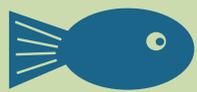




northwest & north-central iowa



By Thomas Gengerke

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Natural lakes and small impoundments. Great border rivers and smaller prairie streams. Waters that run deep and cold and those which are shallow or warm. Different things to different people.

These contrasts contribute to differing perceptions of quality natural resources and all are available within northwestern and north-central Iowa. So what's the commonality? I think its diversity. Diversity of land forms and species contribute to the profound richness of natural systems and resource experiences available to us.

From an angler's viewpoint, we have to marvel at the diversity of opportunities available to us, and we need to remind ourselves that if we hope to reap the benefits of this diversity we need to remain flexible. We need to be flexible in our choice of environments, our location within the water body, our presentation and our selection of what species we pursue. The information in this article, highlighting more than a dozen favorite sport fish species found in northwest and north-central Iowa, should shed some light on how to be flexible in varying situations.

Spring will hopefully help in that process. It is a season of perpetual renewal. It is also one of my favorite periods of the year to fish. It's an easy time to be flexible because there is such a large array of diverse opportunities. I can fish for smallmouth bass with a small, 1/8-or even a 1/16-ounce jig, with or without a minnow, on the rocky shorelines of Spirit Lake of West Okoboji, or I can throw spoons or minnow imitating lures for northern pike. A recent change in regulations has opened some of our best

pike water to year-round angling opportunities. There is no longer a closed season on pike on West Okoboji, East Okoboji and Spirit Lake. Big fish and lot's of 'em. I can hardly wait.

Early spring is also a time for channel catfish. Try the shallow and warmer water and use cut bait. These fish are on a feeding binge at this time of year. During May the crappies are vulnerable to minnow or jig presentations. Use a small bobber and a small jig. Jig color can make a difference, so be flexible. I've also learned that Berkley Crappie

Nuggets can make a difference.

As the water temperatures increase, so does the opportunity for great bluegill fishing. I would



suggest small jigs and dark colors; my preference is black. If the bite slows you might add a piece of crawler or even a wax worm. Twitching the bait will frequently entice a gill to bite. If the fish have moved to deeper water you might consider a slip bobber, light line and a #8 hook with a piece of crawler. If you choose to move away from bluegills it may be time to unload the tackle box on largemouth bass. Jigs, spinnerbaits, crankbaits – a multitude of choices – will all work. Talk to other anglers and, again remain flexible.

These species and many others will provide diversity, opportunity and lot's of recreation for old and young alike. Be flexible, appreciate these quality natural resources and – above all – have fun.



TOP SURPRISES OF 2004

Clear Lake (Cerro Gordo County) and Brushy Creek (Webster County)

Walleye fishing on Clear Lake (Cerro Gordo County) was much better than anticipated in 2004. In fact, nearly 10,000 walleyes were taken this past open water season, marking the best catch since 1996. Successful recruitment is critical for this fishery to prosper, and survival of fry and fingerling stockings exceeded expectations in recent years. An abundant forage supply allowed this strong year class of walleye to reach 14 inches (legal minimum length) by late summer/early fall. Clear Lake anglers took advantage of this and recorded one of the best fall walleye fishing in recent memory.

The great news is this should carry over to 2005. Walleye will continue to grow and many of these fish will be 1 to 2 pounds by this season. Fish the rocky shallow shorelines in the spring and move out to deeper water as the water temperature warms. A jig and minnow is the best technique in the spring and live bait rigs or trolling crank baits is the most successful technique in the summer. Drifting with nightcrawlers or minnows produced excellent results last year and will continue to work in 2005.

Brushy Creek Lake, located in Webster County, has been full of surprises since the gates were closed in 1998. Fish growth and numbers have been incredible, rivaling any lake previously constructed. The big surprise at Brushy in 2004 was the growth rates and number of bluegill. The numbers weren't surprising considering this huge year-class of fish was first observed in 2001 when they were spawned. However, due to the incredible numbers present, we thought that the growth rates would be slower than what had been observed in the past. But by 2004, many of these fish had grown to 7 to 8 inches. Look for fantastic bluegill angling opportunities in 2005. A great population of largemouth and smallmouth bass, walleye, crappie, catfish and muskies round out the opportunities.

top 10 waters for walleye

1. **Clear Lake** — *Cerro Gordo*, Outstanding last fall, should be excellent in 2005.
2. **Black Hawk Lake** — *Sac*, Strong year classes of 15- to 18-inch walleye. Slip bobbers and leeches are the top bait in the spring. There is a 15-inch length limit.
3. **Des Moines River** — *Kossuth & Humboldt*, Fish below rock dams immediately after ice-out.
4. **Iowa River** — *Hardin*, 1- to 2-pound fish are abundant.
5. **West Fork Des Moines River** — *Emmet*, Good water levels produced good angling in 2004 and the same will hold true for 2005.
6. **Little Sioux River** — *Buena Vista, Cherokee and Woodbury*, Fish the deeper holes with live bait, especially live chubs for walleye up to 6 pounds.
7. **Silver Lake** — *Dickinson*, Consistent producer, 13- to 18-inch fish available.
8. **Spirit Lake** — *Dickinson*, Continued growth of the strong 2001-year class will produce some excellent fishing.
9. **Lost Island Lake** — *Clay and Palo Alto*, Good 2001 year class strength will produce in 2005.
10. **Center Lake** — *Dickinson*, Fingerling stockings has produced 15- to 17-inch fish.

top 5 waters for yellow perch

1. **Rice Lake** — *Winnebago*, Abundant population, some sorting required.
2. **Silver Lake** — *Worth*, Best fishing in the fall with small minnows.
3. **Lake Cornelia** — *Wright*, Good numbers of 8- to 9-inch fish.
4. **Silver Lake** — *Palo Alto*, Surveys indicate good number of fish available.
5. **Trumbull Lake** — *Clay*, Good number of fish. Large fish available; best time – ice period.

top

5 waters for bullheads

1. **Crystal Lake** — *Hancock*, Half-pound fish are plentiful.
2. **Rice Lake** — *Winnebago*, High density of 9- to 10-inch fish.
3. **Black Hawk Lake** — *Sac*, Lots of 8-inch bullheads for anglers of all ages to catch. Early spring to June is the best time to catch a mess of bullheads.
4. **Center Lake** — *Dickinson*, Good shoreline access and good numbers of 10- to 12- inchers.
5. **Lost Island Lake** — *Clay and Palo Alto*, Plenty to go around in the 8- to 10 inch range.

top

5 waters for crappies

1. **Spirit Lake** — *Dickinson*, The past two years have been excellent; 10-inch fish available.
2. **Brown's Lake** — *Woodbury*, Lots of 9- to 12-inch crappie available. Spring and fall are the best times to go after these tasty panfish.
3. **Black Hawk Lake** — *Sac*, Huge year class of 7 - to 8-inch fish present. Good growth rates will have these fish up to 10 inches by fall. Some fish up to 14 inches present.
4. **Nelson Park Lake** — *Crawford*, Great fishing from shore for 8- to 11-inch crappie; fish with a bobber and small jig.
5. **Beeds Lake** — *Franklin*, Excellent fishing in 2004.

top

10 waters for catfish

1. **Des Moines River** — *Kossuth & Humboldt*, East and West forks are both excellent.
2. **Boone River** — *Hamilton*, Fish in riffles during mid-summer for active fish.

TOP HUNCHES FOR 2005

Lake Smith (Kossuth County) and Brown's Lake (Woodbury County)

A substantial winterkill in 2000 left Lake Smith with an abundance of undesirable species, so in 2001 it was chemically renovated. Personnel with the Iowa DNR and the Kossuth County Conservation Board treated the lake with Rotenone, a fish toxicant, to rid the lake of unwanted bullheads and carp. Following the renovation, the lake was restocked with largemouth bass, bluegill and channel catfish.

Recent fishery surveys reveal these fish have grown fast and are now angler-acceptable size. Bass measuring up to 15 inches and weighing 2 pounds were present last fall. Bluegills are very abundant and many are 7 to 8 inches and weigh 1/3 of a pound. Catfish vary in size, but many are 1 to 2 pounds. Crappie were stocked this past fall and will provide additional opportunities in a few years.

Lake Smith is located three miles north of Algona and is owned and managed by the Kossuth County Conservation Board. It has a concrete boat ramp, however it is limited to electric motors only. There is good shoreline access with several docks and piers, and camping is available as well.

If it's nice crappies you're looking for, try Brown's Lake, located two miles west of Salix in Woodbury County. A fisheries survey done in 2004 showed a great population of 9- to 12-inch crappie in this 580-acre oxbow lake. May and June are the two best months to pinpoint a mess of crappies. Fish near the shore and other structures as the fish move in to spawn. The other good news is biologists observed several year classes of these slabs, ensuring good fishing for years to come. Good populations of channel catfish, largemouth bass and northern pike provide opportunities for a variety of anglers.

MOST OVERLOOKED

Lake Pahoja (Lyon County) and Nelson Park Lake (Crawford County)

Lake Pahoja (Lyon County) – This small 70-acre man-made lake in extreme northwestern Iowa is overlooked by many anglers, probably because of its location. As with many small lakes, the fishery supports a rather localized clientele. The adjacent park is maintained and managed by the Lyon County Conservation Board, with all the amenities from camping cabins to playgrounds and all the facilities that accompany modern day camping. This lake has provided many hours of angling for largemouth bass, bluegill and crappie. At present, the lake supports a tremendous population of nice-sized channel catfish that can be harvested day or night on a variety of baits.

Nelson Park Lake – What this lake lacks in size, it more than makes up for in quality. Located in Crawford County, three miles west and three miles north of Dow City, this 11-acre lake contains an abundance of keeper crappie and bluegill as well as a great channel catfish fishery. Bluegills range from 7 to 8 inches and the crappie fall in the 8- to 11-inch range. A cage catfish program with the Crawford County Conservation Board assures the angler of a continuous supply of catchable size cats. Electric motors only are allowed on this small lake.

3. **Clear Lake** — *Cerro Gordo*, Fish early morning or evenings on the windy shoreline throughout the summer.
4. **Storm Lake** — *Buena Vista*, One of the best channel cat fisheries in the state. Lots of 2- to 4-pounders.
5. **Black Hawk Lake** — *Sac*, Great population of “eater” size fish, from 14 to 20 inches.
6. **Silver Lake** — *Dickinson*, Surveys indicate 2- to 3-pound fish available.
7. **Lake Pahoja** — *Lyon*, A huge population of 15- to 20-inch fish.
8. **Ocheyedan Pond** — *Osceola*, An excellent population of “cats” from cage reared and stocked fish.
9. **Five Island** — *Palo Alto*, Good numbers of “cats” present, a bonus for this walleye lake.
10. **Center Lake** — *Dickinson*, Good numbers of 18- to 20-inch fish.

top

5 waters for bluegill

1. **Lake Smith** — *Kossuth*, Renovated in 2001; size and numbers excellent.
2. **Upper and Lower Pine Lakes** — *Hardin*, High density in both lakes; larger fish in Lower.
3. **West Okoboji Lake** — *Dickinson*, Larger fish (8-inch-plus) but fewer numbers for 2005.
4. **Brushy Creek** — *Webster*, Huge year class of 7 - to 8 -inch bluegills. Target suspended fish near the timber in the summer or on the bottom in the fall with a small hook tipped with a wax worm.
5. **North Twin Lake** — *Calhoun*, Bluegills up to 9 inches are plentiful near the structures or on the weed line .

top

4 waters for smallmouth bass

1. **West Okoboji Lake** — *Dickinson*, Fairly consistent producer. Good year-class strength for the 15- to 17-inch fish.

HIDDEN JEWELS

Iowa River (Hardin County) and Scharnberg Park Pond (Clay County)

The Iowa River in Hardin County offers some of the best fishing in north-central Iowa. From Alden to the Hardin/Marshall county line the river supports populations of channel catfish, smallmouth bass, walleye and northern pike. The Hardin County Conservation Board maintains large numbers of public accesses throughout the county. The river valley is extremely scenic and provides excellent opportunities to observe deer, waterfowl, turkeys and other wildlife. The stream is excellent for canoes and small jonboats. Three dams exist along the route: Alden, Iowa Falls and Steamboat Rock.

Scharnberg Park Pond (Clay County) – This 10-acre pond is loaded with channel catfish. There is good shoreline access and a new fishing pier for convenient fishing. Also there are plans in the works for a boat ramp to accommodate small boats. In 2004, a modern campground facility was created along with a couple cabins. This area is maintained and managed by the Clay County Conservation Board and is located one mile east of Everly off County Road B24.

2. **Spirit Lake** — *Dickinson*, Steady with sub-legals growing into the fishery.
3. **Iowa River** — *Hardin*, Riffle/pool habitat with limestone bottom.
4. **Boone River** — *Hamilton*, Scenic river with good number of smallies.

top

5 waters for largemouth bass

1. **Lower Pine Lake** — *Hardin*, Fish up to 7 pounds in 2004 fishery survey.
2. **Briggs Woods Lake** — *Hamilton*, Bass of all sizes sampled in 2004 survey.
3. **Willow Creek Pond** — *Osceola*, Good numbers of legal-sized fish.
4. **Brushy Creek** — *Webster*, Lots of angling pressure but lots of bass. Some fish exceed 6 pounds.
5. **West Okoboji Lake** — *Dickinson*, Fairly consistent; will be more legal fish available for 2005.

top

5 waters for northern pike

1. **Silver** — *Worth*, Three- to 5-pound fish taken in spring and fall.
2. **Spirit Lake** — *Dickinson*, Spring brood stock netting indicates an abundant and growing population.
3. **West Okoboji** — *Dickinson*, Trophies and hammer handles available.
4. **Tuttle Lake** — *Emmet*, A border lake where the pike have recovered from the 2001 winterkill.
5. **Trumbull Lake** — *Clay*, Shallow lake with nice-sized northern pikes.

top

trophies & unique opportunities

Trophies – Muskie populations in Clear Lake (Cerro Gordo), Spirit and West Okoboji (Dickinson) and Brushy Creek (Webster), have matured in numbers and size. Late summer and fall are peak periods.

Unique Opportunities – They're scrappy and good eating so take advantage of yellow bass at North Twin (Calhoun), Black Hawk (Sac) and Clear Lake (Cerro Gordo). The white bass at Storm Lake (Buena Vista) and Yellow Smoke (Crawford) are definitely worth the trip. Lot 's of action and fish larger than 15 inches.

BEST PLACE TO SHORE FISH

Black Hawk Lake (Sac County) and Beeds Lake (Franklin County)

Black Hawk Lake, a 957-acre natural lake located in Sac County, has 11.4 miles of shoreline. Almost 50 percent is publicly owned, an extremely high percentage of public ownership for a natural lake in Iowa. Creel surveys in past years have shown that shore anglers catch almost as many fish per hour as boat anglers. The best shoreline fishing per hour occurs in the spring when the bullheads move into the shallow waters. These fish are ideal for young and old anglers alike and provide an ideal family fishing outing. Thousands of crappie, walleye, catfish and yellow bass are also caught from the shoreline each year. No boat, no problem.

Beeds Lake offers some of the best shore fishing in northern Iowa. Five fishing jetties, one pier and several small docks provide access from the shoreline. In addition to these structures the entire shoreline is open to fishing, with the causeway on the west end being one of the most popular areas.

Beeds Lake supports a high density of crappies, with most running between 8 and 9 inches. Crappies will move into the rocks around the jetties and the causeway in mid-May and provide good opportunities for panfish. Largemouth bass and northern pike are frequently caught from the shore when the weeds begin to grow. Early morning and sunset are the best time for these predators throughout the summer.

If you prefer catfish, Beeds Lake has plenty of them as well. Fishing at night usually provides the best results. Prepared stink baits, chicken livers, dead chubs and frogs are the preferred baits.