



Fish

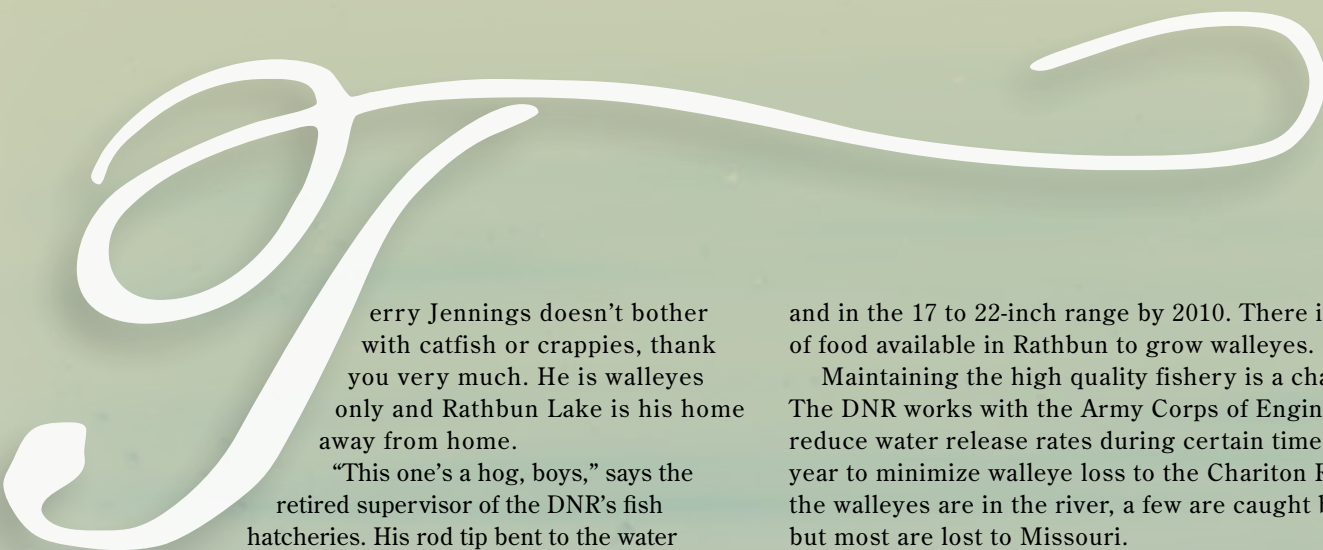


WALLEYE PHOTO BY MICK KLEMESRUD; PHOTO, THIS PAGE, BY MARK FLAMMANG

Unmatched Walleye Fishing on Southern Iowa's Spectacular Rathbun Lake

BY MICK KLEMESRUD

On!



erry Jennings doesn't bother with catfish or crappies, thank you very much. He is walleyes only and Rathbun Lake is his home away from home.

"This one's a hog, boys," says the retired supervisor of the DNR's fish hatcheries. His rod tip bent to the water surface, Jennings slowly reaches over to shut off the kicker motor. "This one's a hog."

Netted and boated, the 22-inch walleye slid in to the live well to join three others caught earlier in the day. She was the largest, so far.

Lake Rathbun, the 11,000-acre reservoir across Appanoose and Monroe counties, is Iowa's most substantial walleye resource south of Interstate 80 and is in the top 25 percent of the most productive walleye lakes in the world.

The Rathbun walleye fishery has come a long way since the 1980s collapsed when numbers dropped dramatically due to a not-so-successful stocking program. It was a boom or bust cycle, but by the 1980s, it was mostly bust. The DNR was determined to do better.

and in the 17 to 22-inch range by 2010. There is a lot of food available in Rathbun to grow walleyes.

Maintaining the high quality fishery is a challenge. The DNR works with the Army Corps of Engineers to reduce water release rates during certain times of the year to minimize walleye loss to the Chariton River. Once the walleyes are in the river, a few are caught by anglers, but most are lost to Missouri.

The Rathbun Land and Water Alliance is an active group of federal, state, local officials with private groups and landowners working together toward a goal to improve and maintain the lake water quality.

"Water quality is the key," says Mark Flammang, fisheries management biologist at Lake Rathbun since 1995. "The common thread is we all want good water quality at Rathbun. Anything we do to improve the water quality will improve fishing and the lake in general."

Fishing at Lake Rathbun differs from other walleye lakes. The best fishing begins mid-May at the earliest. In 2007, it didn't begin until Labor Day. Rathbun is primarily a summer fishery, improving as the weather gets warmer. If a cold front comes through, fishing slows and anglers may want to wait until the weather heats up.

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To help lessen the impact of the down years and to rebuild the fishery, the DNR grew and stocked larger fingerlings, which have a much higher survival rate than fry-size fish.

The hatchery still released 33 million newly hatched fry in Rathbun each spring, but would add 80,000 8-inch fingerlings in the fall. Fisheries staff set a goal of tripling the walleye biomass in the lake—accomplished in the early 1990s. Then they set the bar higher to double the previous goal. That was accomplished in the late 1990s. The process of growing large walleyes before stocking resurrected the Lake Rathbun fishery and now benefits other Iowa lakes. The 8-inch walleyes stocked in 2006 will have reached the 12- to 14-inch range by fall 2007. The walleyes stocked in 2007 will be that same length in fall 2008, then in the 15- to 17-inch range in 2009,

Fish on!

"Got it! Fish on," Flammang says with a solid hook set from the middle of the boat.

"Is it a bluegill?" jokes Jennings as Flammang swings in the nearly 15-inch walleye.

Anglers attack Rathbun in one of two ways: with live bait at specific areas either trolled or drifted, or by pulling crankbaits around the lake. Jennings knows the lake, and prefers to back troll over specific areas.

Trolling backwards in shallow water among rocks and stumps can be tricky. Jennings back trolls in a zigzag pattern over sunken islands and other underwater mounds. He goes as fast as he can and stay in contact with the lake bottom, usually between 1 to 1.5 miles per hour.

"You get another one Terry?" Flammang asks.

"Yep, and it's another big one," Jennings says. A scoop

Lake Rathbun is 11,000 acres of top walleye water. When hot summer days cause fish in other lakes to get lockjaw, walleye fishing is often at its best at Rathbun.





*“You aren’t kidding,
they aren’t shy,”*

Flammang says while pulling up the aggressive 17-incher.

of the net and a 19-inch walleye is in the boat. "When a big one hits, it feels like you hit a snag."

Walleyes primarily feed on gizzard shad, spottail shiners, emerald shiners, and young crappies. The Corps will raise and hold the water level from April 1 to mid-June, which benefits of crappies and gizzard shad. The flooded vegetation provides food and escape habitat for young fish, which also works to the advantage of walleyes.

Jennings uses night crawlers exclusively for bait. "Some guys use minnows, not many use leeches. Leeches are hard to come by in this part of the state," he says. Jennings uses spinners with two hooks—one about three or four inches below the other, so he can set the hook without giving so much line or hooking them too deep.

Pulling crankbaits is another popular way to fish as anglers can cover a lot of water and don't need extensive lake knowledge. Plus, crankbait-caught walleye tend to be larger than those caught with live bait. Live bait anglers need to know where the sunken humps and other structures are located to be successful. On average, live bait will produce more walleyes, but they will be smaller.

Even in the heat of summer, walleyes can be found close to shore, in less than 4 feet of water. Jennings favors using a 1 ounce to 1 and a half ounce bottom bouncer with a spinner harness tipped with a night crawler. The bottom bouncer helps to keep the bait up off the bottom from hungry 10-inch channel catfish as well as all the snags.

Looking ahead

"You aren't kidding, they aren't shy," Flammang says, pulling up the aggressive 17-incher.

"How'd that feel?" Jennings asks.

"Hit it like a deer running into a fence—smacked it," Flammang says, placing it into the live well.

The past few years, Rathbun walleye fishing has been better in April and May than June and July, a reversal of trend. Some anglers take that as a sign the fish are gone, which is not the case, and protections are needed. Flammang says they continue to evaluate the impact of regulations, including the possibility of adding a minimum length limit.

Currently, Rathbun has no length limit and Flammang receives a number of questions on why. Sorting through reams of data, he shows only 10 percent of walleye caught below 15 inches are kept, mainly because anglers are concerned about the fish dying after release from being hooked too deeply. Those fish make up about 22 percent of all walleyes harvested.

"Length limits would reduce the harvest substantially, with no real improvement in the walleye population," Flammang says. "We're always looking at it, but biologically, that need hasn't risen yet."

Opportunity knocks

Lake Rathbun draws anglers from across Iowa and surrounding states for its excellent walleye and crappie fishing. An estimated 40,000 to 45,000 anglers fish Rathbun for walleyes annually, and that number could increase with the opening of Iowa's first resort state park on the lake's north shore.

The new Honey Creek Resort State Park will offer a hotel, a new RV park with 20 full hook-up sites, a fish cleaning station, 48 boat slips, boat rental and a freezer to store cleaned fish and game.

"There definitely is going to be added opportunity here with the new resort state park," Flammang says.



TERRY JENNINGS knows Rathbun. He arrived in 1973 as the hatchery was being built and has netted, reared and released more walleyes and walleye fry than can be counted. Retired since the end of 1999, he spends four or five days each week, as often as the weather allows, fishing for old marble eye.

Jennings keeps a fishing diary recording the length and number of every walleye he catches. In 2006, Jennings caught 957 walleyes. In 2005, he caught more than 800. By mid 2007, he had not surpassed 400. At the end of each year, that diary goes to Mark Flammang, fisheries management biologist responsible for Lake Rathbun. Flammang uses that information along with the fall survey to track the walleye population.

Jennings keeps on the move while fishing. He works shallow out to deeper water and doesn't spend too much time in one spot. If there are no fish in the boat after 15 to 20 minutes, it's off to another area. Keep on the move, work a spot over, and go. Always back trolling around structure, his eye carefully watching the depth finder and GPS. Don't overlook shallow water even in the heat of late July. Try different depths to see what is working. Jennings was using an orange colored spinner blade during the interview, but walleyes were caught on a white silver and chartreuse blades.