

Lower Sangamon River

2016 Fisheries Fact Sheet



OVERVIEW: The Sangamon River is the largest Illinois River tributary with a length of 240 miles and a watershed encompassing 5362 square miles. The watershed is separated into three management sections – Upper Sangamon, Lower Sangamon and Salt Creek. The Lower Sangamon extends from the mouth at the Illinois River in Beardstown to the confluence of the South Fork near Riverton. The only mainstem dams within this reach are lowhead dams at Springfield and Petersburg, both of which are old and breached. The lowermost 36 miles of the Sangamon from the Salt Creek confluence downstream was channelized in 1949. The original Illinois River confluence and part of the original meandering Sangamon River channel is contained within the Sanganois Conservation Area.

RIVER ACCESS: The Lower Sangamon River is a public water body. That designation extends from the Illinois River upstream to one mile south of the Mechanicsburg Road bridge, and also includes the lower two miles of the South Fork. Public waters are open to fishing but landowner permission is needed to legally access bankside private lands. Public fishing access along the Lower Sangamon is available at Wheeland Park in Riverton, Riverside Park in Springfield, Sangamon River State Fish and Wildlife Area (SRSFWA) northeast of Salisbury, Lincoln's New Salem State Historic Site south of Petersburg and Petersburg City Park. Boat ramps are available at all of these sites except SRSFWA and New Salem State Historic Site. Public boat ramps are also found at Route 97 bridge north of Oakford and Route 78 bridge north of Chandlerville. The Sanganois Conservation Area has access to old Sangamon River backwaters and a boat ramp to access Illinois River backwater lakes, but no access to the present day Sangamon River channel.

STATUS OF THE SPORT FISHERY: The Lower Sangamon fishery has surely declined from the days before the prairie was plowed under, however there is evidence of improvement in the past 30 years. Basinwide stream assessments initiated in 1981 have shown increased abundances and distributions of bluegill and largemouth bass accompanied by a steady decline in green sunfish, an environmentally tolerant species. Improvements in water quality and land management practices are likely causes for this positive sunfish trend. Unfortunately, Asian carp have recently invaded the Lower Sangamon. Bighead carp and silver carp were first represented in our Sangamon River fish samples in 2003 and were first reported by commercial fisherman in 2001. Grass carp were first picked up by IDNR sampling in 2000 but were collected by commercial fishermen as early as 1993. Bowfishing for carp has gained popularity in recent years.

Channel catfish – Channel catfish are the primary game fish of the Lower Sangamon and the population is very good. Spring hoop net surveys in 2015 yielded results similar to previous surveys. Most (77%) of the channel catfish measured 16 to 24 inches with an average weight of 2.2 pounds. Larger channel catfish from 8 to 10 pounds are not unusual in the Lower Sangamon. The largest channel cat in our 2015 sample was a 27 inch fish that weighed 8.3 pounds. Summer electrofishing samples typically produce an abundance of smaller individuals, providing evidence of successful reproduction and recruitment. For example 67% of channel catfish collected by electrofishing in 2013 were less than 11 inches long.

Flathead catfish – Flathead catfish throughout the range of size classes are abundant in the Lower Sangamon River. Hoop net surveys produced 98 flatheads over 11 inches long, 24% of which were over 28 inches. Trophy-sized fish exceeding 36 inches and 25 pounds are not uncommon. The largest flathead catfish from our surveys was 43 inches and 43 pounds. Few flathead catfish were captured in our 2015 effort in mid-May because cool water temperatures were not conducive to pre-spawn activity.

Largemouth/Smallmouth Bass – Largemouth bass are represented in almost every electrofishing sample in the Lower Sangamon, but usually in small numbers and small sizes. The largest bass are typically in the 10 to 12 inch range. Salt Creek is home to a good smallmouth bass population but they are rarely found below the confluence with the Sangamon River.

Bluegill/Crappie – Bluegill are ubiquitous in the lower Sangamon, with the largest individuals in the 6 and 7 inch range. Black crappie are present in relatively small numbers. Quiet pools will provide fun and productive sunfish fishing in the Sangamon River.

White bass – The white bass are typically present throughout the Lower Sangamon River. There is a good white bass fishery below the dam at Petersburg.

Sauger/Walleye – Like white bass, sauger and walleye fishing in the Sangamon is seasonally productive below the dam at Petersburg.

FISHING REGULATIONS: The Sangamon River is subject to statewide sport fishing regulations. There is however a 12 inch minimum length limit for largemouth and smallmouth bass within the Sanganois Conservation Area. Bowfishing and commercial fishing are permitted from the Sangamon River mouth in Cass County to Belt Route 48 southwest of Decatur.

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