



RICE LAKE

STATE FISH AND WILDLIFE AREA

FISHERIES STATUS SUMMARY

LOCATION: Located in Central Illinois, the Rice Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area lies adjacent to the Illinois River, 4 miles south of Banner, Illinois, along Route 24 in Fulton County.

DESCRIPTION : The principal water bodies within the Rice Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area are Rice Lake (1400 acres), Big Lake(1000 acres), Duck Island Main Lake(166 acres), Duck Island Little Lake(57 acres), Goose Lake, Slim Lake, and Beebe Lake. Rice Lake, Big Lake, Goose Lake, Slim Lake and Beebe Lake are shallow backwater lakes that are sustained primarily by groundwater seepage and overflow from the Illinois River. Duck Island Main Lake and Duck Island Little Lake are the only deepwater areas within the site and are located in the quarry at the downstream end of Duck Island.

Because the Rice Lake SFWA is not separated from the Illinois River by a high levee, its fish populations fluctuate in composition, numbers, and condition as the area is alternately flooded and dewatered by river levels. The basin of Rice Lake and Big Lake are broad and dish-shaped, constraining the quality and quantity of year-round fish cover.

Ongoing water level management activities involve midsummer drawdowns to promote moist-soil plant production. As a result, water levels in Rice Lake and Big Lake during July and August are typically no more than 12 to 16 inches, with water temperatures during drawdown approaching 90 degrees Fahrenheit. These conditions severely limit both the composition and survival of fish populations. Rice Lake has had recent low dissolved oxygen fish kills occurring in the summers of 2003, 2005, 2006, 2007, and 2018. High Illinois River levels in 2008, 2009 and 2010 prevented major water level draw downs in Rice Lake and no major fish kills occurred. No major fish kills occurred in Big Lake or the attached Duck Island Main Lake during these same time frames. The attached Duck Island Main Lake serves as a deepwater refuge and/or escapement for fish in Big Lake.

MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES: Due to the annual inundation of the Rice Lake Complex by the Illinois River, fish species management on this small scale is a difficult objective. The associated sedimentation, loss of lake water volume and loss of aquatic plants have all negatively impacted the sportfish habitat present in the Rice Lake Complex. The current fishery is also definitely hindered by the lack of deep water habitat for the winter and the summer stress periods. An accessible deep water refuge of 7 to 10 feet of water in approximately 20% of the Rice lake/Big lake complex would be a goal for a future restoration project at this site. The current function of the site does allow for some fish refuge in the Duck Island gravel pit which contains 166 acres of deep water habitat. Annual fish population analysis surveys will be used to monitor the fishery and evaluate its quality. The major parameters to be used in measuring the species quality will include catch per unit of effort values, index of condition and overall species composition. Fish population documentation will provide baseline data and changes from the historical data. The data collected now maybe needed to evaluate and improve the design for future restoration projects or management actions.

Limited fish stocking may occur at the Rice Lake Complex. Northern pike fry have been stocked in the early spring at the site to utilize the flooded terrestrial vegetation as a nursery habitat. Migration to deep water habitat and the Illinois River is expected. Alligator gar were stocked into the Duck Island Little Lake in 2010. This lake at the Rice Lake Complex was one of several Illinois River backwater lakes chosen as initial stocking sites for the alligator gar reintroduction in Illinois. Alligator gar survival, growth and habits will be evaluated at these sites.

Status of the Sport Fishery: In 2019, 37 species were sampled and represent a backwater/riverine fish community. This level is the highest in the past 10 years. Since the 2003 survey, over 40 different species have been collected in the annual surveys.

The density of bluegill, largemouth bass, black and brown bullhead populations are still very low. Spring and summer water level does not appear to be the only factor for their population densities. Dramatic declines have been observed after low water years, and then surge after high water years. But winter water levels either low or high also appear to have an effect on these populations too.

Largemouth Bass: Largemouth bass population was present at a low density of fish from 6 to 14 inches in length.

Bluegill: Bluegill population was present in a moderate density of fish up to 8 inches in length and in very good body condition.

Crappie: Black and white crappie populations were present in very low densities of fish up to 12 inches in length.

Channel Catfish: Channel catfish population was present at a low density of fish up to 26 inches in length.

Bullhead Catfish: Brown, Black and Yellow Bullhead populations were present in low densities of fish up to 14 inches long.

Other Fish Species: Most fish species found on the site are common to the LaGrange Pool of the Illinois River. Over 40 fish species have been collected from the waters of the Rice Lake SFWA during recent years by IDNR Fisheries. In 2019, a total of 37 fish species were collected by spring electrofishing.

In 2013 the commercial fish harvest from Rice Lake was 20304 pounds of common carp, 110734 pounds of silver carp, 106301 pounds of bighead carp and 6431 pounds of buffalo.

Fishing Regulations: Sport fishing seasons and limits are uniform with statewide rules. However, boat fishing is not allowed during the waterfowl hunting season and the week preceding it. Effective 4/1/2000, Largemouth and Smallmouth Bass will have a 12 inch minimum size limit on the Illinois river and all backwaters.

Public Fishing Access: Bank fishing will be allowed year-round in the vicinity of the Complex headquarters. Bank and boat fishing will be allowed year-round on Duck Island Main Lake and Little Lake. Boat fishing will be permitted year-round, except for October 1 to April 1 on Rice Lake, Big Lake, Bebee Lake, Goose Lake and Slim Lake. Ice fishing, sport or commercial, is not permitted at the Rice Lake Complex. Open water commercial fishing is available with a site permit from April 1 to August 31st.

CONTACT INFORMATION –

Rice Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area: (309) 647-9184.

IDNR Fisheries County Fish Biologist: (309) 446-9143.

Illinois Fishing Information booklet and IFISHILLINOIS website <http://www.ifishillinois.org/>