Big-time Smallmouth?

With a new, annual stocking program under way, anglers and biologists have big hopes for "bronzebacks" in Kinkaid Lake.

Story By
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What happens when you stock smallmouth bass into a lake that has a history of producing record-class fish? Fisheries biologists—and anglers—are waiting to see how the newest additions to Kinkaid Lake respond to their new southern home. While smallmouth are often considered a northern species in Illinois, the fact the world record (11 lb. 15 oz.) came from a Tennessee impoundment has both biologists and anglers speculating about the potential for big smallmouth at this southern Illinois lake.

"Kinkaid definitely has the potential to produce large smallmouth, especially in the next 10 to 15 years," explained Shawn Hirst, district fisheries biologist for the Department of Natural Resources. "Many times, the best chance for trophy fish is during the initial introductions as the population is beginning to grow."

Anglers everywhere know that longer growing seasons in warmer, southern waters can produce whopper fish. George Perry's legendary 22 lb. 4 oz. largemouth bass came from Georgia; the world records for both black and white crappie (6 lbs. and 5 lb. 3 oz., respectively) came from Mississippi and Louisiana. The world record walleye (22 lbs. 11 oz.) came from Arkansas.

Yet, for now, anglers must wait for their chance at an Illinois smallmouth record. The newly stocked smallmouth in Kinkaid still have a lot of growing ahead of them, according to Hirst.

Bass anglers at the 2,750-acre Illinois impoundment might someday hook whopper smallmouths if historical trends continue.

(Photo by Adele Hodde.)

(Photo by Joe McFarland.)

Newly stocked smallmouth can thrive with little competition—and a 16-inch minimum size limit for anglers.

"The first smallmouth were stocked in 2005," he pointed out, "but that was only 50 fish we had available that year. In 2006 we stocked 3,200 smallmouth fingerlings and in 2007 we stocked 4,000."

As of June last year, anglers already were hooking some of those young fish at this 2,750-acre Jackson County impoundment.

Veteran Kinkaid Lake fishing guide Al Nutty said, while nobody is fishing specifically for smallmouths yet, he's already caught a few of the "bronzebacks" while taking clients crappie fishing.

"The size ranges from 10-11 inches so far, and the fish look good," Nutty said. "With the dynamic forage base out there, it's really looking promising." Hirst said the relatively few smallmouth present in the huge lake can grow with the advantage of little competition from other smallmouths.

"Intraspecific competition is lower and available food resources are greater at this time," the biologist noted. "Couple that with a strict length (16 inches) limit and strict creel limit (3 fish per day; any combination of largemouth, smallmouth, spotted bass), and the potential is definitely there."

Big fish and Kinkaid seem to go together. Muskie stocked annually in Kinkaid for more than 20 years have thrived: Hirst once netted a 50-inch female that likely would have broken the state record. Although many monster fish used to swim over the spillway, a fence-like spillway barrier now keeps large muskies and other big game fish in the lake ("No one really fishes below the spillway anymore," Hirst said).

Walleye stocked in Kinkaid since the 1980s also reach exceptional size.

"My personal best during spring sampling was a 27-inch 10 pounder," Hirst said. But even bigger walleye have been documented. Researchers tracking muskies in Kinkaid a few years ago often encountered walleye in their nets.

"On March 17, 2004, one net we pulled had eight walleye—and all of them weighed around 10 pounds," testified Pat Beck, a former SIU fisheries researcher now working in Texas. A particular fish Beck lifted from the nets tipped the scales at 10.9 lbs. and measured about 27 inches.

All of the potential trophies were released unharmed. But there are more stories.

Nutty also reports catching a walleye so large it prompted a case of mistaken identity one night last summer. As a practitioner of catch-and-release, he reflexively leaned over the boat to unhook what he assumed was a decent muskie and let it swim away into the dark water.

"It was already too late to grab the net when the fish turned and its eye caught the light," Nutty recalled. He recognized the unmistakable glow of the namesake walleye.

"It looked to be about 33-34 inches," Nutty estimated.

With a documented history of monster muskie and walleye production in the deep waters of Kinkaid, can huge smallmouth be far off? Recent shoreline stabilization efforts added nearly 6 miles of limestone boulders, and biologists say that rocky habitat benefits more than just water clarity.

"That new shoreline is awesome smallmouth habitat," Hirst said. "And while the smallmouth in the lake so far are limited in numbers, if the fish pull off a spawn and it's successful, their numbers could really take off."