

2012 Survey Summary Sandhill Lakes Northeast Region

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This summary pertains to those Sandhill Lakes located in the Northeast Region that were surveyed in 2012. 2011 data has been left for comparisons. Panfish species and northern pike are sampled in the spring with trap nets. Largemouth bass are sampled in the spring with night-time electrofishing gear. Not all lakes are surveyed annually. Sandhill lakes can be naturally formed, they are typically shallow, and spring fed. Sometimes these lakes are formed when upstream hay meadows were ditched during the early settlement days or a drainage was blocked, or both. These lakes are very productive and well suited to panfish species such as black crappie, bluegill and yellow perch as well as largemouth bass and northern pike. Growth rates for panfish in these systems are usually above statewide averages. Bass generally top out around the 6 pound range and pike rarely exceed 15 pounds. Current regulations include an aggregate 15 fish daily bag limit on panfish with a possession limit of 30. Bass and pike regulations will be discussed below.

Water levels were at record highs this spring, but fell to near record lows in lakes in this region with the drought of 2012. Feast to famine for fish populations. High water years mean increased shoreline length, lake depths that prevent summer and winter kills and increased productivity for all species present. However, high water can allow unwanted species like carp to enter a lake which are then very destructive to aquatic habitat. It then becomes necessary to renovate the lake and watershed with rotenone to restore a high quality fishery. Lakes are generally not renovated if carp cannot be kept from re-entering the watershed. Drought years can provide an excellent opportunity to conduct these renovations, but are cause for concern for fish kills. High water in the spring of 2012 allowed carp to re-enter Overton lake in southwest Holt county and this winter, depths of more than 2.5 feet could not be found. **Anglers must be very careful not to move unwanted or destructive species from one system to another by bucket or as bait.**



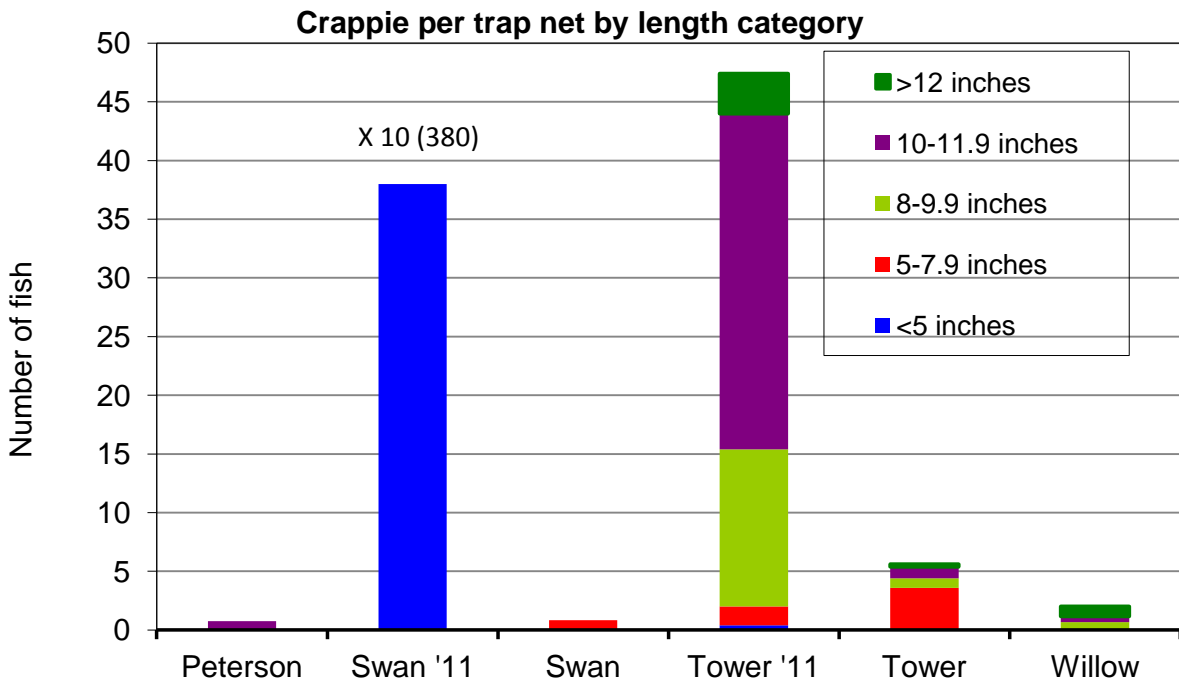
Tower Lake June 2012



Tower Lake October 2012



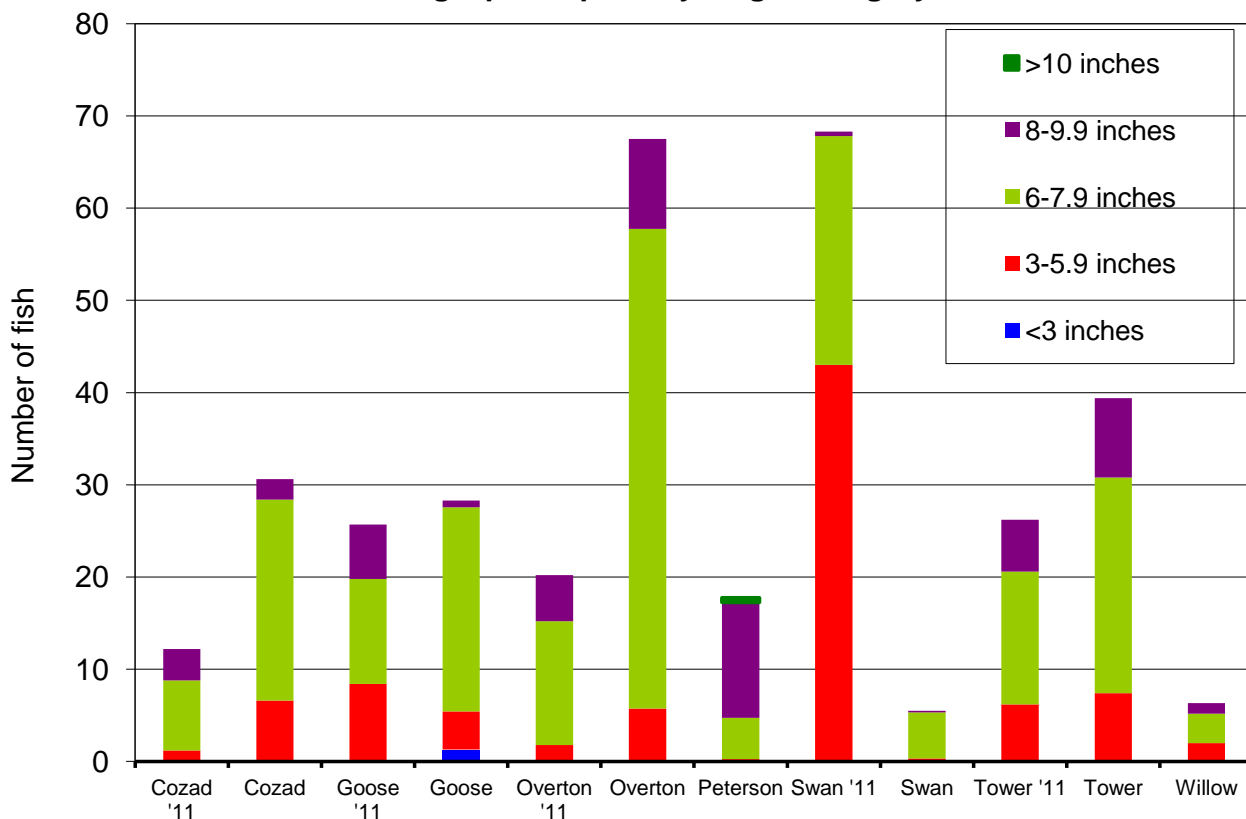
Black Crappie in sandhill lakes are known to grow to trophy sizes even in the presence of carp. They are a favorite for ice fisherman, but can be targeted during open water as well. Even though crappie were surveyed in the spring when water was high, catch at both Tower and Swan dropped significantly. Higher water conditions in the summer of 2011 may have helped open water anglers to target crappie at Tower. A very low portion of the small fish sampled in 2011 recruited into the next size class in Swan, this may have been due to predation by a healthy bass population. There was a low catch of 10"+ crappie at Peterson and Willow as well. Cozad, Goose and Overton lakes do not have crappie.





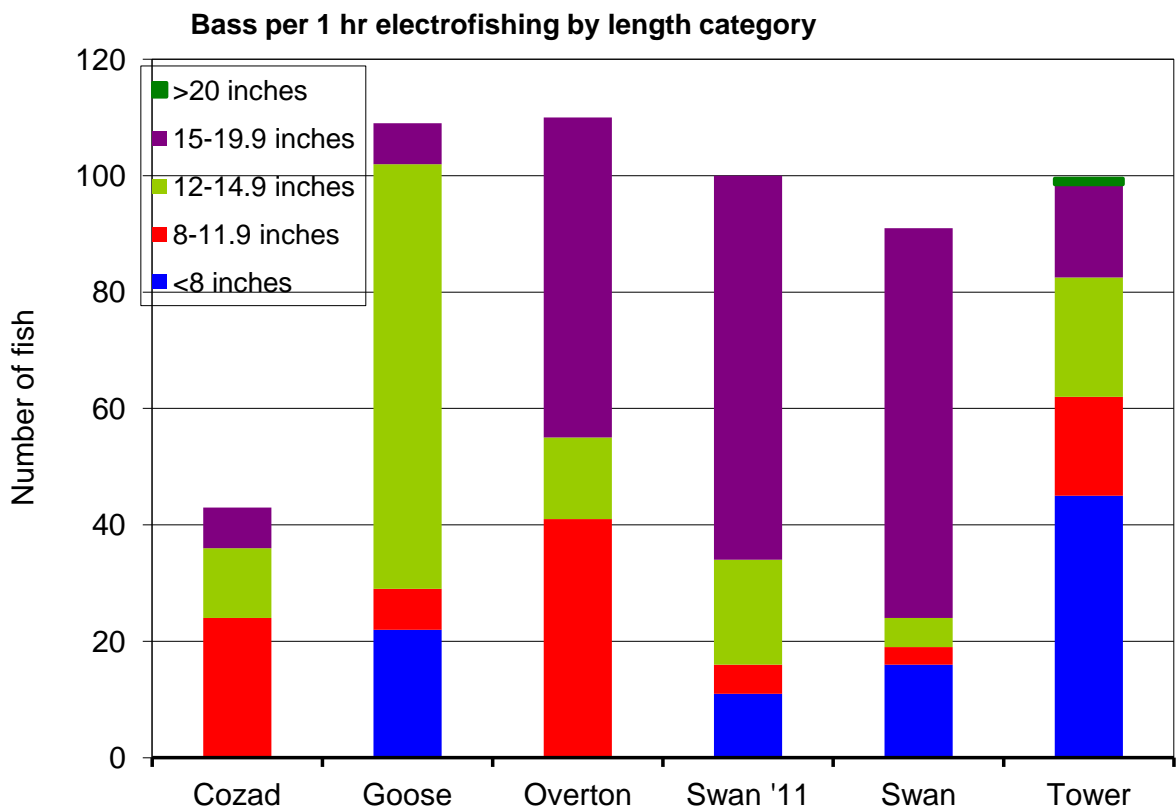
BLUEGILL are targeted year-round by anglers in these shallow lakes. They are common in sandhill lakes across the state and most of these can produce Master Angler size fish. Shallow lakes with good water clarity can experience heavy vegetation growth during the summer and anglers must use techniques to fish in and around this vegetation. In many sandhill lakes harvest is highest through the ice. All of these lakes have fish in excess of 8 inches and should provide anglers good opportunities in 2013. The best opportunities for 8"+ bluegills appear to be at Peterson, Tower and Overton, however with the low water levels at Overton this winter, we better hope for some precipitation. Dissolved oxygen measurements conducted in December were at lethal level at most locations, but no stressed or dead fish were observed at that time.

Bluegill per trap net by length category



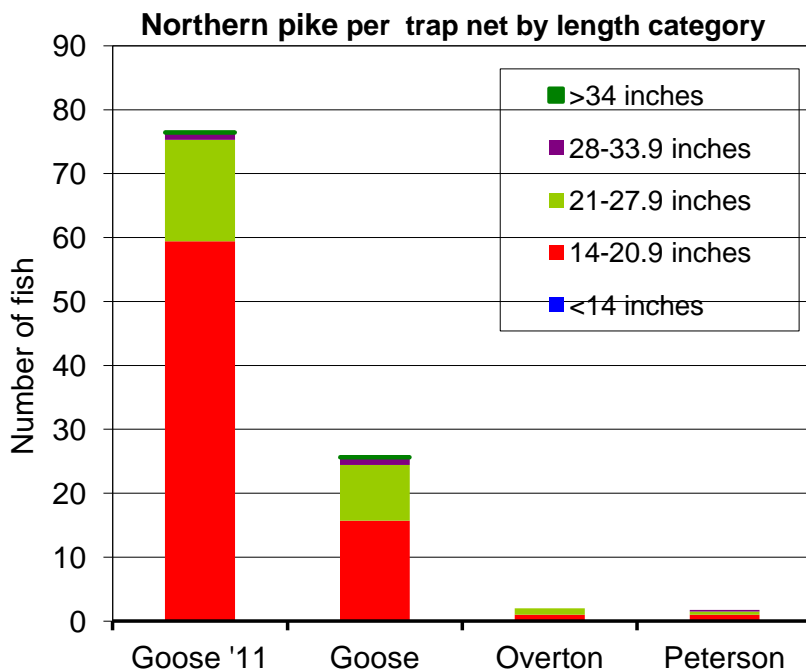


Largemouth bass are the primary predator in most sandhill lakes. The health of the bass population is a primary factor for providing quality panfish to anglers. High bass densities of fish less than 15 inches control panfish recruitment allowing good growth for the remaining fish. Most angling pressure occurs during open water and vegetation can be a challenge, or blessing for catching big bass. Good bass populations are present in all the lakes listed below but are top notch at Overton, Swan and Tower, however Overton has public access for ice fishing only. Peterson was not sampled due to water levels, but a holds a good bass population. For the second year in a row, over 65% of the bass sampled at Swan were 15+ inches. State-wide regulations for bass is a minimum length limit is 15" with a daily bag of 5 fish, only one can be over 21". Possession limit is 10.





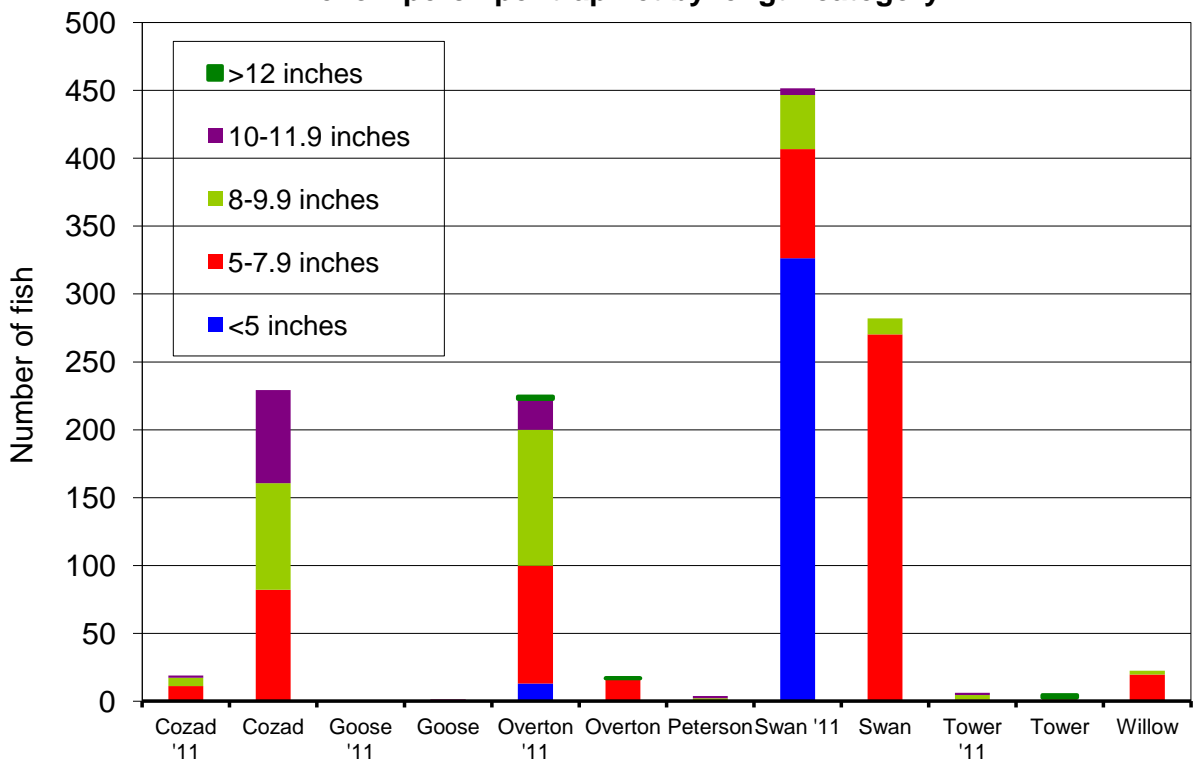
Northern pike can grow to extremely large sizes in some water-bodies, but only rarely exceed 15 lbs in most sandhill lakes. These shallow lakes have very high summer water temperatures and this limits growth. Nebraska's sandhill lakes are nearly the southern extreme for self-sustaining northern pike populations. Pike are found in selected sandhill lakes to satisfy angler demand and for curbing common carp recruitment. Pike are an excellent fighting fish, open water or through the ice, and are hard to beat on the table if time is taken to remove the Y-bones. Sites can be found on You-Tube that instruct how to remove Y-bones. Goose is the only lake below that has a pike population and it is managed with a 28-34 inch protected slot length limit. The slot limit allows for harvest of smaller pike while those best suited for carp predation remain protected and in the lake. Daily bag limit is 3 with a possession limit of 10. Pike were sampled in Overton lake while electrofishing this spring, they would have entered at the same time as the carp. While northern pike angling opportunities are limited in eastern sandhill lakes, the Valentine Refuge Lakes and Merritt Reservoir offer additional opportunity.





Yellow perch are an ice angler favorite and commonly grow to jumbo sizes in these productive lakes. This species can be targeted on both open and frozen water but can be difficult to find mid-summer with heavy stands of aquatic vegetation. It is this very habitat that enables some of this species to grow to 12 plus inches. Perch can be found in most sandhill lakes across the state. Overton and Swan show the best opportunities, but next springs surveys will determine the fate for Overton. Perch over 8 inches can be found at Cozad and Tower as well. Timing can be critical for catching perch in trap nets, so some of the drastic differences between years may be a function of the perch not being in the sampled habitat at the time of the survey. Even though perch catch was low this year, many perch eggs were observed deposited along the shoreline in most of these lakes.

Yellow perch per trap net by length category





Common Carp

Common carp find their way into many Sandhill Lakes and will degrade water quality, destroy aquatic vegetation, and out-compete more desirable sport fish when carp densities are high. Much time and fishermen's money is spent controlling, eliminating and preventing carp from entering Game and Parks managed lakes. In the Northeast Region, common carp are found in Goose Lake WMA, Long Lake SRA, Twin Lakes WMA, and Willow Lake WMA to name a few. Carp re-entered Goose Lake in 2008 and 2010 but are found in low numbers at this time and are not having an effect on the sport fish populations. A renovation was conducted on Clear Lake, Brown County in 2012 in conjunction with the Fish and Wildlife Service, Sandhills Task Force and multiple private partners. There will be year-round public fishing access once the fish population is established. Should these dry weather patterns persist, Twin Lakes, Rock County will be renovated in the spring of 2013 and Willow Lake, Brown County in the fall. Drought years are the best time to renovate sandhill lakes when water is out of the cattail and marsh areas to insure a complete kill on carp. A raised dike and outlet/carp barrier project was completed last summer at Willow Lake in preparation for the upcoming renovation.



New Willow Lake carp barrier



Old Willow Lake carp barrier



Swan Lake carp barrier

Access for these sandhill lakes vary due to ownership. Cozad, Goose & Willow are property of the State of Nebraska and are managed under Wildlife Management Area regulations. Tower Lake is part of Yellowthroat WMA and is owned by the Fish and Wildlife Service. Overton, Peterson & Swan are privately owned lakes with public fishing agreements.

| Access | Cozad | Goose | Overton | Peterson | Swan | Tower | Willow |
|---------------------|-------|-------|---------|----------|------|-------|--------|
| Bank/Wading | YES | YES | NO | YES | YES | YES | YES |
| Boat | YES | YES | NO | YES | YES | YES | YES |
| Daytime Only | NO | NO | YES | NO | NO | YES | NO |
| Ice Fishing Only | NO | NO | YES | NO | NO | NO | NO |
| Modern Boat Ramp | YES | YES | NO | NO | NO | NO | NO |
| Primitive Boat Ramp | NO | NO | NO | YES | YES | YES | YES |



Location of NE District public access Sandhill lakes

Check the Boating Guide for details:

<http://outdoornebraska.ne.gov/boating/pdfs/boatguide.pdf>

For fishing regulation and public waters information consult the 2013-2014 fishing guide at:

<http://outdoornebraska.ne.gov/Fishing/guides/fishguide/pdf/FishGuide.pdf>

For more information contact the Game and Parks Fisheries staff:

Jeff Schuckman, Phil Chvala – Norfolk Regional Office – 402-370-3374

Andrew Glidden – Bassett Field Office – 402-684-2921

Please remember that these fishing areas have limited services and no trash pick up. If you pack it in, pack it out, and keep our wild places looking wild!