This mid-sized river in northeastern Illinois supports an abundant and varied sport fish community and offers unique fishing opportunities for the avid angler.

An Angler's Guide to the Fox River

Story and Photos
By Vic Santucci

DNR fisheries biologist Vic Santucci shows off a couple of large channel catfish. Channel catfish are found throughout the river and Chain O' Lakes and are one of the most abundant sport species in terms of total biomass or weight.

The early morning sun filtered through the trees on the east bank, leaving long, odd-shaped shadows on the water. A light mist rose as the canoe glided onto the gravel bar and came to a stop.

Tom, my son, quickly cast his jig and plastic crawfish into the fast water of a beautiful riffle-and-run habitat dotted with small boulders. Slowly reeling in line as the current carried the lure downstream, the tip of his rod twitched as the lure bounced along the bottom. Just as the jig passed a boulder at the edge of the fast water his line tightened and a 13-inch smallmouth bass leaped from the water.

My attention shifted back to the live minnow I was fishing with in the slow water of the natural pool below the riffle-run habitat. A large swirl appeared near the minnow and the drag on my reel whined as a 3-pound channel catfish took off with the bait.

The Fox River is home to many of the most popular sport fish species—smallmouth and largemouth bass, northern pike, flathead catfish, walleye and muskie—and a variety of other sought-after species, such as black and white crappie, bluegill, freshwater drum, white bass, yellow bass, common carp and several types of large-bodied suckers.

(Photo courtesy Frank Jakubicek.)

A satisfied Fox River anglers displays a legal walleye from the Fox Chain's Lake Marie. The Chain has an 18- to 24-inch protective slot limit to prevent harvest of large female walleyes that are collected each spring as broodfish for the DNR's hatchery system. Largemouth bass, like the one shown above, are an important predator and sport species in the Fox River.

The Fox River originates near Waukesha, Wisconsin and flows in a southwesterly direction for 185 miles until it reaches the Illinois River at Ottawa. Changes in gradient and local geology combine to create different fishing opportunities along the 115 miles of river that flow through Illinois.

The flat, upper river reach includes the 7,100-acre Fox Chain O'Lakes and its exceptional walleye, muskie, largemouth bass and channel catfish fisheries, where anglers generally utilize boats and typical lake techniques. In contrast, the shallow water and stream-like conditions found throughout much of the river below the Algonquin Dam dictate that anglers leave their bass boats at home and toss out a line from shore or while wading, canoeing or kayaking.

"Good sport fish populations can be found throughout most free-flowing sections of the Fox River," said Steve Pescitelli, Department of Natural Resources (DNR) streams biologist. "Some areas of the Fox River previously had problems, especially in Kane County where heavy pollution and high number of dams combined to reduce fish populations. Since passage of the Clean Water Act in 1972, water quality has improved; however, dams remain a problem, degrading river habitat and fragmenting fish populations."

Thirteen low-head dams on the Fox River do provide good access to the river and an easy target for anglers, but good fishing can be found in most free-flowing sections. Ken Gortowski, an avid Fox River angler and fishing guide, prefers to wade the shallow reaches well downstream of dams.

"That's where the best fishing is and where the real adventure takes place," Gortowski said. "Wading is a great way to get away from it all and enjoy the natural beauty of the river. It can be physically challenging, but the fishing is great

Wading the Fox River

Wading is a great way to access rivers, but precautions are advised.

1. Always wear a life vest.

2. Never wade immediately below or above dams. Many dams have hydraulic "suck holes" or "keepers" at their bases that can trap and drown people.

3. Avoid wading during periods of moderate or high flows when currents can be strong, unpredictable and dangerous. The summer and fall low-flow period (mid June through mid October) is the best time for wading, but high water events can occur any time of year.

4. Wear waterproof waders with good soles to protect yourself from sharp objects on the river bed.

5. Take it slow and become familiar with the section of river you are wading. The Fox River has low water clarity much of the year due to abundant planktonic algal blooms that make submerged obstacles (boulders, logs, scour holes) difficult to see, even with polarized sunglasses.

6. Wade with a buddy. Fishing with a friend who knows the river—or a fishing guide—is recommended for first timers. Check out local bait shops and fishing newspapers or conduct a Web search to hook up with experienced fishing guides.

A DNR hauling truck is used to transport fingerlings from one of the State hatcheries for stocking in the Fox River. Many fish species are able to maintain populations by natural reproduction in the varied habitats of the Fox River, but species such as walleye, muskellunge and largemouth bass receive help from the state hatchery system.

(Photo courtesy Steve Pescitelli.)

An angler struggles to hold on to a monster muskellunge from Lake Catherine (above). Originally introduced in the Chain, legal-sized muskie (more than 48 inches long) now can be found throughout the Fox River in Illinois. DNR streams biologist Bob Rung (right) displays two nice walleyes caught by hook-and-line in the lower Fox River near Yorkville.

and you really begin to appreciate the relationship between good river habitat and good sport fishing."

If wading is not your cup of tea, try canoeing or kayaking to access those hard-to-get-to fishing holes. The best paddling is located in the lower river downstream of Aurora. There are about 9 miles of free-flowing river between the Montgomery and Yorkville dams and about 27 miles between the Yorkville and Dayton dams. The river between Sheridan and Ayers Landing at Wedron is particularly scenic with up to 100-foot high sandstone bluffs, shallow caves, tributary waterfalls, islands, small rapids and deep scour pools.

Channel and flathead catfish and several large sucker species are common in the lower Fox. Certain reaches also are known to support good populations of smallmouth bass, walleye and muskellunge. Diverse habitat (i.e., varying current velocities, water depths, bottom substrate and physical cover) is key to good fish populations and fishing in mid-sized rivers like the Fox. Specific areas to target include tributary mouths, deep holes, bridge piers, areas where fast-moving water flows into slack pools and downstream reaches of natural pools just upstream of riffles.

Wondering where all of the fish in the river come from? Many species are native and maintain populations on their own by reproducing naturally in the river and associated wetlands and tributary streams. Many tributaries continue to be important components of the Fox River ecosystem because they are a source of clean water and provide important spawning and nursery habitat for sport and non-game fishes.

Take a drive to check out the Fox River and the many fishing opportunities it has to offer. While there, take a moment to consider how far the river has come—and think about what you can do to help preserve this important natural resource for future generations of anglers.

(Photo courtesy Ray Mathis.)

Whether fishing by boat, bank or wading, anglers find good sport fish populations throughout the Fox River. Photo taken at the boat concession operation at Moraine Hills State Park in McHenry County.

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