Wherever there's bait fish, predators will follow. Smart anglers go with the flow.

Fishing the Tailwaters of Lake Shelbyville

(Photo by Kathy Andrews.)

Story By Trent Thomas

When the seagulls are in tight formation over the churning water below the Lake Shelbyville dam, you know the fishing is red hot in the tailwaters.

Large numbers of bait fish associated with a high volume of water being released from the lake attracts gulls—and concentrates big fish for a feeding frenzy. Another indication of good fishing is a full parking lot, as locals are tuned-in to these predictable fishing bonanzas. But what are they catching? A good question that is not easily answered.

There is no doubt that many come for the muskies. The fabled "fish of a thousand casts" apparently does not apply here. The current Illinois state record hailed from the tailwaters: a 38-pound, 8-ounce monster caught in April 2002. Every spring nearly a half dozen 50-inchers are produced on average, and reports exist of fishermen catching 30 muskies in one outstanding day. One faithful tailwater fisherman turned in a voluntary creel card which recorded 189 muskies caught in the tailwaters in 2006. If your intentions are to catch a muskie, the tailwaters of Lake Shelbyville are a good place to be. These popular fish are well known to escape the reservoirs in which they are stocked. The occasional one will continue down river, but the vast majority stick around the dam where a steady diet of gizzard shad is delivered from the lake.

Not everyone is there for the muskies, though. Many fishermen line the banks to catch their daily limit of six saugers. A temperature change of a few degrees and fishermen are catching their limit of walleye instead. Both species are native to the Kaskaskia River, although current populations are surely supplemented with stocked fish escaping the reservoirs of Shelbyville and Carlyle. Small spinner baits and twister tails seem to be the lures of choice for the task. Sixteen to 20 inches is the average size of these highly coveted eaters, but the occasional 10-pound walleye has been recorded.

Tailwaters can provide red-hot fishing action, but the turbulent nature of these waters deserves respect.

Scheduled water releases in mid-December to bring Lake Shelbyville

Seasonal rains and discharge schedules may affect fishing success. For current fishing conditions at Lake Shelbyville call (217) 774-3951 or visit www.mvs.usace.army.mil/Shelbyville.

Safety First

Water-based recreation is a huge industry in Illinois, and tragically each year people die preventable deaths boating, fishing, wading or swimming near the turbulent waters near dams.

At Lake Shelbyville, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers designed the tailwaters to exclude public access close to the base of the dam. All dams are different dynamically and visitors should use extreme caution. Get to know the river in advance of your visit. Stay back from dams when approaching from upstream or downstream. Never wade or swim in the vicinity of a dam. Always wear your life jacket.

Current fishing conditions for Lake Shelbyville are available by calling (217) 774-2020 or at www.lakeshelbyville.com.

For further information about dam safety, visit www.dnr.state.il.us/owr/SafetyAtDams.htm.

down to winter pool level also bring the true underwater giants. You can set your clock by the arrival of the big flathead catfish. Flathead catfish in the 60-pound range have been documented with rumors of bigger ones out there. The exceptionally wet year of 2002, with high flows throughout most of the summer months, produced several flatheads more than 50 pounds including the site-record 62-pounder. The catfish loom down river most of the year and make the mass pilgrimage to the dam to feed on easy meals of shad coming through with the large volume of lake water.

Although the action really heats up during the high-water periods, the tailwaters produce successful fishing days throughout the year. Muskies and saugers maintain steady catch rates throughout the year with a noticeable drop during the dog days of summer. This is a great time to switch your attention to crappies. In 2006, tailwater crappie fishing was rumored to be the best since the dam was constructed 35 years earlier. No explanation is readily available for this good fortune, so just enjoy it while it lasts.

Not surprising, someone also could have a blast catching the more typical river fare in the tailwater area. When nothing else is biting, cast to one of the big gar cruising just below the water surface breaching for the occasional gulp of air. They are easy targets and can be caught all day long. Or, go deeper for the hefty buffalos usually plentiful in the tailwaters that will test the poundage of your line. They are good eating when prepared properly and not many people fish for them.

Summer also is a good time to launch a canoe and head down river where a thriving smallmouth bass population exists. The Kaskaskia River was rumored to boast one of the best smallmouth bass fisheries in the state prior to construction of the reservoir. Today, the population is a splinter of what it was decades ago, but thriving nevertheless. The river is enjoying the successes of a five-year stocking program that has been supplementing the population numbers of smallies. Catch rates have quadrupled since the onset of the program. Several reports of fishermen catching 40 or more smallmouth bass in a single float trip are being told. Not many people make this trip, so the fish are naive to the lures being thrown at them. Most are currently on the small side, around 10 to 12 inches, but you may get lucky and hook one of the 5-pounders that call the Kaskaskia River home. The adult population of smallmouth bass is still vulnerable in this reach, so catch-and-release fishing is strongly recommended for this prized sport fish.

Canoes or kayaks can be rented for a nominal fee at the bait shop on the south side of Highway 16 just below the dam. A half-day trip will take you to the first bridge south of Shelbyville, or you can make it a full day of enjoyable fishing and head for the second bridge. You will find excellent fishing the whole way. For a small charge a concrete boat ramp is available for use, although larger boats cannot navigate the river during low water.

Put the tailwaters of Lake Shelbyville on your list of fishing destinations this year. The choices of target fish species are abundant and excellent.

The locals know it. The seagulls know it. And now you do, too.

(Photo by Adele Hodde.)

The tailwaters provided excellent fishing for South Chicago Heights resident John Klyczek.

(Photo by Adele Hodde.)

Nate Toranzo, Shelbyville, enjoys a quiet moment fishing downstream of the Lake Shelbyville dam.

Trent Thomas is a streams biologist based in Gibson City.