At this central Illinois cooling lake, there's more on the line than generating electricity.

Power to the Anglers

Story By Mike Garthaus
Photos by Adele Hodde

In 2007, an outdoor cable television show listed Clinton Lake as one of the top 10 family-friendly places to fish in the country. And, contributing to that recognition is the greatly improving fisheries at this central Illinois hotspot.

Clinton Lake has been open to fishing for more than 30 years, and the management of its fisheries has been a partnership from the beginning. Illinois Power, the original owners of the Clinton Power Station, and the Department of Natural Resources worked together to formulate a management strategy for the lake and provide resources to create, and later improve, the fisheries. New partnerships have been established with Exelon, the current owner of Clinton Power Station, fishing clubs and sportsmen's groups that have provided funds and assistance for the management of the fisheries.

Before the lake was opened to fishing, DNR stocked more than 4.2 million fish to provide a quality fishing experience and establish a large number of predators to control rough fish. The species stocked were largemouth bass, walleye, channel catfish, redear sunfish, bluegill, tiger muskie and hybrid striped bass.

Annual fish surveys conducted by DNR since 1979 have provided valuable information for the management of the fisheries. September electrofishing sampling results are used to determine if fishing regulations or stocking requests

largemouth bass

DNR fisheries biologists and volunteers have conducted annual fish surveys at Clinton Lake for more than 30 years.

need to be altered. In addition to these annual surveys, special surveys have been conducted for 30 years to help manage walleye, largemouth bass, hybrid striped bass and crappie.

In addition to stockings from the state hatchery system, fish are supplied from on-site rearing ponds built by Illinois Power. In 2008, Exelon built a new rearing pond at Clinton Lake, increasing the number of rearing ponds to five. The Illinois Smallmouth Alliance, Illinois Bass Federation, Bloomington/Normal Bass Club, Fishers of Men Bass Tournament and the McClean County Sportsmen donated funds to make needed improvements to the aged rearing ponds. DNR's heavy equipment crew also is completely refurbishing one of the rearing ponds.

The state hatchery system and the on-site rearing ponds have been utilized to stock millions of fish into Clinton Lake. The initial stockings of walleye, hybrid striped bass, largemouth bass and tiger muskie continued for many years, with smallmouth bass, striped bass and crappie later added to the stocking list.

Since 1979, approximately 124 million walleye fry and 2 million fingerlings from the state hatchery system, and 65,000 walleye fingerlings produced from rearing ponds, have been stocked in Clinton Lake. The walleye stocking program has established and maintained a great walleye fishery. Approximately 52 percent of the walleye collected during the 2009 fish survey were longer than 20 inches. During the 2009 survey, the catch rate for walleye 20-plus inches in length was the highest catch rate in more than 17 years. Even a decade ago, a survey reported more than 5,500 walleye caught in Clinton Lake that year.

The addition of hybrid striped bass to Clinton Lake provides a bonus trophy fishery, which has developed into one of the best in the state. Approximately 835,000 hybrid striped bass fingerlings and 330,000 fry have been stocked since 1978; however, from 2000 to 2007 only 50,000 fingerlings were stocked, and the fishery declined. In order to improve the hybrid striped bass fishery, Exelon stocked 50,000 fingerlings in both 2008 and 2009, supplemented with more than 75,000 and 45,000, respectively, stocked from the state hatchery system. Because of the increased stocking effort, the hybrid striper fishery is on the rise. The 2000 angler survey reported that approximately 3,500 hybrid striped bass were caught in Clinton Lake during that year, and the 2009 electrofishing survey reported the highest catch rate for the past 12 years.

September electrofishing samples allow biologists to temporarily stun and collect fish to monitor population characteristics.

Thirty years of data on species numbers, lengths and weights have been used to establish Clinton Lake's fishing regulations.

Smallmouth bass were present in Salt Creek before Clinton Lake was constructed, and have maintained a small, fishable population in the lake. Since 1993, rearing ponds have been used to raise more than 18,000 smallmouth bass for the lake. Since 2001, 406,000 2-inch smallmouth and 85,000 4-inch smallmouth have been stocked from the state hatchery system. Even though their number is below the management objective, the 2009 fish survey resulted in the lake's highest-ever catch rate for smallmouth bass. The smallmouth bass stocking effort is improving this popular game fish fishery.

When Clinton Lake first opened, the most popular fish was crappie. Results of angler surveys conducted from 1982 to 1988 revealed that more than 90 percent of the fish harvested from Clinton Lake were white crappie. In the early 1990s the crappie fishery declined, and angling pressure was not far behind. An effort was started in 1999 to improve the crappie fishery by using on-site rearing ponds. Between 1999 and 2005, Clinton Lake was stocked with more than 30,500 white crappie produced from the on-site rearing ponds. Unfortunately, white crappie numbers did not increase during fish surveys, so another approach was taken to improve this fishery.

Starting in 2007, rearing ponds were used to raise and stock black-nose crappie. The black-nose crappie is a black crappie with a black mark from its chin to the top of the head. The black stripe provides biologists a natural mark on the fish that can be used to determine the success of the stocking program. (NOTE: Even though anglers want these fish in other waters, anglers are not allowed to transport live fish in Illinois.)

From 2007 to 2009, more than 143,000 black-nose crappie were stocked into Clinton Lake. Crappie stocked in 2007 averaged nearly 9 inches in length in the fall of 2009 and plenty of legal fish should be available in 2010.

The goal of the crappie-stocking project is to increase the number of anglers having successful fishing trips at Clinton Lake—and anglers already are catching a large number of these fish. During the 2000 angler survey more than 85,000 crappie were caught. Since crappie have a difficult time producing high numbers naturally in Clinton Lake, the continued use of rearing ponds will be used to maintain a good population.

The fish highlighted are only a selection of the management projects that have taken place at Clinton Lake. Nothing can guarantee a successful angling trip, but many man-hours and resources have been devoted to providing quality fisheries in Clinton Lake.

The future of successful fishing at Clinton Lake looks very bright. If you have not fished this central Illinois wonder for many years, or are looking for a new destination, put Clinton Lake on your list.

Mike Garthaus is the DNR district fisheries biologist for Ford, DeWitt, Piatt, Livingston, McLean, Vermilion, Champaign and Iroquois counties.

At a glance

Clinton Lake State Recreation Area, 7251 Ranger Road, DeWitt, IL 61735
Telephone: (217) 935-8722
Web site: dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/parks/r3/clinton.htm
Directions: From I-55, north bound, exit east on Route 54 to Clinton. Continue to DeWitt, where a brown informational sign will read "Mascoutin State Recreation Area." Turn right onto Highway 14 through DeWitt. Proceed approximately 1 mile to the park.

Clinton Lake in review

Clinton Lake, constructed to serve as a cooling lake for the Clinton Nuclear Power Plant, was formed by damming Salt Creek just downstream of the confluence with the North Fork of Salt Creek. The dam was closed on October 12, 1977 and filled to its normal pool elevation on May 17, 1978 creating a 4,895-acre reservoir. Clinton Lake was opened to fishing on August 1, 1979.

The addition of striped bass to Clinton Lake created a trophy fishery, and catch rates continue to increase.