A GUIDE TO FISHING NEBRASKA IN 2021
By Daryl Bauer, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, fisheries outreach program manager

WALLEYE
Nebraska’s largest reservoirs are the state’s best walleye habitats and consistently provide the best fishing. The highest total sampling rates of walleyes in the fall of 2020 were at Winters Creek, McConaughy, Merritt, Davis Creek and Calamus reservoirs. Winters Creek, Davis Creek, Sutherland and Maloney will be best for the state for eating-size 15- to 20-inch walleyes in 2021. Anglers targeting big walleyes should plan trips to Elwood, Merritt, McConaughy and Lewis & Clark. Smaller reservoirs in eastern Nebraska are less ideal as walleye habitats, but Wanahoo, Wildwood, Holmes, Wehrspann and Wagon Train will offer anglers opportunities to catch walleyes, including some big fish.

WHITE BASS
White bass also are open-water predator fish that thrive in Nebraska’s largest reservoirs. The best white bass fisheries in 2021 will be found at Harlan, Swanson, Medicine Creek, Calamus and Enders. Most of the white bass at Harlan will be less than 10 inches long this year, but that big year-class should produce great fishing in years to come. In addition to the reservoirs already listed, Davis Creek, Sutherland and Red Willow will offer fewer white bass overall, but good numbers of fish larger than 12 inches. Midway, Johnson and McConaughy will be best for some big white bass – fish larger than 15 inches.

WIPERS
Wipers are hybrids of white bass and striped bass, and like their parent species, they also are most successful in open-water habitats – Nebraska’s largest reservoirs. Swanson, Elwood, Harlan and McConaughy reservoirs will offer the most wipers for anglers in 2021. Calamus, Red Willow, Davis Creek and Branched Oak also will offer some good wiper fishing. Anglers looking for trophy wipers will find McConaughy, Branched Oak, Harlan and Elwood hard to beat. Remember all wipers caught at Branched Oak immediately must be released.

BLUEGILL
Anglers can take their kids to catch some “sunnies” on just about any small body of water in Nebraska. Our state can produce large numbers of 8-inch-and-larger bluegills, as well, and there will be a bunch of waters that will do that this year. Small- to medium-size reservoirs across Nebraska offer some of the best bluegill fishing every year, with Olive Creek, Wanahoo, Iron Horse Trail, Summit and Duck Creek topping that list in 2021. Sandhills lakes offer lower densities of bluegills, but can produce some trophy bluegills, with the biggest fish in excess of a pound. The best Sandhills lakes in 2021 will be Smith (Wildlife Management Area), Swan, West Long and Frye. Anglers should remember that bluegills that big are rare fish and worthy of having a picture taken and then returned to the water. Pits like Sandy Channel No. 4 and Sandy Channel No. 8 also will produce quality bluegills this year.

CRAPPIES
Crappies are panfish that can be found throughout Nebraska, with anglers always on the lookout for waters that will produce fish larger than 10 inches. Whitney Reservoir is a perennial favorite and will be in a class by itself in 2021. Other reservoirs that will be good will be East Twin, Sherman, Wagon Train, Willard Meyer and Wellfleet. Again, Sandhills lakes tend to have lower densities of panfish like crappies, but can offer some of the biggest, fattest, black crappies in the state.Hackberry and Cottonwood-Steverson lakes will be the best of the Sandhills this year.

LARGEMOUTH BASS
Largemouth bass thrive in water bodies that offer stable water levels, clean water and an abundance of shallow water cover, especially aquatic vegetation. In Nebraska, small reservoirs, Sandhills lakes, pits and ponds tend to provide the best of that habitat. Some of those waters can have high densities of bass, which tend to produce excellent panfish fishing as largemouth bass keep panfish numbers in check. However, waters with lots of bass may not necessarily be the best for producing big bass. When looking at the sampling data for the best bass waters, those with the highest numbers of bass may not offer the best opportunities to catch fish larger than 15 inches. Lower densities of largemouth bass can offer anglers the best opportunities to catch bass larger than 15 inches. Some small- to medium-size reservoirs that will be particularly good this year include Verdon, Grove, Wanahoo, Summit and Czechland. Pits and ponds are some of the best bass fisheries in the state; Two Rivers No. 3, Sandy Channel No. 8 and Fort McPherson will offer some excellent bass fishing.

CHANNEL CATFISH
Channel catfish are a popular fish in Nebraska and are found widely across the state. Sutherland, Branched Oak, Midway, Sherman, Pawnee and Minatare all will offer good numbers of 16-inch-and-larger channel cats in 2021. For fish longer than 24 inches, anglers should plan to fish Meadowlark, Iron Horse Trail, Wagon Train, Wildwood and Red Willow.

Smaller reservoirs across Nebraska offer some additional access to warm-water streams and rivers on private lands.

OTHER SPECIES
Nebraska is known for its diverse fishing opportunities. Besides the species highlighted in the fish-sampling graphs, there are a variety of other fish that can be pursued. Nebraska offers opportunities to catch other sunfish species such as REDEAR SUNFISH at Fort McPherson and War Axe interstate lakes and Duck Creek and Wildwood reservoirs. Smallmouth Bass can be caught at
War Axe, Johnson and McConaughy, as well as the Missouri River in northeast Nebraska.

BLUE CATFISH can be found in reservoirs like Pawnee, Medicine Creek and Swanson, but look to the Missouri River in southeast Nebraska for the biggest blue cats in the state – some weighing triple digits.

FLATHEAD CATFISH are another species of large catfish that can be found in the Missouri River, as well as in reservoirs like Harlan, Sherman, Branched Oak and the Tri-County canal system. All flatheads at Branched Oak must be released immediately after capture, and anglers should consider releasing big flatties on other fisheries as well.

SAUGER fishing will be best on Lewis & Clark Reservoir and the Missouri River in northeast Nebraska, but Johnson Reservoir and the Tri-County canal system also have good numbers of sauger.

SAUGEYE are a walleye and sauger hybrid, and stocking is producing some excellent opportunities for anglers to catch those fish in Big Alkali, Meadowlark, Big Indian 11a, Blue Lake, Willard Meyer and Pawnee.

YELLOW PERCH always are a tasty and popular panfish; in 2021, some of the best yellow perch fishing will be found at Rat & Beaver, Watts and West Long lakes in the Sandhills.

Sandhill lakes are some of the best NORTHERN PIKE habitats in the state as well, and, once again, lakes on the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge, Hackberry and Dewey will be some of Nebraska’s most popular pike fisheries. Box Butte Reservoir in the Panhandle also has an excellent pike fishery. Reservoirs in southern and eastern Nebraska are typically too warm for cool-water northern pike, but Wanahoo is relatively new and has some pike habitat now. All pike are required to be released at Wanahoo.

The “king of freshwater sport fish,” MUSKELLUNGE, also can be found in Nebraska waters. To catch this trophy, toothy predator, anglers should target Merritt, Calamus and Zorinsky reservoirs, as well as Mormon Island West, Grand Island’s L.E. Ray Lake, and Timber Point.

Nebraska also has waters that support cold-water fish year-round where anglers can pursue a TROUT Slam, catching rainbows, browns, brooks, and possibly even cutthroats and tigers (brown trout and brook trout hybrids). Most of the cold-water trout streams are found in western and northern parts of the state; the East Branch of Verdigre Creek, Long Pine, Soldiers and Ninemile creeks are favorites among trout anglers. In 2021, the rainbow trout fishing at Lake Ogallala will continue to be good, and anglers might even catch some cutties from the White River and Soldier Creek in Nebraska’s Pine Ridge.

Photo: Nebraskaland Magazine/NGPC