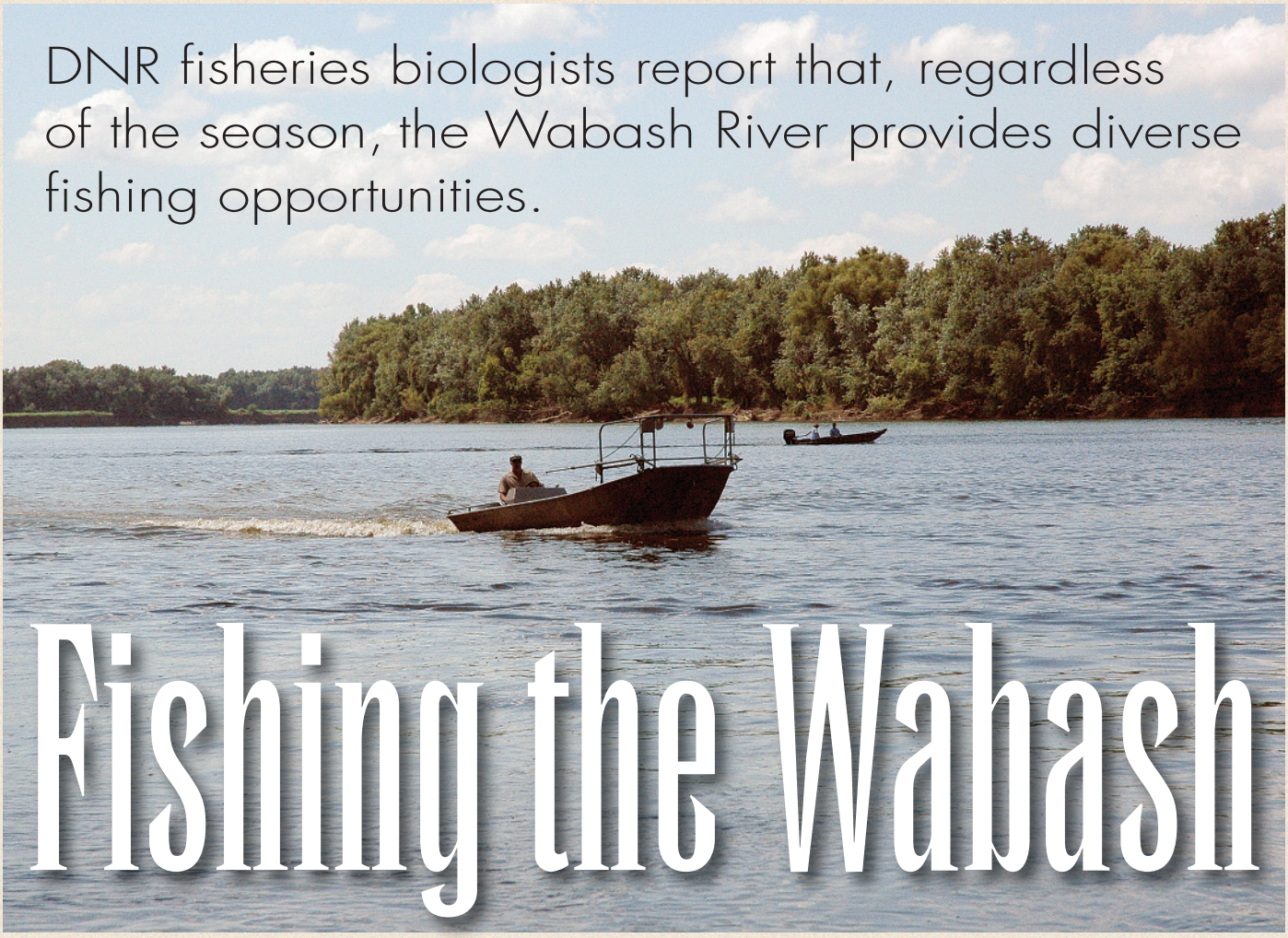
DNR fisheries biologists report that, regardless of the season, the Wabash River provides diverse fishing opportunities.



Fishing the Wabash

Story and Photos
By Les Frankland

To the Miami Indians it was "wah-bah-shik-ki," meaning "pure white" because the clear waters flowing over the limestone river bed near Fort Wayne, Indiana, created an image of a shining, white river.

The Wabash River—one of the largest free-flowing rivers east of the Mississippi—originates near Fort Recovery, Ohio, flowing southwest for 500 miles through Indiana and forming the boundary between Indiana and Illinois until it meets the Ohio River above Old Shawneetown. Unlike all other large Illinois rivers, the Wabash River has no navigation channel, and no commercial navigation. River depths can vary from 6 inches to 50 feet, creating a challenging outing to boaters not familiar with the river. Boaters are advised to check river stages as some areas cannot be traversed by boat during low-water periods.

The Wabash drainage area is approximately 33,000 square miles, of which about two-thirds is agricultural and one-quarter comes from Illinois. The river flows unimpeded for more than 400 miles from the Huntington Dam in Indiana to its confluence with the Ohio.

Starting south of I-70, the Wabash River forms a common boundary between Illinois and Indiana, and provides nearly 200 miles of angling opportunities.

Illinois' portion of the Wabash River is more than 200 miles long and starts about 9 miles above Darwin, or 15 miles below Terre Haute, Indiana. It continues its course south, picking up drainage from the Embarras River south of Vincennes, Indiana. At Mt. Carmel, the White River, draining a large portion of Indiana, enters the Wabash. At that point the Wabash nearly doubles in size and continues its course, receiving drainage from the Little Wabash near New Haven. From there, the Wabash flows

In recent history, the harlequin darter (*Etheostoma histrio*), one of the smallest fish in the Wabash and an Illinois-endangered species, is known only from the Embarras and lower Wabash rivers.

Canada geese settle on the banks of the Wabash River near Grayville (Edwards and White counties). A nearby, large, oxbow lake is a popular fishing destination.

another 15 miles, ending at Wabash Island on the Ohio River.

Because of its unique qualities for a large Illinois river, the Wabash supports a diverse fishery. Fish species range from small, endangered darters to large paddlefish. Sport species present include blue cat, channel cat, flathead cat, white bass, black bass, striped bass, hybrid striped bass, smallmouth bass, spotted bass, largemouth bass, white crappie, black crappie, bluegill, freshwater drum and sauger. Carp—common, grass, bighead and silver—also are present.

Catfish provide the best opportunities for the angler and can be found throughout the river's entire length.

Smallmouth bass are found in the upper 100 miles of the river and spotted bass throughout its length. Late summer and fall, when river levels are low and the water clarity is improved, are the best time to seek black bass.

Among the fish found in the Wabash River are paddlefish (below, held by Mack Sitzes, fisheries technician) and blue cats (right, held by Steve Jenkins, fisheries biologist).

White, striped and hybrid striped bass can be found throughout the river's length but are more numerous in the lower 100 miles. Look for these species from spring through early summer in the lower river around the numerous sandbars and fast-water riffle areas.

Sauger can be found throughout the river's entire length. Those same sandbars and fast-water riffles hold sauger

Although not as common as their cousin the sauger, walleye are a prized sport fish and present in the Wabash River.

from late February through early April.

Better fishing opportunities for largemouth bass, crappie and bluegill are in the oxbow lakes along the river. Formed when the river cut off large bends, these oxbows serve as the boundary between Indiana and Illinois. A large oxbow lake, accessible to the public, can be found at Grayville. The paved boat ramp and parking area are managed by the City of Grayville.

Although angling success can occur anywhere on the river, a few stretches are especially well-known. Identified by Illinois locations are the river stretches near Mt. Carmel, Maunie and New Haven. Indiana reaches include areas near Vincennes and New Harmony.

Boat access to the river can be found at the public boat ramps on the Illinois and Indiana sides of the Wabash. Public ramps on the Illinois side can be found at Hutsonville, Westport, St. Francisville, Mt Carmel, Grayville, Brown's Pond near Maunie and New Haven via a 2-mile stretch of the Little Wabash River (see sidebar).

The uniqueness of the Wabash River and its diverse fishery will provide the angler with many rewarding experiences that cannot be found on other Illinois waters.

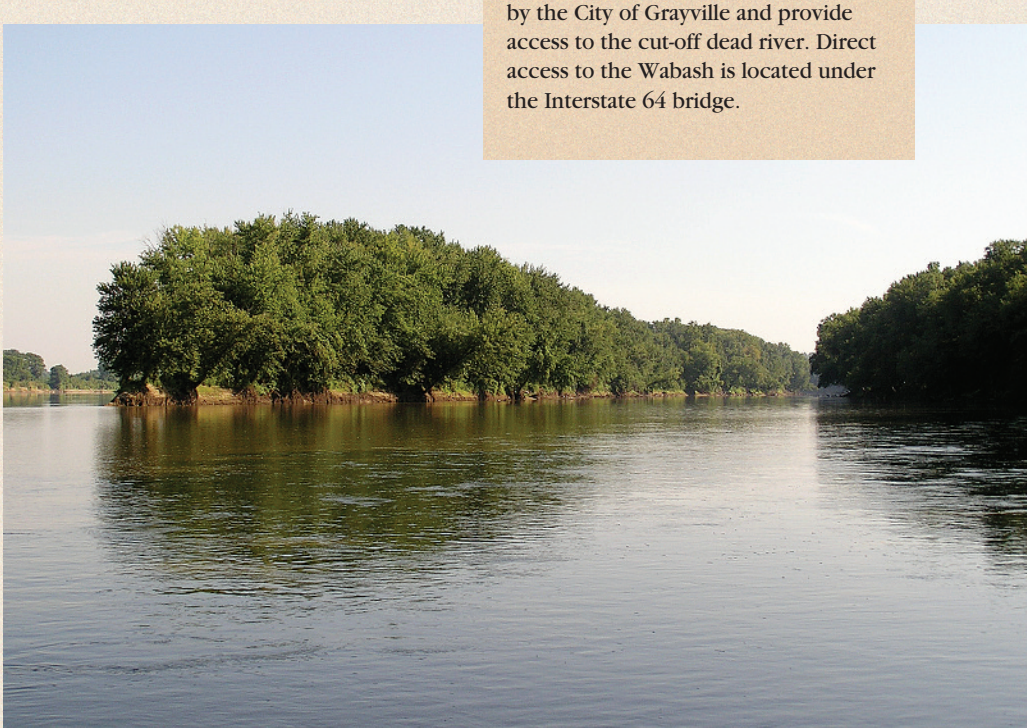
One of the largest islands in the Wabash, Mink Island, near Maunie in White County, provides a diverse fisheries habitat.

Boundary river fishing

Officers of Illinois and Indiana will recognize and accept valid sport fishing licenses of either state when legally possessed and used on the Wabash River forming a common boundary between Illinois and Indiana. Anglers shall not fish on water beyond the natural and ordinary river banks of the state in which they are not licensed to fish. Anglers shall not fish from land attached to or taxed by the state in which they are not licensed or fish in tributaries, bayous or backwaters of that state. Anglers must abide by the laws of the state in which they are fishing.

Wabash River access areas in Illinois

Darwin: Boaters may access the river at the end of Franklin Street in Dawin from the ramp a farmer uses to ferry equipment across the river.
Hutsonville: South of the Route 154 bridge at Cherry and South Water Streets are a paved boat ramp, parking lot, picnic table and shelter.
St. Francisville: This access site has a paved boat ramp, dock, parking, picnic tables, benches, shelter and portable restrooms.
Mt. Carmel: Located south of 5th Street, this access area has a paved, double boat ramp and gravel parking lot.
Grayville City Access Site and Memorial Park: These paved boat ramps and parking areas are managed by the City of Grayville and provide access to the cut-off dead river. Direct access to the Wabash is located under the Interstate 64 bridge.

Beall Woods State Natural Area, located on the banks of the Wabash River in southeastern Illinois, has one of the few remaining tracts of relatively virgin timber east of the Mississippi River. Besides hiking, Beall Woods offers camping, picnicking, fishing—and a chance to marvel at trees that are 120 feet high and more than 3 feet in diameter.

For further information, write Beall Woods State Natural Area, 9285 Beall Woods Ave., Mount Carmel, IL 62863, phone (618) 298-2442 or visit dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/parks/r5/beall.htm.