers continue to remain around half of what we saw through 2011. The average size continues to increase with a 10 inch average for all white perch, and some fish up to 13 inches available. The proportion of the population less than 8 inches did increase, however, as a large 2013 year class is evident with many 6 to 8 inch fish collected. This is the first large year class since 2010. Anglers continue to report that many of the sportfish collected this past fall had plenty of white perch in their stomachs indicating they remain an important prey species in Wilson. Fish condition improved slightly compared with the 2013 sample with the biggest fish in excellent condition. Approximately 60% of the catch was between 10 and 12 inches with 12% between 8 and 9 inches, and 28% less than 8 inches. **The white perch is an Aquatic Nuisance Species (ANS) on the prohibited species list which means they must be dead if you keep them in your possession for consumption or if you keep them for bait or any other reason. Cut the small ones in half and feed the other fish if you catch ones you don't want to keep – do not throw any live white perch back!**