

ILLINOIS RIVER FISHING OPPORTUNITIES

The Illinois River is formed at the junction of the Kankakee and Des Plaines rivers and runs 273 miles west southwest and south to enter the Mississippi 14 miles up stream of Alton. The river and adjoining backwaters provide an aquatic resource of some 87,000 surface acres. Besides the dam on the Mississippi at Alton in which pool the lower 80 miles of Illinois River is included, there are the LaGrange and Peoria dams on the lower 228 miles of sluggish river and the Starved Rock, Marseilles and Dresden Island dams on the upper 45 miles of faster flowing river. Diverse aquatic habitats are the basis for the diversity of sport fish present, as each species favors certain habitats over others.

The current in the Illinois River varies with the water levels and with the width of the stream, but generally falls within the range of 0.5 to 4.0 miles per hour. The river has a minimum depth of 9.0 feet in the marked channel and varies from 100 yards to 1 1/2 miles in width.

The depth of the river is regulated for navigation purposes by a series of locks and dams. Each section of the river between dams is called a navigation pool. The pools are given the name of the dam which controls the water level of the pool, that is, the dam which is immediately downstream from the pool.

The Marseilles and Starved Rock pools have a bedrock bottom, but in the pools below Starved Rock Lock and Dam the bottom is mud, sand or gravel. The Starved Rock pool is characterized by ledges of St. Peter's sandstone, but the rest of the river has low, muddy banks. Cottonwood, Silver Maple, and willow are the dominant tree species. The oaks and hard maples that grow on the river bluffs add beautiful color in the autumn.

Tailwater habitat, found below each navigation dam, is fast turbulent water caused by the passage of water through the dam. Tailwaters receive heavy fishing pressure because fish congregate in these rough waters. White bass are particularly fond of tailwaters, and channel catfish and drum are often caught there.

Lake and slough habitats have little or no current and may have aquatic vegetation. Lakes have greater average depths than sloughs. These areas are good for bullheads and sunfish species.

Side channels are departures from the main channel and may be as wide and deep as the main channel or so shallow that they resemble sloughs. All side channels have current in them during normal water stages Channel and flathead catfish like side channels.

Main channel border habitat is the area between the edge of the navigation channel and the closest land or shallow water over submerged land, This is the most predominant habitat along the Illinois and is so varied that most sport species can be found in some type of main channel border area.

Largemouth bass, crappie, and bluegill or green sunfish are so common in the Illinois that they are taken from all habitats.

Two crappie species occur -- the white crappie and the black crappie -- but, there is no apparent difference in their bait preference or methods used to catch them. Fish near stumps, brush piles or other such shelter. Small minnows are the most common bait and these should be hooked high in the back on a small hook with a bobber 2 to 3 feet above the hook.

Nightcrawlers can also be used effectively in early spring. When crappie start schooling before spawning (April and May) leadhead jigs and spinners become productive and may be used in combination with a lip-hooked minnow, Usually the best months are March, April and May; then fishing picks up again in the fall.

Sunfish occurring on the Illinois include bluegill, green sunfish, warmouth and occasionally pumpkinseed or rock bass. Fish near cover such as brush piles, stumps, or weed beds and drop your bait as close as possible to the cover. Use as small bobber to keep the bait off the bottom. The most popular bait is the night crawler on a small hook, but crickets and grasshoppers work well during summer. For ice fishing wax worms or corn borers are quite effective.

The white and yellow basses are the true basses native to Illinois. Fishermen often call these fish "stripers", and this can cause confusion with a larger salt water cousin (striped bass) which has adapted to fresh water and has actually been taken from the Ohio River along Illinois. The white bass is generally more abundant than the yellow bass on the Illinois River except for localized areas in the Starved Rock pool. White bass grow larger than yellow, making them more desirable sport fish, These fish like current and turbulence as is shown by their

abundance in tailwaters. They are taken on jigs cast into the rough water below dams or obstructions in the main channel border.

Sometimes bass can be found in the quieter water along a sand bar or bank in the main channel border. Spinners with minnows or artificial lures resembling minnows are effective when a school of white bass are spotted by the furious surface activity of minnows trying to elude them. Best fishing seems to be in the morning or evening, but bass may be taken from deeper water during the day by retrieving the artificial lure or minnow a short way off the bottom. May and August have been the best months for bass.

Largemouth bass are taken most frequently in the main channel border and lake habitats, They like the cover of weed beds, brush, stumps, willows and fallen trees where they can hide from their prey. Since, largemouth are sight feeders they are attracted by action and not by smell of the bait or lure. They succumb to the temptations of a variety of lures, plugs, and jigs which must each be retrieved in the manner best suited to the lure. Common lures are Mepps spinners and plastic worms. Minnows hooked below spinners provide more attraction than the lifeless form of a minnow alone, The best fishing is in May, June and September; and once the weather warms to 75 degrees or better, early morning or evenings are best.

Smallmouth bass populations are found in local areas above Peoria. Fish weighing better than 2 1/2lbs have been collected by biologists sampling with electrofishing gear. Although the smallmouth does not attain the size of largemouth bass it is more of a scrapper and pound-for-pound provides more heart-pounding action than any other stream species in Illinois. Artificial lures such as plastic worms, jigs, spinners, and spoons are most effective, but live frogs and crayfish are also successful. Fish in early morning or late evening.

Walleye and sauger fishing on the Illinois has improved considerably the past few years. In the spring the tailwaters of Starved Rock Dam may be crowded with boats of fishermen after their favorite sport and table fish. Many of the fish taken are sauger, which may range in weight up to 5 pounds (the state record sauger was 5 lbs. 12 1/2 oz. taken from the Mississippi). The walleye are generally larger, and reports of 7-8 pounders come in each year. A common lure is a jig-minnow combination with the minnow hooked through the head and a weight attached via a three way swivel to fish the jig a foot or so off the bottom. Lead head jigs or minnows by themselves are also popular. The tailwaters can be fished through winter for walleye or sauger because the rough water keeps them

free of ice cover. Reportedly the largest walleye are caught during winter and it takes the hardest anglers to fish for them.

Drum (sheepshead, white perch, silver perch) seem to prefer areas with good current such as tailwaters and the main channel border. Worms, shrimp, or minnows are fished on the bottom over bars, mud flats, or off a gradual bank in areas with moderate to strong current. Although partial to current many drum are taken fishing on the bottom of larger lakes. They can also be caught on trotlines using natural bait. Spring and fall are the best seasons for drum.

Catfish are the meat fish for many people who appreciate the occasional 10-15 pound channel or 20-30 pound flathead they catch along with the common 2-10 pounders. "Cats" like to hole up underneath old stumps, downstream of fallen trees, around log jams, and in washout holes along banks. Since these fish rely primarily on their olfactory sense to detect food, prepared baits with a strong odor are most effective. These include blood baits, cheese baits, and various homemade concoctions of an odor so rank that the fisherman can hardly handle them. Worms, liver, shrimp and an almost end less variety of goodies are successful at one time or another for catfish. The more solid prepared baits can be balled around a treble hook and fished on the bottom with a tight line weighted by a sliding sinker, Pieces of sponge rubber are dipped in baits having a thinner consistency and placed on or before a hook, Around trees and log jams a bobber may be necessary to prevent loss of gear. Many catfish are taken on trotlines baited with crayfish or fish, If you're seeking flatheads use large hooks and big bait such as 6" carp on your trotline, Fishing picks up for catfish when it is slacking off for many species during the hot months of summer (July through September), Since sight (hence light) is not necessary for feeding catfish, some of the best fishing may be throughout the night.

Black, yellow and occasionally brown bullheads are found in the sloughs. Nightcrawlers are the most common bait, fished beneath a bobber or on the bottom without a bobber. Shrimp, grasshoppers, grubs, liver and prepared baits are among things considered desirable by bullheads, As with their larger cousins bullheads will feed all night, tempting many fishermen to stay out until the wee hours of morning during the warm summer months.

This discussion would not be complete without mentioning carp. Carp are not considered in the maps section, because they are so common that they can be caught almost anywhere. Their size and fighting strength are increasing the carps popularity every year. Next to the flathead catfish, carp are the largest fish regularly taken by anglers on the Illinois. Properly prepared, carp are a match for

any fish in palatability. So it is no wonder that more and more fishermen are actively seeking carp with worms, corn and doughballs among other baits. Doughballs can be made from flour, water, and a flaky breakfast cereal, which mixture is formed around a treble hook. Fish on the bottom or near the bottom with a bobber in shallow areas from May through October.

In the maps section some of the access areas available to the public are noted. Certain public areas and private areas open to the public are available only after paying a fee and such fees are usually posted. Unless an area is known to be public or is posted as a public area, it should be assumed that it is private and permission from the owner is necessary to use that area.

On the maps, areas have been marked that are known to have good sport fish populations. Each area is marked showing the sport fish most likely to be taken there. It is realized that the areas marked represent only a portion of those occurring on the river, and as more fishing spots are discovered this guide will be updated. Access sites available to the public are labeled and list the basic facilities found at each site. NO attempt was made to list all access sites, but only those nearest fishing areas marked on the map.