

Trying To Save Duck Hunting In Minnesota

BY DOUG SMITH

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MINNEAPOLIS — When Minnesota's duck season opens this fall, there likely will be something in the air besides wingbeats: change.

That's because the season might begin Sept. 24 — the earliest in more than a half-century — after the Legislature changed a law last week that for years forced Minnesota to delay the opener.

And shooting on opening day almost certainly will begin a half-hour before sunrise instead of 9 a.m. because of another law change.

The state also could be broken into north-south hunting zones, and the season split in the south — opening for two days, then closing for a week, then reopening again — while running continuously in the north for 60 days.

"All of those options are on the table," said Tom Landwehr, Department of Natural Resources commissioner. "I think it's fair to say we'll see a different structure this year."

The changes, intended to boost the chances for hunters to shoot ducks, are prompted by the loss of 40,000 state duck hunters over the past dozen years. Those falloffs follow decades-long wetland and upland losses, habitat degradations and hunter dissatisfaction over declining harvest.

Some Minnesota hunters have dropped out of the sport, while others have sought waterfowl in the Dakotas and Canada. Now the DNR is faced with a management conundrum: How to retain a critical mass of hunters while also trying to protect local duck populations.

Whether more birds in the bag will translate into more duck hunters remains to be seen.

"I think it will," said Brad Nylin, executive director of the Minnesota Waterfowl Association, who supports the earlier opener. Said John Devney of Delta Waterfowl: "It's a remarkably positive step in the right direction."

Regardless, the potential changes are historic. Minnesota duck hunters have never had hunting zones, and they haven't seen a split season in 18 years. While no decisions have been made, Landwehr said "there's a pretty good possibility" the opener will be Sept. 24 — the earliest possible under federal guidelines.

That could give hunters a better crack at early migrating ducks — such as wood ducks and blue-winged teal — but it raises several other concerns. What about Youth Waterfowl Day, which, since it began 15 years ago, is held two weeks before the opener? It would fall on Sept. 10.

"That would be too early," Landwehr said. Even a week later might be too early, he said. Ducks likely wouldn't be fully fledged.

"If we went with a Sept. 24 opener, we'd have to talk about whether or not we'd have a youth hunt," Landwehr said. The DNR figures about 5,500 youths participate in the one-day hunt. Nylin said he would support a youth hunt on Sept. 17, a week before the regular opener.

Another issue: Whether opening the season that early would hurt the state's duck-breeding population, especially its coveted mallards.

"There certainly are some who think that's too early and it will have impact on local ducks," said Steve Cordts, DNR waterfowl specialist. But he believes the effects would be minimal.

"The bulk of the birds we'd shoot would be blue-winged teal," he said. Said Devney: "I just don't see any risk to duck populations. The positives far outweigh the negatives."

The Fish and Wildlife Service likely will give states more options for zones and splits this fall. For Minnesota, that could mean north, south and southeast zones along the Mississippi River. The north zone could open on Sept. 24 and run for 60 consecutive days. The south zones could open Sept. 24-25, then close for five days, then reopen for 58.

That would give southern hunters the opportunity to hunt ducks over Thanksgiving weekend — something many of them want.

In fact, legislators passed a law in 2005 forcing the DNR to delay the opener until the Saturday nearest Oct. 1 just for that reason, Cordts said. That requirement was removed from the law last week by the Legislature.

Hunters will find out soon whether big changes are coming. Sept. 24 is only two months away, and Landwehr will have to make decisions within weeks so that rules can be adopted and waterfowl hunting regulations can be published on time.

With a liberal 10-bird daily bag limit, hunters shot an incredible 2.6 million ducks — the second-highest harvest ever.

OF THE OUTDOORS | GARY HOWEY

Cabela's Walleye Tourney Hits Neb.

BY GARY HOWEY
Hartington, Neb.

What does it take for 111 two people teams to spend two long days chasing walleyes on Nebraska's Lake McConaughy when it's 98 degrees with a heat index of 108 degrees?

The answer is simple; the opportunity to become the 2011 Cabela's Regional Walleye Tournament Champion and to be presented the championship trophy along with a check for \$10,000.00.

That's what it was all about when teams from Nebraska, Kansas, Colorado, Wyoming and Texas converged on the big lake in southwestern Nebraska the weekend of July 16-17.

In order to be invited to the tournament, teams from each state had to qualify for the big tournament by fishing and finishing in either the Nebraska Walleye Trail, Kansas Walleye Association, Colorado Walleye Association, Texas Walleye Association or the Wyoming Walleye Stampede tournaments.

The regional tournament rules allow each two person team to weigh in five walleyes each day of the tournament, with each angler only being allowed one fish over 22" per day.

McConaughy is Nebraska's largest reservoir with 35,700 surface acres and over 100 miles of shoreline. It was not too many years ago, Lake McConaughy was low, no more than a small lake with a giant beach, but not so the last few years as the lake has filled. The water was up so much that the sites of last years weigh in and the area where the boats launched was under water, forcing this year's event was moved to Admiral's Cove on the north edge of the lake.

The many years of low water at McConaughy had allowed cottonwoods, willows and other vegetation to thrive. As the water came up, the flooded vegetation made ideal habitat for the walleyes and the alewife on which they feed. Submerged timber could be found from the shallows along the shoreline out into deep water.

Since the contestants are from a broad area, you could bet there would be many fishing methods being used over the big lake. As it was last year, the preferred bait and method being used was to troll 1 1/2-ounce bass style spinner on lead core. Not your traditional walleye bait, but the bait that helped last years champions, Bobby Roland and Scott Sundstrom members of the Nebraska Walleye Trail to bring in their winning weight of 37.48 pounds.



PHOTO: GARY HOWEY
Cabela's Regional Walleye champions: A Cabela's representative (Rt.) presents Brian Regelin (Cozad, Neb.) and Brett Vinzant (Bertrand, Neb.) the first place \$10,000.00 cash prize after they won the Cabela's Regional Walleye Championship with 40.7 pounds of walleyes during the two-day tournament held on Nebraska's Lake McConaughy.

It's believed that these willow leaf spinner baits being trolled deep imitates the main prey fish on the lake, the alewife.

In interviews prior to the tournament, many of the top anglers commented that in order to win this tournament, it would take a two-day limit close to 40 pounds to win the tournament. None felt that catching their big fish would be a problem, many worried about catching the smaller fish, those under 22" long.

As the flights roared out of Admiral's Cove, warm temperatures, high humidity and very little wind greeted them. On McConaughy, which is a clear lake, a wind or walleye chop is needed to activate the fish, especially for those anglers fishing the shallower water.

Because of the high temperatures, the weigh in site was manned all day, allowing contestants to bring their fish in to be weighed after which, the fish were returned to the water, helping to assure a better survival rate.

As it did last year, McConaughy lived up to its big fish reputation as throughout the day over a dozen 7 pound or larger fish were brought to the scales, with the largest fish a 9.94 pound fish caught by Team 13, James Miller (Hershey, Neb.) and Jason Cooper (Sutherland, Neb.).

With the final gun, on day one, the leaders were from a Nebraska Walleye Trail team, Team 44, Brian Regelin (Cozad, Neb.) and his partner Brett Vinzant (Bertrand, Neb.) came to the scale with five fish weighing in at 23.06 pounds, which included a

8.02 walleye. Close behind in second place with 4 fish totaling 20.54 pounds was Team 64, Ron and Seth Green, another Nebraska Walleye Trail team from North Platte, Neb. In third place was Team 13, Miller and Cooper, who weighed in 3 fish totaling 20.04 pounds.

Day two started much the same as day one except the weatherman had predicted a 10-20 MPH wind. Unfortunately, most of the day seemed flat calm, making it a tough bite for many of the teams.

As the contestant's boats roared out of the bay at Admiral's Cove, many of the teams include the Regelin and Vinzant team made their way to the north side of the lake while a few others sped off towards the south shore.

Once again, the hot bait seemed to be the larger spinner baits trolled on leadcore, with a few teams pitching light jigs up into the flooded timber.

The wind that the weatherman had promised finally blew a couple of hours before the final weigh in, allowing the walleyes to move up out of the submerged trees and into the shallower water to feed. This walleye chop was what the teams had hoped for all day.

As the wind picked up, so did the bite with many of the teams reporting their best bite came as the wind started rippling the water.

As the teams came in for the final weigh in, only six large fish were weighed in, even though there were less large fish weighed on day 2. Even though there were less big

fish weighed in, the overall size of those fish was larger with the big fish on Day 2. The big fish of the day ranged from 7.62 pounds to the big fish of the day, a 10.3-pound walleye that was weighed in by Colorado Walleye Association Team 50, Todd Christofferson and Frank Becvar of Longmont, Colo.

When the final tally was announced, the leaders of day 1, Brian Regelin and Brett Vinzant came in with just 2 big fish weighing 17.64 pounds and that added with their 5 fish, 23.06 pounds weighed in on day 1 brought their two day total to 40.7 pounds which was enough to earn them the tournament trophy along with a check for \$10,000.00.

Team 41, caught their fish trolling 140' of lead core line with 2 oz. bass spinnerbaits along the south shore line, in the Vans Resort area, at a depth of 24' down over 30 to 40" of water.

Coming from 8th place to claim the second place \$6,000.00 cash prize was the Nebraska Walleye Trail Team 88, Jason Erickson and John Hupfer of North Platte, NE, who, on Day 1 had brought in 5 fish weighing 17.28 pounds. They weighed in 5 more fish on the second day totaling 17.08 pounds bringing their two-day total weight to 34.36 pounds.

This team, known for pitching jigs into the shallows faced the flat calm waters early in the day, keeping the walleyes deep. Because of the lack of fish in the shallows, they decided to give trolling crankbaits a try, which gave them their one big fish of Day 2.

As the wind picked up, later in the day, rippling the water, Team 88 moved back shallow to pitch jigs where they picked up their final four fish.

In third position and taking home the \$4,000.00 third place prize was the Nebraska Walleye Trail Team 18, Ev Tarrell (Sidney, Neb.) and Jeff Mekelburg (Fleming, Colo.) who came up from 11th place bringing in 3 fish on day two weighing 14.86, giving them a tournament total of 30.08 pounds.

If there was ever a doubt about Lake McConaughy being back and that it holds some of the largest healthiest walleyes in the upper Midwest, this tournament should answer that question.

For great walleye fishing and the opportunity to catch that walleye of a lifetime, you might want to give Big Mac a try!

For more information on the great outdoor opportunities that area available at Lake McConaughy and Keith County, Nebraska go to www.visitogallala.com.

Gary Howey, Hartington, Neb., is the president of *Outdoorsmen Productions LLC* and the producer/host of the award winning *Outdoorsmen Adventures* television series. For more information on the *Outdoors* check out www.outdoorsmenadventures.com.

TROPHY SPOTLIGHT



LEFT: Bryce Dangler caught this 2-pound Northern Pike while fishing with brother Brady and grandparents Willard and Shirley Dangler on July 21 at Lake Yankton.

ABOVE: Tristan Redman caught this largemouth bass on July 23 at Lake Yankton.

Feds To Step Up Asian Carp Hunt Near Chicago

CHICAGO (AP) — Federal officials say they will begin intensive monitoring of a waterway near Lake Michigan next week after genetic material from the invasive Asian carp showed up in three rounds of genetic testing.

Crews will conduct electrofishing — using electric jolts to stun fish — sweep nets and additional sampling in Lake Calumet near Chicago during a four-day period beginning Monday.

Last Friday, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers said it had found two additional samples containing DNA from silver carp, one of two Asian species threat-

ening to enter the Great Lakes after migrating northward from the South for decades.

Some scientists say if the large, voracious carp establish a

foothold in the Great Lakes, they could starve out prized sport fish by gobbling plankton.

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Outdoors Briefs: Health Alerts For 4 Neb. Lakes Over Toxic Algae Levels

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — The state has issued health alerts for three Nebraska lakes.

Officials said Friday that water samples taken from the Lone State Lake in Fillmore County, Rockford Lake in Gage County and Maskenthine Lake in Stanton County showed high levels of a toxin released by blue-green algae. The levels exceeded the state's threshold.

Meanwhile, a similar alert issued three weeks ago for Willow Creek Lake in Pierce County remains in effect.

Since May, the state has conducted weekly sampling at 47 public lakes in Nebraska. Some types of toxic blue-green algae can produce dangerous toxins.

People can still camp, fish and boat on lakes under an alert, but they should not have full-body contact with the water.

Drinking toxin-tainted water can cause vomiting, diarrhea, respiratory failure and, rarely, death.

Nebraska Squirrel Season Opens Aug. 1

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission says the state's squirrel hunting season opens Aug. 1 and runs through Jan. 31.

The daily bag limit is seven squirrels, and the possession limit is 28.

The commission experts say squirrels dine primarily on the nuts of oaks, hickories and walnuts. They eat other nuts and fruit when preferred foods are not available.

Nebraska Game Bird Program Sign-Up Begins Aug. 1

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission says hunters may register for the Harvest Information Program starting Aug. 1.

Program registration is required of Nebraska residents age 16 and older and all nonresidents who plan to hunt migratory game birds between Aug. 1 and July 31 next year. The birds covered at dove, ducks, geese, snipe, rail, coots and woodcocks.

The program is required by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. It helps wildlife managers estimate the number of migratory birds killed by hunters each year.

Hunters may register online at nehip.com or by telephone at 877-634-8687. The hunters are assigned numbers they must have with them while hunting.

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