

# ALTON POOL ILLINOIS RIVER

## 2016 FISHERIES FACT SHEET

The Illinois River is formed at the confluence of the Des Plaines and Kankakee rivers near Channahon in northeastern Illinois. It flows southwest for 273 miles across the state to enter the Mississippi River at Grafton. There are five dams along the Illinois forming pooled reaches named (upstream to downstream) the Dresden Pool, Marseilles Pool, Starved Rock Pool, Peoria Pool and La Grange Pool. The Lower Illinois reach is the Alton Pool.

**LOCATION:** The Alton Pool extends upstream 80.2 miles from Grafton to the tailwater of the La Grange Lock and Dam, north of Meredosia. Although the lower Illinois River reach is not impounded, it is termed the Alton Pool because it is influenced by the Mel Price Lock and Dam on the Mississippi River at Alton.

**RIVER ACCESS:** The Alton Pool is typically characterized by slow water velocities and soft substrates of mud and sand. There are a number of islands and associated side channels in the reach. One notable side channel is Dark Chute, with a boat ramp available at the Godar-Diamond Island Complex along Route 100 north of Hardin. Cross the river to the mouth of Macoupin Creek for good fishing opportunities as well. About 10 miles to the south, Hembold and 12 Mile islands are accessible by a ramp at The Glades Management Area west of Rosedale. The area between Grafton and Nutwood has many backwater lakes that provide good sunfish and bass fishing opportunities. The Stump Lake Fish and Wildlife Area boat ramp just north of Pere Marquette State Park provides access to Flat, Long, Fowler and Upper Stump lakes. The Stump Lake complex provides excellent bluegill, crappie and bullhead fishing. Boat ramps at Grafton and Pere Marquette State Park provides access to Lower Illinois River. The northern half of the Alton Pool has a number of good fishing sites with easy access as well. The ramp at Pearl provides good fishing and access. Big Blue Island located between I72 and Route 100 is accessible by boat with a ramp just southwest of the Route 100 Bridge near Florence. Naples has a ramp on the river as does Meredosia. There is a ramp upstream of the La Grange Lock and Dam but access to the tailwater requires locking through. The run from the Meredosia ramp to the La Grange tailwater is about 9 miles but worth the trip. The swift currents below the dam add a diversity of habitat conditions which provides excellent white bass fishing, along with concentrations of sauger, largemouth and smallmouth bass and catfish. Public access areas are typically good areas for bank fishing as well. There are numerous bank fishing areas in the Mississippi River Fish and Wildlife Area (see below).

**STATUS OF THE SPORT FISHERY:** Historically the Lower Illinois River was one of the most productive freshwater fisheries in the world, but in the past 50 years land use changes have resulted in aquatic habitat degradation that led to sedimentation of backwaters. Asian carp have recently invaded the river and now comprise about half of the biomass of our electrofishing samples in the lower river. Still, a total of 61 native fish species were captured by electrofishing in the Illinois River in 2016, and excellent sport fishing opportunities remain in the Alton Pool.

**Channel catfish** – Channel catfish is the primary game fish of the Alton Pool and they are very abundant throughout the reach. Notable areas for channel catfish are main channel border (area between the navigation channel and the river bank) and side channels with current. Stink baits and gizzard shad are the baits of choice. PCB contamination in fish is a remnant of past pollution that is declining. There remains a one-meal-per-week contaminant advisory on channel catfish over 16 inches in the lower Illinois River due to low level PCB detection in the flesh. These advisories are developed to protect infants, children, and women of child bearing age and may be overprotective to adult men and women over child bearing age. Trim the fat, particularly around the belly, and allow fat to drip off the fish when cooking to minimize exposure to PCBs.

**Flathead catfish** – Flathead catfish are quite common in the Alton Pool and trophy-sized fish exceeding 36 inches and 30 pounds can be found. Fish the deep holes main channel border near current breaks. Specifically the mouth of Macoupin Creek and nearby Dark Chute at Diamond Island, and the La Grange tailwater offer great opportunities for catching flatheads. Gizzard shad and skipjack herring are the best baits for flathead catfish.

**Blue catfish** – The blue catfish population is on the rise in the Lower Illinois River and, like flatheads, they also reach trophy sizes. Two previous world record blue catfish (at 124 and 130 pounds each) were caught just a few miles downstream of the Illinois River mouth. Fish the deep holes and main channel border near structure from Pearl down to Grafton for “blue skins”. Cut baits such as those used for flatheads are choice for blue catfish.

**Largemouth Bass** – Largemouth bass are prevalent throughout the Alton Pool and, like other members of the sunfish family they have reproductive spikes during big flood years. Largemouth bass numbers were up in 2014 and 2015. Two good year classes in a row resulted in an abundance of bass in the 12 to 15 inch range in 2015. The outlook for 2016 is excellent. Backwaters, side channels and shallow water with structure are the places to fish.

**White bass** – The white bass is a schooling species that is present throughout the main channel of the Alton Pool. The largest individuals and highest numbers of white bass are seen in the La Grange tailwater. Look for shad breaching the water surface and white bass are typically on the chase. Shad-like lures are recommended.

**Sauger/Walleye** – Sauger and, to a lesser degree, walleye, are most abundant in the La Grange tailwater. They are typically found in deep waters during the day but search for food in the shallows of the main channel border at night. Jigs with trailing minnows make good sauger and walleye lures.

**Crappie** – An abundance of 10 to 12 inch black crappie were present in 2015 and like bass, the prospects are great for 2016. Backwaters, side channels and main channel border areas with submerged brush are the best locations for crappie.

**FISHING REGULATIONS FOR ALTON POOL ILLINOIS RIVER:** There is a 12 inch minimum length limit for largemouth and smallmouth bass. The daily catch limit is six bass and no more than three smallmouth bass. The minimum length limit for walleye, sauger and hybrids is 14 inches, with a six fish daily creel limit. Waterfowl management areas may be closed to fishing as posted at the site. For specifics on restrictions and for info on bank fishing access, contact the Mississippi River Area office (618)376-3303.

**For further information contact:** IDNR Fisheries at (618)468-2851.

