

Year of the Walleye

By Eric Fowler

Nebraska's state record walleye was caught almost 40 years ago, but indications are there may be a new record swimming around even as you read this.



PHOTO COURTESY OF RANDY RICHARDS

Of the 50 hook-and-line records on the books in Nebraska, only six have stood longer than the 16 pound, 2 ounce walleye Herbert Cutshall of Ogallala landed on Lake McConaughy in July 1971. Of those, only one – a 10 lb.-11 oz. largemouth bass caught in 1965 – ranks with walleye among the top five game fish most sought by anglers.

Will the state walleye record ever be broken? Nebraska Game and Parks Commission fisheries biologists say based on some recent catches, it could. And if it is, it will most likely happen in one of two waters: the unchannelized Missouri River in Boyd County or Lake McConaughy.

Of the two locations, the odds may be better on the Missouri River. In March of 2009, an 18-pound, egg-laden female was caught in gill nets set by biologists studying paddlefish below Fort Randall Dam, just five miles from the Nebraska state line. In the same net, they caught a 15-pound walleye, and in July they netted another that weighed 15-9. All fish were released and could still be alive and even larger. Another fish caught in the Fort Randall tailwaters in November 2002 matched Nebraska's record and set a new one for South Dakota.

"There are some mega-giant walleye up there in the Fort Randall tailwaters,"

said Brenda Pracheil, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln graduate student who led the Commission's sampling crew.

Jeff Schuckman, who manages northeastern Nebraska fisheries from the Commission's Norfolk office, said tagging studies have shown walleye do indeed move up and down that reach of the Missouri River, some long distances. Fish tagged in the Fort Randall tailwaters have been caught as far downriver as Lewis and Clark Lake and vice versa, although most fish stay where they were tagged.

"There's an opportunity for a big walleye anywhere in that system up there," Schuckman said, adding that while fish tend to stack up below the reservoirs, there are also sections of the river downstream from the dam that are also good walleye fisheries, especially the area where the Missouri first flows into Nebraska.

Above: Randy Richards of North Platte holds a 32-inch, 14.98-pound walleye he caught from Lake McConaughy last April, the second largest walleye submitted for a Master Angler award in 2009.

Right: Brenda Pracheil holds the 18-pound walleye a fisheries research crew caught in the Missouri River below Fort Randall Dam last March, a photo Pracheil says doesn't do the fish justice.



PHOTO COURTESY OF BRENDA PRACHEIL



PHOTO BY BOB GRIER

A lucky angler could pull a state record walleye from Lake McConaughy this year.

Daryl Bauer, fisheries outreach program manager for the Commission, said of all the state's reservoirs, McConaughy has the best chance of producing a new record, largely because three fish caught there in recent years came within a pound of the mark: a 15-8 walleye in 2008 and a 15-4 in 2009, both of which were kept, and a 35-incher that was released in 2001 after tipping the angler's scale at 15-12.

Being the state's largest reservoir, Big Mac also has the most walleye, upping the odds that one can live long enough

to grow to record proportions. And the introduction of alewife into the reservoir in 1986 to help alleviate the boom-and-bust cycles that can come with gizzard shad, McConaughy's primary prey fish to that point, "literally super-sized everything" in the lake, helping walleye grow fast and fat, Bauer said.

The Commission gives Master Angler awards for kept walleye weighing eight pounds or more or released fish measuring 28 inches or longer. While a walleye can reach eight pounds in just six years in ideal habitat conditions stocked with abundant food, Bauer said it takes eight to 10 years for most to reach that size, and it may take 15 to 20 years for a walleye to reach state-record proportions.

Historic sampling records have shown that good walleye fishing in McConaughy is tied to lake levels, said Bauer. When the lake is full, reproduction is high and results in good fishing in the years that follow.

Cutshall's fish could have been the product of the first high-water period at the lake, Bauer said. While Kingsley Dam was completed and Lake McConaughy began filling in 1941, the reservoir didn't reach capacity until 1951. Twenty years later, Nebraska's walleye record was set.

Another high-water period stretched from 1983 to 1987, resulting in the

highest walleye abundance to date in 1988. In 1996, the number of trophy walleye caught in Big Mac began to take off, and between 1997 and 2002, an average of 333 Master Angler awards were issued annually, making it one of the best walleye fisheries in the Midwest. Bauer said those fish, which included a 15-pounder caught in 1996, were likely survivors from excellent production in the late 1980s that grew up on alewives. "I expected that if we were going to bust the record, the early 2000s were probably the best time," Bauer said.

While that window of opportunity closed, another appears to be opening. Drawn to what seemed at the time to be abysmally low levels in 1991, Big Mac's water rose significantly in 1993 and stayed there through 1999, again producing an abundance of walleye. "We're 17 years out from that," Bauer said, "so that's probably those 15-pound fish we're seeing now."

Bauer is happy to see those big fish being caught. He'd worried chances weren't as good at setting a new record this time around due to the nature of the recent drought-induced, record low water levels at Lake McConaughy. At the same time, however, with lake levels now recovering and expected to be the highest since 2000, the stage is also being set for another glut of big walleye in the years to come.

Record Walleye



Nebraska's walleye record ranks favorably among other midwestern states, according to Daryl Bauer, fisheries outreach program manager for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

The list below contains all Midwestern walleye records as well as those from other states that top Nebraska's. In an apples to apples comparison on habitat, only Colorado and Wyoming top Nebraska. Bauer said the records from southeastern states, including Missouri, are from a larger strain of walleye. As one would expect, records from traditional walleye-belt states such as Minnesota are bigger than Nebraska's. As for Montana and other points to the west, Bauer said those fish grow bigger than ours thanks to a diet of trout.

State	Weight	Year
Kansas	13.16	1996
Iowa	14.5	1986
North Dakota	15.75	1959
Nebraska	16.13	1971
South Dakota	16.13	2002
New Mexico	16.56	1989
New York	16.56	2009
Michigan	17.19	1951
Idaho	17.38	2006
Wyoming	17.42	1991
Minnesota	17.5	1979
Pennsylvania	17.56	1980
Montana	17.75	2007
Wisconsin	18	1933
Colorado	18.81	1997
West Virginia	18.97	2004
Oregon	19.15	1990
Washington	19.3	2007
Missouri	21.1	1988
Kentucky	21.5	1958
Arkansas	22.69	1982
Tennessee	25.0	1960

Whether the next record walleye is swimming in Big Mac, the Missouri River or somewhere else, setting it may come down to timing. The 18-pound walleye biologists netted in the

EXCERPTED FROM 2009 FRESHWATER FISHING HALL OF FAME OFFICIAL WORLD AND USA STATE FRESH WATER ANGLING RECORDS

A Big Year at Big Mac?

If the weather cooperates and anglers can pattern the fish, Lake McConaughy could produce an astounding number of big walleye this year and maybe even a new state record.

When Nebraska Game and Parks Commission biologists set gill nets there last fall, they collected more fish longer than 25 inches than any other lake in the state ... way more.

Biologists averaged a total of 27 fish per gill net at Big Mac last fall, fourth highest in the state behind Swanson, Maloney and Sutherland reservoirs. But roughly one third of those fish were 25 inches or longer, a third 20 to 25 inches and another third 15 to 20 inches. According to a formula developed to estimate the total number of walleye in Lake McConaughy, there are more than 400,000 fish 15 inches or longer waiting to be caught.

"I anticipate a lot of Master Angler awards this year," said Daryl Eichner, district fisheries supervisor in charge of McConaughy and other southwestern Nebraska reservoirs, referring to awards issued by the Commission for trophy fish.

While the fall sampling haul was impressive, Eichner said the one night last April that biologists spent netting females to collect eggs for use in hatchery production was even more impressive: In just nine sets, biologists caught more than 140 females, most weighing eight pounds or more. For comparison, the best night last spring at Merritt Reservoir, the state's top lake for egg collection, produced 99 females on 32 sets.

That said, anglers haven't had nearly as much luck as biologists when it came to catching fish at Big Mac the past two years, causing some to wonder if the lake's fishery might have crashed due to extended drawdown caused by drought. Angler success measured by creel surveys was down sharply in 2008

and 2009, both in the number of fish caught and the number harvested. And only 29 Master Angler awards for walleye were earned at the lake in 2009, well below the average of 333 per year awarded from 1997 to 2002.

However, said Eichner, "Those numbers don't represent what's out there."

That may be in part to Master Angler-sized walleye being so common in McConaughy in recent years that many anglers aren't worried about getting a certificate. "I'm one of them," said Kerry Keane of Gering, who guides at Lake McConaughy and last year caught or guided anglers to 35 to 40 Master Angler-sized fish that were not submitted for awards, including one or two a day during a hot fall bite. "I haven't turned in a Master Angler for years, and I really need to, because I know the biologists like to have that data."

Eichner said several factors may have played into the overall drop in fishing success at Lake McConaughy the past two years, most notably cool spring weather and rising water levels.

The walleye fishing at Big Mac typically picks up in April when the fish stage and spawn on Kingsley Dam. Following a post-spawn lull of a week or two, the walleye bite picks up in the western half of the reservoir as water temperatures rise. From early May into June, anglers usually have the best luck drifting leeches or nightcrawlers on Lindy rigs or worm harnesses in shallow water, and catch a few fish on trolled spinner rigs or crankbaits. In July, walleye fishing slows as the fish move to deeper water. As fall approaches, success improves as fish look to fatten up for winter, but by then, fishing pressure has declined substantially.

In 2008 and 2009, however, the water was slow to

warm and the May/June bite simply never took off, Eichner said. "There would be little flurries of a hot bite, but then we would get hit by a storm front with wind and cool temperatures and the bite would die down and it would be dead for a week or more."

Keane agreed. "Last year was good once it warmed up and stabilized, but that didn't happen until mid-July. The May and June bite was horrible."

Rising water levels are a blessing and curse. Extended drought and low inflows caused the lake to dip to a record-low elevation, but reduced irrigation releases by Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District, timely rains and increased runoff from the North Platte River basin have brought water levels up 40 feet since 2006, including a 15-foot rise since February 2009. Central engineer Cory Steinke projects the lake will rise another 10 feet prior to this year's irrigation season, bringing it to within 15 feet of full pool and to 77 percent of capacity, the highest it's been since 2000.

"There's only so much carrying capacity, so fish populations adjusted accordingly," Eichner said of the low water years. "Now we're going to return to something that resembles a full McConaughy and the fish are going to have a lot more elbow room."

And with rising water expected to flood 5,000 acres of trees that grew on the exposed lakebed during the drawdown, "it's going to make it more challenging to get those fish out of shallow water on the western part of the lake," Eichner said. "It's going to be work. The guys are going into that brush, trying to find

some gaps, but it's going to be very difficult not to snag up."

The decline in angler success has helped keep walleye numbers up in Lake McConaughy, which is good considering walleye recruitment was poor the past two years, despite the stocking of 2.2 million fingerlings and 3.5 million fry.

"The 1- to 3-year-old walleye are there, but my concern is they're not there in strength," Eichner said. Poor shad reproduction and low lake levels could be to blame, Eichner said, but he hopes increasing the stocking rate in the lake this year will result in a strong year class.

Eichner's concern, however, plays into future years. For now, at least, things are shaping up for a big year for big walleye at Big Mac.

Walleye Over 15 inches in Lake McConaughy

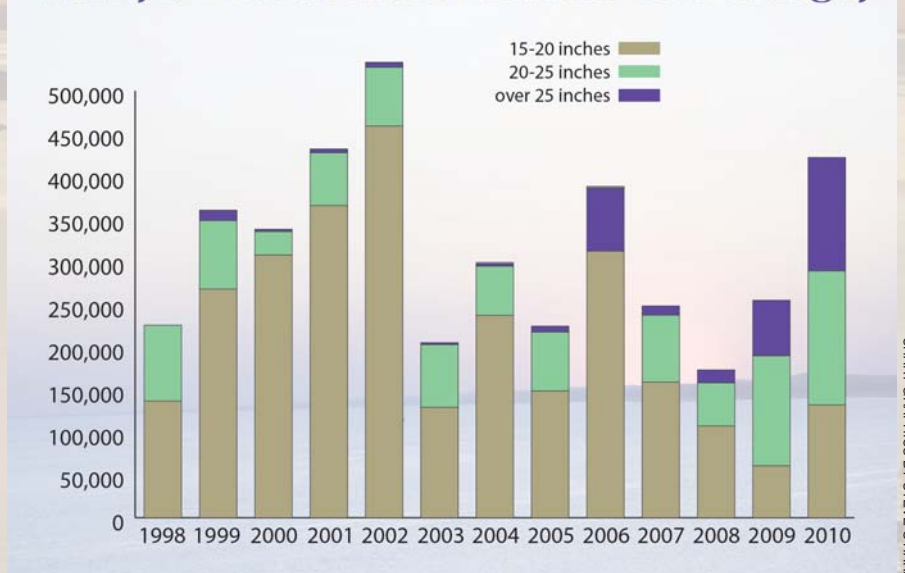


CHART GRAPHICS BY STEVE OHARE



PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

Anglers fish Lake McConaughy near Kingsley Dam.

Missouri River last spring was just 29 inches long. No girth measurement was taken, but the pre-spawn female was so fat it was "like holding a football," said Pracheil. "It was unbelievable. I've never seen anything like it. And we've caught a lot of big walleye."

While some may scoff at the notion that a 29-inch fish could weigh that much, Bauer said fish put on more girth than length as they age. He said the eggs the fish was carrying likely weighed between one and two pounds, meaning that the fish's post-spawn weight could still top either the Nebraska or South Dakota record. Master Angler data from McConaughy

shows 29-inch walleye weighing up to 13 pounds and a 27-incher weighing 12.

"Body mass, fat ... even what it had for supper the night before could have an influence on weight," Bauer said.

"When you talk about a state record-sized fish, that's not just a big fish, that's an exceptionally big fish. That's the rarest of the rare," Bauer said. "So habitat conditions have to be good, if not ideal. You've got to have a heckuva lot of prey to eat, and I'll tell you that in most cases those exceptionally big fish are relatively fast growing. But even if they're fast growers, they've got to live for a pretty good length of time to reach record proportions. And that

means they've got to escape anglers for a pretty good length of time."

The latter point took at least two potential record setters out of the equation. Given another year or two, the 15-pound walleyes caught in Big Mac in recent years might have topped 16-2. Bauer always encourages anglers to release the big ones, and says he would turn a 15-pounder back himself after snapping a few photos and taking measurements for a graphite mount. "But I'm not going to be a catch-and-release Nazi over something like that," said Bauer. "I know how danged excited you're going to be, because I would be too. That is a fish of a lifetime. A

15-pound walleye? That's unheard of."

And if an angler's scale shows he's holding a potential state record, Bauer said there is little chance that fish will survive the required trip to a certified scale and inspection by a biologist.

"Are you going to kill that fish to have a state record?" he said. "Heck yes! And have my name in all the newspapers? Yes! Almost everybody would tell you that."

So if you're looking to be the next record holder, spend some time on McConaughy or the Missouri River, and you never know. If a few fish have grown to or near a record weight, others have as well. ■