

NEBRASKAland Magazine's

Fishing the SANDHILLS

A Guide to Nebraska's Sandhills Lakes

NEBRASKA
- GAME  PARKS -

Talk to anglers who have fished them, and they may tell you that Sandhills lakes are like no other lakes you've fished. And while the words may literally be true, as the makeup of these lakes is truly unique, the reasoning behind the words can vary widely, even if it applies only to the fishing.

For some, the draw is northern pike. While not all Sandhills lakes hold pike, these shallow waters are some of Nebraska's best habitats for the toothy predator, and the only waters where they can consistently reproduce. For other anglers, it's both the size and number of largemouth bass the lakes can hold. Still others are drawn by the size and number of panfish. As with pike, Sandhills lakes are the only in Nebraska that contain self-sustaining populations of yellow perch. Perch, bluegills and crappies can grow fast and fat in these lakes, which are as fertile as any lake on the planet.

There are, indeed, no lakes like those in the Sandhills in this hemisphere and perhaps in the world. They are natural lakes, but they aren't fed by surface runoff like ponds and reservoirs elsewhere in Nebraska or natural lakes found in other states. Nearly every drop of rain that falls in this 19,000-square-mile area of grass-stabilized sand dunes goes straight down into the Ogallala Aquifer. These lakes, and countless wetlands, are simply locations where the landscape dips below the surface of the aquifer.

Rarely will you find water deeper than 10 feet in a Sandhills lake, and in some the maximum depth might be only 3 feet. Of the 1,640 lakes 10 acres or larger, 86 percent are too shallow or alkaline to support fish. In the ones that do, the year-round movement of groundwater keeps the water fresh, preventing winter and summer kills due to loss of oxygen that hamper fish production in other types of lakes that are this shallow, and also keep the lakes cool enough to support fish like pike and perch. The lake levels, and often the fish populations, follow those of the water table. When it drops, die-offs can and do occur in Sandhills lakes. When it rises, good fishing will follow.

Shallow, clear water also allows sunlight to reach the bottom of even the deepest parts of most Sandhills lakes, producing an abundance of zooplankton and phytoplankton, the tiny animals and plants that are the foundation of the aquatic food web. It also promotes the growth of smartweed, pondweed, coontail and other aquatic vegetation. These plants are the basis for the abundant invertebrates such

as damselfly and dragonfly nymph, snails and leeches that panfish and young bass and pike feast and thrive on. Most lakes are ringed by marshlands, with dense stands of cattails and bulrushes rising from the shallows.

These features are what make Sandhills lakes produce fish in both quantity and quality, especially panfish, which

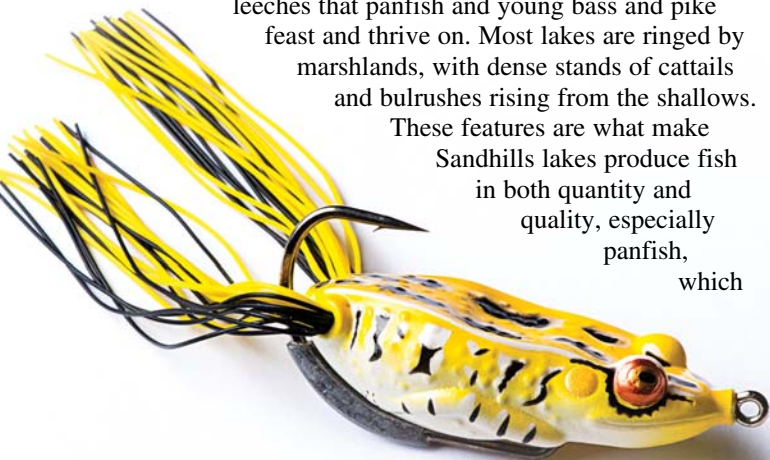


PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

thrive with the abundant food and cover. Unlike reservoirs and ponds, which have a narrow band of highly productive water around their shorelines, nearly every acre of a Sandhills lake supports fish.

Anglers may curse the abundance of aquatic vegetation found in Sandhills lakes, especially in the summer when it is seemingly impossible to retrieve a lure without it becoming fouled by weeds, and frequent stops to clean the vegetation from the props of "weedless" electric trolling motors are required. But those anglers need to remember that when they fish other waters, they target these "weeds" because they know that's where the bass, pike and panfish are most often found. In Sandhills lakes, the target is simply much bigger. If you can't handle the weeds, fish early, from April to June, and come back in the fall, when weeds start to die back and fish are gorging themselves for winter.

The ring of vegetation that surrounds the entire shoreline of most lakes makes bank fishing impossible. Those who don waders can reach the outside edge of the cattails, or pockets of water within them, on several lakes, but footing can be difficult and in some cases the bottom is too soft to wade. When winter arrives, however, ice-up is the great equalizer that opens a lake to all anglers. And because



Pockets of open water behind the cattails that ring most Sandhills lakes are almost always worth a cast with a topwater lure or spinnerbait, including this one Steve Frederick of Scottsbluff is fishing at Hackberry Lake on the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge. Extremely fertile by their nature, Sandhills lakes produce panfish, including bluegills (below), in quantity and quality, making them popular among ice anglers.

of the shallow nature of the lakes, they are quick to freeze, providing ample opportunity. On many lakes, the heaviest pressure and harvest of fish comes in the winter.

Many anglers are drawn to the Sandhills by the obscurity and isolated nature of the lakes. While only 40 are open to public fishing, they see far less boat traffic than you will find on most Nebraska reservoirs. There are no marinas, no shorelines ringed by cabins, and only a handful of lakes even have campgrounds. Roads are sparse and often rough, and you will see far more cattle than cars and people. All but two lakes have a 5 mph speed limit, and some allow only electric motors, so you won't find yourself listening to the drone of Jet Skis and speed boats all day. Wildlife is abundant. Spend the night and you will swear you've never seen so many stars. And while the broad vistas and absence of trees bother some Easterners, many people find the view from the top of a ridge, where you can seemingly see forever, exhilarating. Even if you don't have a lake to yourself, which you sometimes do, the peace, quiet and solitude breeds a sense of having your own private fishing hole in the middle of the wilderness.

Between that and excellent fishing, you now have two reasons to visit.



PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

How to Fish the Sandhills

Northern Pike

Pike fishing picks up at ice-out, but can start slow. While the fish will take lures, they are often sluggish in the still-cold water, making smelt fished on the bottom or under a bobber, a good approach. As the water warms, weedless spoons, such as a Johnson Silver Minnow and spinnerbaits in yellow, black, chartreuse or white are the favorite lures of many anglers. Large Mepps spinners and Daredevil spoons, both staples for pike anglers elsewhere, and shallow-diving crankbaits will work early in the year before vegetation becomes too thick, or in deeper water where the weeds don't reach the surface. Soft plastics, including swim baits, rubber worms and creature baits, can be effective when pike are finicky.

Tooth-proof leaders are recommended whenever you're fishing for pike. While steel leaders are most commonly used, they can affect the bite when water is clear, which it often is early in the year before algae blooms begin. In that case, lighter wire leaders are best. While pike can still bite through heavy fluorocarbon line, its use can be the difference between getting bites or not. Baitcasting rods and reels and strong, braided line can be invaluable when you want to keep hooked fish out of the vegetation.

Anglers should start their search for pike near vegetation, especially isolated stands of bulrushes, cattails, smartweed

and pondweed. The weeds may not be immediately visible. Early in the year, pike might be lurking in the tops of 2-foot tall weeds in 6 feet of water waiting for dinner to swim by. Don't be afraid to spend time casting to what may appear to be "open" water to search for these fish. As spring moves towards summer, when pike are in search of cooler water, they may be found in these weeds even farther from shore.

In the winter, the use of tip-ups for pike can be both effective and entertaining. Countless variations allow a smelt and a treble hook to be held on or near the bottom directly beneath the hole. When a pike grabs the bait and swims off, a flag is tripped by the free-wheeling spool of line, eliciting a call of "Flag up!" among friends and a race to the hole. Pike typically cruise slowly around the lakes in search of food all winter. A line of tip-ups extending from the shore towards the middle of the lake can intersect their route.

Largemouth Bass

Largemouth bass take a bit longer to become active than pike, but a warm spell will send them into action early in the spring. Look on the north bank first. Bass spawn in the weedy shallows of Sandhills lakes when water temperatures hit the mid-60s in May. Getting to them can be a challenge. Look for pockets of open water tucked in the cattails that ring the lakes.

The rest of the year, bass are often found around the edges of the lakes, especially in gaps in the cattails, but they can also be found anywhere there is an isolated patch



Northern pike, like this one caught at Clear Lake on the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge, can be caught in many Sandhills lakes.

PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS



Albert Allen of Ainsworth admires a largemouth bass he landed from his kayak at Tower Lake on Yellowthroat Wildlife Management Area.

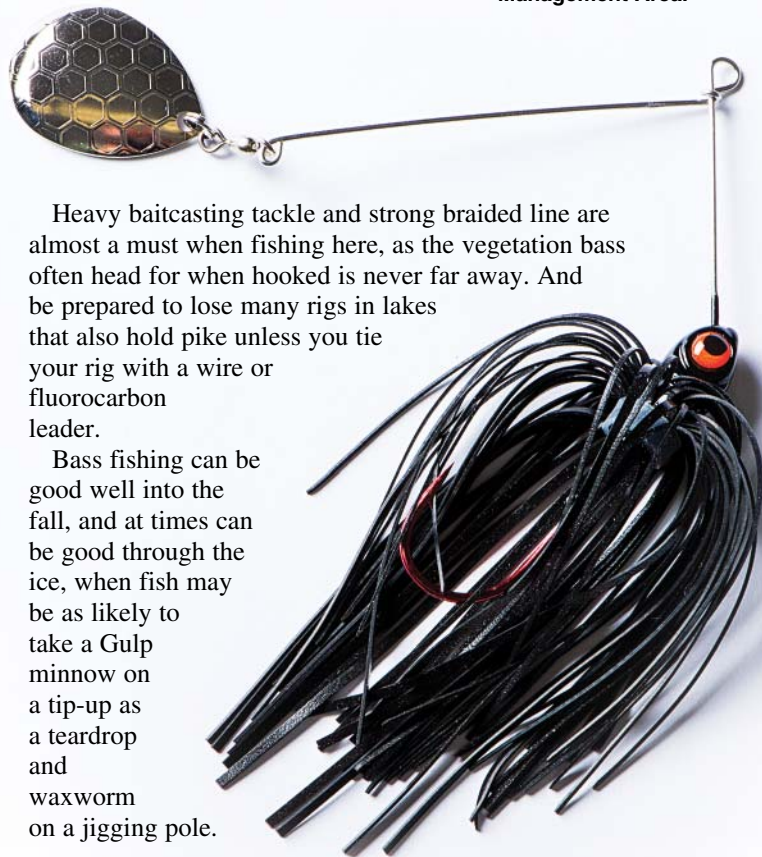
of vegetation, be it a stand of bulrushes or a patch of smartweed or pondweed.

Soft plastics, such as Texas-rigged rubber worms fished through the vegetation on the bottom can be extremely effective. While the lakes are shallow, these rigs may require a half-ounce weight – more than most people normally use – to get through the thick vegetation.

Spinnerbaits can be retrieved through or just above lighter vegetation, or along the edge of it. Shallow diving crankbaits, such as a Mann’s Baby-1 Minus, are also just as useful here as they are on other waters if you can find edges and pockets of open water where they can be effectively fished. Topwater poppers and plugs can work well in the spring and later in the year when fished along weedlines or in open pockets.

In heavier vegetation, topwater frogs, Johnson Silver Minnows and other weedless lures are the only baits you can possibly fish, but ones that bass will readily take. Skilled anglers might even be able to keep a buzzbait on top of the weeds.

Lure color selection for bass is similar to pike. Dark colors work best on soft plastics, and yellow, black, chartreuse and white are typically the best colors for spinnerbaits and buzzbaits. Tip those or your Silver Minnow with a plastic or pork trailer to add scent and action and to allow for a slower retrieve if fish aren’t overly aggressive.



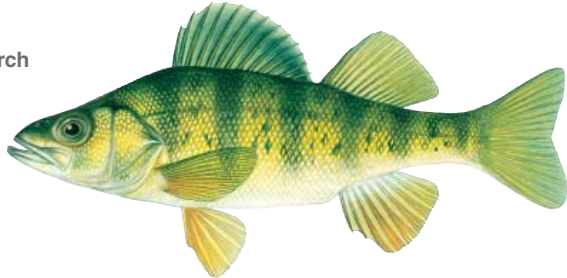
Heavy baitcasting tackle and strong braided line are almost a must when fishing here, as the vegetation bass often head for when hooked is never far away. And be prepared to lose many rigs in lakes that also hold pike unless you tie your rig with a wire or fluorocarbon leader.

Bass fishing can be good well into the fall, and at times can be good through the ice, when fish may be as likely to take a Gulp minnow on a tip-up as a teardrop and waxworm on a jigging pole.

Bluegill



Yellow Perch



Black Crappie



Panfish

Bluegills, yellow perch and crappies grow fast and fat in Sandhills lakes and are the main draw for many anglers.

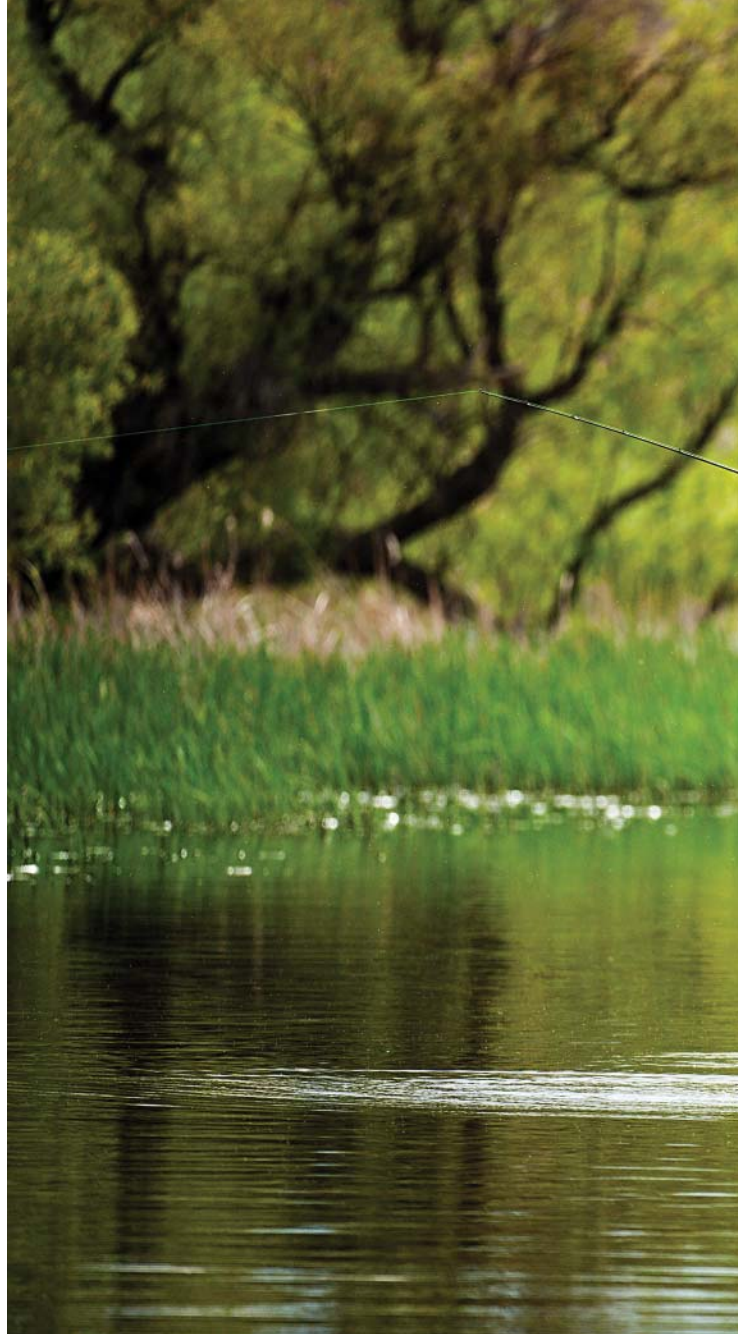
Bluegills in Sandhills lakes spend most of their time in cattails, bulrushes, smartweed, pondweed and other vegetation, where they have the most cover from hungry bass and pike and plenty of food. Use Mepps spinners, Johnson Beetle Spins or Blakemore Roadrunners to search for fish along the edge of the vegetation. If you find fish, toss out a jig tipped with a piece of nightcrawler or PowerBait worm or waxworm under a bobber and you may be able to pull several fish from a school.

Bluegill spawning beds are harder to find in Sandhills lakes than elsewhere due to the thick vegetation that rings most lakes. But if you find an open patch of sandy shoreline in late May, be sure to fish it. During this time of year and at other times when water is clear, a high vantage point from your casting deck and polarized sunglasses can allow you to sight fish for bluegills.

Yellow perch can be caught using the same tactics as bluegill through much of the year. They are,



PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER



however, a more nomadic species and more likely to be found in deeper water that may even be free of vegetation. Crappies will spawn in the shoreline vegetation in May and fishing during this time can be excellent. The rest of the year they are found near vegetation in deeper, open water. Minnows aren't allowed in many lakes, but where permitted they are the preferred bait for crappies and perch.

Light spinning or spincasting tackle or a fly rod is sufficient for panfish in the Sandhills. Weedy lakes aren't unfishable, they just require a change in tactics. When vegetation gets thick, a fly rod allows you to cast a dry fly to places you'd never be able to retrieve a jig through. A long cane pole or spinning rod can also be used to probe the weeds for panfish. Drift or motor slowly across the thick vegetation and cast a fly or drop a jig and crawler into any hole in the weeds big enough to fit one in, and it will often hold fish. You can also cast a slip-bobber to these holes. If you catch one fish from a hole, you're likely to catch more.



Guided by their dog, anglers cast toward the shoreline on a calm spring morning on Dewey Lake on the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge.

Don't limit your search to the shoreline. In the summer, you may find larger pockets of open water in the middle of a lake. These deeper spots might also offer the cooler water fish are looking for in the heat of summer.

The search for bluegills through the ice begins where it always does: near vegetation. Early in the winter they may be found in shallow water near cattails. Later, they may move to deeper water. Look for patches of bulrushes poking through the ice or for the leaves of pondweed frozen in the ice. A teardrop and waxworm is the best bait through the ice. Finding fish is the hardest part. If you're not catching fish, move.

Other Species

A handful of Sandhills lakes hold other species, including channel catfish, muskellunge, walleye, sauger and saugeye. The tactics you use for those species won't differ much from

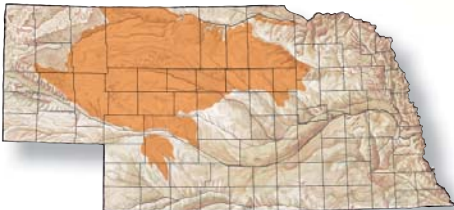
what you use in other waters.

Walleye and sauger have done well in some Sandhills lakes through the years, and biologists are now stocking saugeye, which like sauger tend to do better in turbid water, to see if they do better. While anglers often target those fish on drop-offs and points in large reservoirs, those underwater structures are much more subtle in the Sandhills. Anglers often catch them when targeting perch or crappies with jigs or live bait rigs. Those targeting walleye sometimes fan-cast small perch-colored crankbaits along weedlines at sunrise and sunset, as perch are the main prey of this species in these lakes.

Muskies can be caught in much the same way as northern pike, but these fish are few in number and harder to find.

Lakes with harder bottoms support channel catfish. A nightcrawler and stink or blood bait fished on the bottom work as well here as in other reservoirs. If the lake bottom is weedy or mossy, use a bobber to keep your bait just above it.

The Sandhills Region



The Sandhills is a 19,000-acre area of grass-stabilized sand dunes that covers one fourth of Nebraska and is rich in ranchland. Between the dunes, wetlands fed by groundwater cover 1.3 million acres, including about 1,600 natural lakes 10 acres or larger, 225 of which support fish.

BOTTOM MAP BY TIM REIGERT. TOP MAP BY TRISHA SCHLAKE-IT. GIS APPLICATIONS DEVELOPER.

Public Sandhills Lakes

Public Sandhills lakes are scattered throughout north-central Nebraska. The following list details them by county from west to east. Unless otherwise stated, boats are limited to 5 mph and can leave no wake.

1 Walgren Lake SRA

113 Acres. Sheridan County, 3E, 3S of Hay Springs. Bluegill, Bullhead, Channel Catfish, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Northern Pike, Walleye, Yellow Perch.

While this lake isn't technically a Sandhills lake, it looks, acts and fishes like one, and you can see the Sandhills from there, so we'll include it. The lake filled in 2015 after a dry period sapped its water level. It offers good perch, bluegill and bass fishing, and with a hard bottom, an excellent population of channel catfish. A few big flathead catfish, survivors from fish stocked years ago, still swim there, too. The east half of the lake is private and no bank access is allowed. Wheelchair-accessible fishing pier, concrete boat ramp, primitive campground, stone picnic shelter, pit toilet.

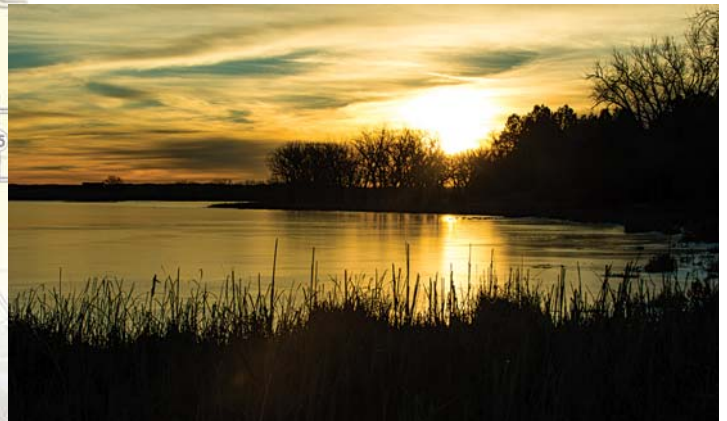
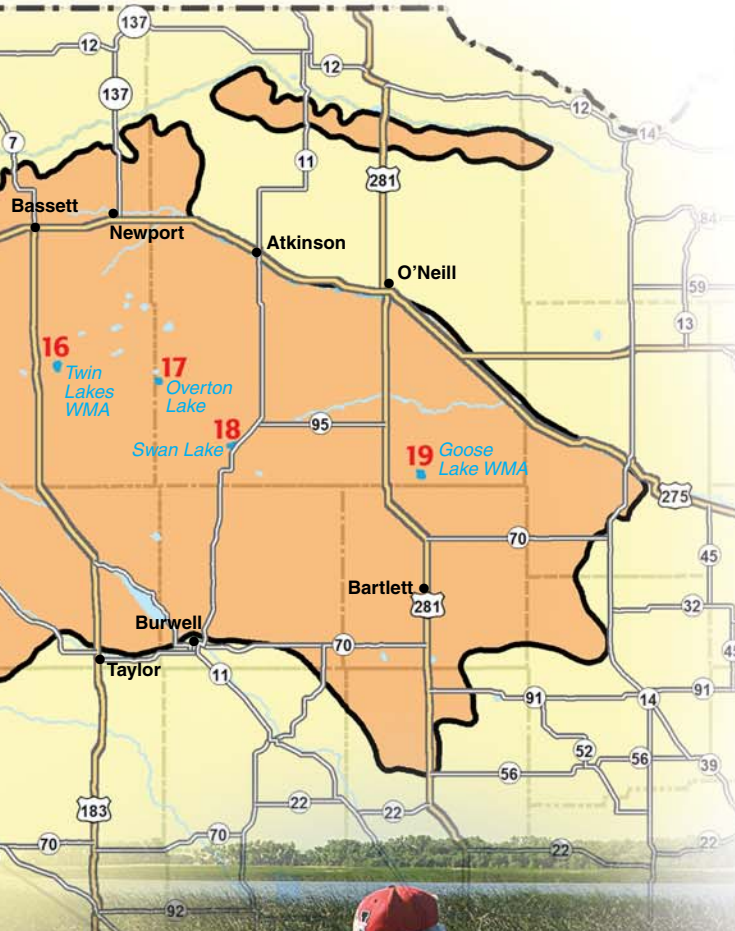


PHOTO BY JUSTIN HAAG

The sun rises over an ice-covered Smith Lake.

2 Smith Lake WMA

290 Acres. Sheridan County, 23S of Rushville. Bluegill, Bullhead, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Northern Pike, Yellow Perch.

Smith Lake has long been an excellent panfish lake, producing big bluegills and bass and abundant perch. An Aquatic Habitat Program project in the late-1990s used a dredge to provide depths of 10 to 12 feet in the center of the lake, lessening the likelihood of winterkill. Like other lakes with good water quality, Smith has always had abundant vegetation. That took a new turn recently when curly-leaf pondweed appeared at the lake in 2015, the first occurrence in the Panhandle. Common in eastern lakes, this submersed vegetation thrived at Smith, covering all of the lake in depths of 6 feet or less and making boating and fishing difficult. Handicap-accessible concrete boat ramp, primitive camping, pit toilet.

3 Shell Lake WMA

160 Acres. Cherry County, 3N, 4E, 8N of Gordon. Bluegill, Channel Catfish, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Northern Pike, Yellow Perch.



LEON SPANGLER OF EWING REELS IN A NORTHERN PIKE AT GOOSE LAKE.



Kayaks are an excellent way to fish Sandhills Lakes, including Tower Lake on Yellowthroat Wildlife Management Area.



PHOTO BY JUSTIN HAAG

Kiera Haag of Chadron holds a bluegill she caught from Cottonwood Lake State Recreation Area near Merriman.

Shell Lake is an excellent fishery and as such gets fished hard. It holds good pike, a few crappies, small bluegills and perch. An Aquatic Habitat Program project in the late-1990s used a dredge to deepen a portion of the lake to up to 9 feet, lessening the likelihood of winterkill. With no carp and excellent water quality, it also has abundant aquatic vegetation and is very difficult to fish in the summer. It gets plenty of pressure through the ice in the winter. Primitive boat ramp, primitive campground, pit toilet. Snowmobiles and ATVs allowed on ice.

4 Cottonwood Lake SRA

34 Acres. Cherry County, 1/2E, 1/2S of Merriman. Bluegill, Channel Catfish, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Northern Pike, Hybrid Bluegill/Green Sunfish, Yellow Perch.

This is one of two Sandhills lakes with no speed limit for boats. Aquatic vegetation hampers summer fishing. Primitive campground, pit toilets, playground and shelter.

5 Cottonwood-Steverson Lake WMA

680 Acres. Cherry County, 30N, 2E of Hyannis. Bluegill, Common Carp, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Muskellunge, Saugeye, Walleye, Yellow Perch.

With a maximum depth of 20 feet, Cottonwood Lake is one of the deepest in the Sandhills. Steverson is more typical, with depths of up to 7 feet. Connected by a narrow channel, the pair are practically one lake. The lakes were acquired in 1997 and renovated soon after, but carp found their way back in and have reduced water clarity and the amount of vegetation. Still, a few walleyes persist, and there are a few muskies and abundant small crappies. Concrete boat ramp, primitive camping on Steverson Lake. Snowmobiles and ATVs allowed on ice.

6 Home Valley Lake

220 Acres. Cherry County, 30N, 2½E, 1N of Hyannis. Bluegill, Common Carp, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Walleye, Yellow Perch.

Part of Cottonwood-Steverson WMA, there is no road to this lake so access is limited to those wanting to portage from Cottonwood Lake. In the summer, that could mean dragging a kayak or float tube over a narrow ridge. The lake gets much more pressure in the winter, when ice anglers are allowed to take snowmobiles and ATVs across the ice on Cottonwood and Steverson lakes and over the hill to Home Valley. The lake holds a decent perch population and some nice bass, but also has carp and is turbid.

7 Lord Lakes (U.S. Forest Service)

15 Acres. Cherry County, McKelvie National Forest, 9W of Merritt Reservoir. Bluegill, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Yellow Perch.

These three small connected lakes offer quality bass. A primitive boat ramp is found on the east side of the east lake. The other two lakes are accessible by foot and best fished in waders, float tubes and kayaks. USFS Steer Creek Campground and Merritt Reservoir SRA campgrounds nearby.

8 Frye Lake WMA

243 Acres. Grant County, 1N, 1½E of Hyannis. Bluegill, Channel Catfish, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Walleye, Yellow Perch.

Since it was renovated in 2002, this lake has become one of the better panfish lakes in the Sandhills, producing good numbers and size of perch, crappies and bluegills. With abundant vegetation and the food that comes with it, fish are well fed. Fishing can be excellent in May and June. No live baitfish can be used or possessed. Primitive boat ramp, primitive campground, pit toilet.

9 East Hyannis Lake (Avocet WMA)

120 Acres. Grant County, 1E of Hyannis. Yellow Perch.

There is no boat ramp on this shallow lake, where aquatic vegetation hampers summer fishing. Primitive camping.

10 DeFair Lake WMA

70 Acres. Grant County, 1E, 2S, ½E of Hyannis. Black Crappie, Yellow Perch.

Boat access is difficult on this shallow, weedy lake. Primitive boat ramp, primitive camping.

11 Long Lake SRA

155 Acres. Brown County, 8½W, 21S of Ainsworth. Bullhead, Channel Catfish, Common Carp, Northern Pike, Yellow Perch.

Long Lake can be good for catfish, but has plentiful carp and few other gamefish. With little use and limited recreational opportunities, the Commission long ago suspended maintenance at the 80-acre State Recreation Area on the south side of the lake. Access road is accessible by trucks only. While primitive camping is allowed, there are no amenities.

Embrace the Weeds

One of the attributes that makes Sandhills lakes such great fisheries can also make them extremely difficult to fish in the summer: weeds.

The shallow depths and excellent water quality of the lakes typically leads to an abundance of aquatic vegetation. Cattails, bulrushes, smartweed, pondweed, coontail and other plants host a myriad of snails, insects and other critters panfish such as bluegills and yellow perch feed upon. Where there are panfish, big predators such as northern pike and largemouth bass can also thrive.

Some lakes, however, can have so much vegetation that by mid-summer it can be almost impossible to motor a boat or retrieve a lure through it all. But that doesn't mean they are unfishable. There will almost always be an edge to the weedline, or at least small pockets in the weeds, that you can pull a fish out of. And you can always use weedless topwater lures or a fly rod to fish on top of the vegetation. As for getting to those spots, if your electric motor won't pull you through the weeds, try using a push pole to get around. A kayak or canoe will skim over the top of even the thickest vegetation, and well timed strokes will keep your paddle weed free.

And if all that is too much for you, go early or late in the year. The most vegetated lakes don't get overly choked until June or July. And in the fall, when temperatures cool, weeds start to die back. That also happens to be the time when fish are feeding hard to get ready for winter. And many places offer the opportunity to do some grouse or archery deer hunting early in the fall, or waterfowl or pheasant hunting later.



Vegetation at Goose Lake near Bartlett.

12 Clear Lake

200 Acres. Brown County, 19S, 9W, 1N of Ainsworth. Bluegill, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Yellow Perch.

This private lake has a long history of excellent fishing and has been home to a fishing club for decades. The need to eradicate carp that found their way into the lake in 1999 led to a unique partnership between the Game and Parks Commission, New Clear Lake Club, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), North Central Resource, Conservation

Boat Ramps

The shallow nature of Sandhills lakes, and the variability of water levels from year to year, makes constructing boat ramps that function a challenge.

Wherever possible, the Commission and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which manage the Crescent Lake and Valentine National Wildlife refuges, have built concrete ramps. These may be poured concrete, or an articulated design that links concrete blocks with cables. Where the accompanying list notes there is a primitive ramp, rock or gravel has often been added to shore up the sandy lakebed. In some cases, however, including several on the Valentine Refuge, a launch is nothing more than a gap in the cattails that is wide enough to back a boat trailer into.

When water levels are high, it is possible to launch larger boats on even some of the primitive ramps. When levels are low, however, the shallow nature of the lakes make it a challenge to get even a small boat in the water on the best ramps, and four-wheel-drive vehicles are required. In these cases, smaller is better, and light boats that can be thrown in the back of a truck or winched onto a tilt trailer from a foot of water are not only your best bet, they're your only one. Many who have found themselves backing 20 yards into the lake hoping to find water deep enough to float their boat have also found themselves looking for someone with 20 yards of chain or tow rope.

In some lakes, getting to the boat launch might even require four-wheel drive, or at least a vehicle with high clearance, as some lakes are at the end of a two-track trail road. Which isn't a bad thing.



The primitive boat ramp at Shell Lake near Gordon.

& Development, and the Sandhills Task Force and the renovation of the lake in December 2012. The partnership also led to an agreement that opened the lake to the public. Anglers will find excellent water quality and good fish populations, with keeper-sized fish expected in 2016. A public boat ramp will be completed by summer 2016. Anglers need to follow the signs to access location. No live baitfish allowed, no camping.

13 Willow Lake WMA

400 Acres. Brown County, 18½S, 12½W, 1N of Ainsworth. Bluegill, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Yellow Perch, Walleye.

Willow Lake was renovated in 2013 and has seen very high growth rates for perch and is producing quality bass and bluegill as well. Walleye were stocked in 2015. With depths of up to 10 feet, it is one of the deeper Sandhills lakes. Primitive boat ramp, primitive camping. Snowmobiles and ATVs allowed on ice.

14 Tower Lake (Yellowthroat WMA)

75 Acres. Brown County, 12½S, 1½E of Ainsworth. Bluegill, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Yellow Perch.

This U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service-owned lake is consistently one of the best fisheries in the region, producing some big crappies, perch and bluegills and excellent bass. The west lake is open to ice fishing only and the east is open year round. Boat access is via a primitive ramp in a ditch connecting the lakes. Access can be difficult in low water but is better since the ditch was dug out in recent years. Electric motors or non-powered boats only. Daytime access only.

15 Cozad Lake (South Pine WMA)

80 Acres. Brown County, 11S, 2W of Long Pine. Bluegill, Largemouth Bass, Yellow Perch.

Drought and low water have hampered this lake and its normally good bluegill population in recent years, but it still holds some big largemouth bass and some perch and bluegill. Deeper water is found in the east half of the lake. The west half is private, but anglers can float across a fence line dividing the lake to fish from a boat (no bank fishing is allowed on west half) when water levels are high enough. Concrete boat ramp, primitive camping.

16 Twin Lakes WMA

North Lake: 105 Acres. South Lake: 82 Acres. Rock County, 16S, 2½E, 2S of Bassett. Bluegill, Common Carp, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Northern Pike, Yellow Perch.

These lakes are hampered by abundant carp, but work to install fish barriers and renovate the watershed and lakes should be complete in 2016. Twin Lakes has provided excellent perch, crappie, bass and pike fishing in the past, and is expected to do so again when that work is done. Planning is underway to construct new boat ramps on both lakes to replace the primitive launches. Primitive camping.

17 Overton Lake

135 Acres. Holt County, 21S, 5E of Newport. Common Carp, Bluegill, Largemouth Bass, Yellow Perch.

This shallow, private lake is leased for ice-fishing and open December 1 - March 15 only. Fishing is currently poor due to carp entering the lake during high water in 2011 and winter-kill caused by low water in 2013. Biologists are considering renovating and restocking the lake, but no timetable has been set. All other access by permission only.

18 Swan Lake

235 Acres. Holt County, 26S, ½W of Atkinson. Bluegill, Channel Catfish, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Yellow Perch.

A renovation in 2006 removed the carp from this private lake leased for fishing, and it has historically been a good bass and panfish lake. Biologists suspect a winterkill in 2014-15 is the reason behind reduced numbers of fish and have been restocking perch, bluegills and bass to help the populations recover. While it does have significant algae blooms in the summer, its depths of 10 to 12 feet keep areas free of submersed vegetation throughout the summer. A four-wheel-drive is recommended for the primitive boat ramp located on the lake's north shore. All other access by permission only.

19 Goose Lake WMA

237 Acres. Holt County, 18N, 5E of Bartlett. Bluegill, Largemouth Bass, Northern Pike, Yellow Perch. While it was one of the first lakes purchased by the predecessor of the Game and Parks Commission, Goose Lake didn't shine as a fishery until renovations removed carp in 1990 and again in 2003.

The troublesome carp have once again found their way back into the lake, and fish populations and angler success have declined enough in recent years that another renovation

is planned, possibly as soon as 2016. Until that happens, anglers can still find a few northern pike and panfish. After it does, fishing is expected to be excellent once again.

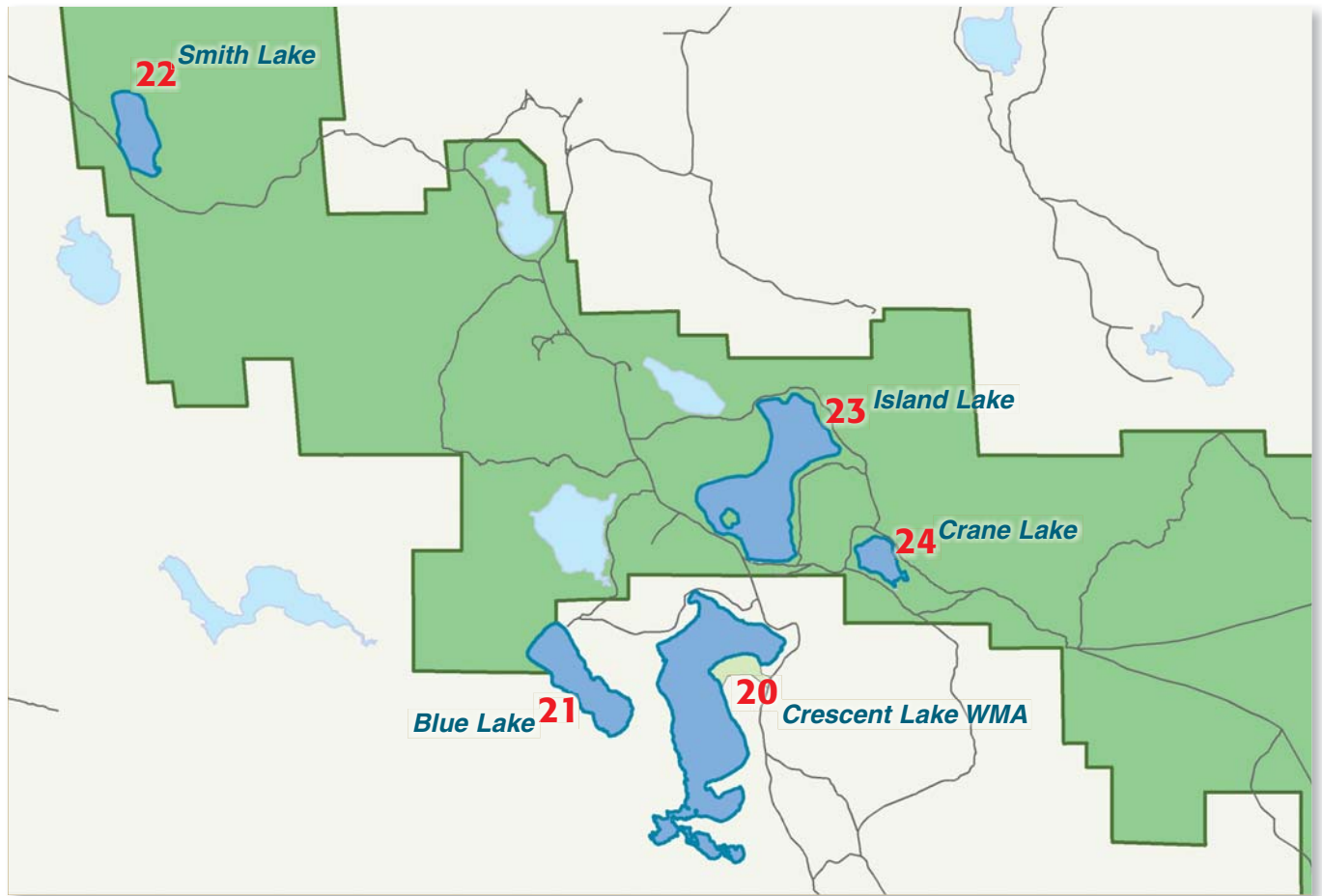
The south arm of the lake is shallower than the main lake. An island and several points expand the amount of shoreline vegetation anglers can ply for pike and bass. The lake doesn't suffer from low water problems like other Sandhills lakes thanks to a well that can be used to maintain water levels when needed. Northern pike between 28 and 34 inches in length must be released, a protected slot limit designed to keep pike in this heavily-fished lake.

Abundant vegetation makes the lake nearly impossible to fish in the summer. In 2015, another aquatic plant, Eurasian watermilfoil, found its way into the lake, making it even worse. The non-native invasive plant, which spreads rapidly, forms dense mats, hampers fishing and can grow from a small fragment of stem or leaf. To prevent its spread to other waters via boats and trailers, which is likely how it arrived, the lake was closed to the public in the fall of 2015. Biologists plan to use chemicals to control Eurasian watermilfoil in 2016, but the effectiveness of the effort will determine when the lake reopens to summer fishing. (It did open to ice fishing in 2015-16). Concrete and primitive boat ramps, primitive campground. Snowmobiles and ATVs allowed on ice.



PHOTO BY JUSTIN HAAG

Jake Perkins of Alliance shows off one of the big bluegills he caught at Smith Lake Wildlife Management Area south of Rushville.



Crescent Lake Area

The three lakes on the Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge open to fishing have long been worth the drive on miles of bumpy roads for anglers. But because they were a long way from everywhere, many looking for more than a day trip crossed them off their list because camping was not allowed. That changed when the Commission opened Crescent Lake Wildlife Management Area on the south edge of the refuge in 2011, and with it, public access to Crescent and Blue lakes. Anglers are now making Crescent Lake WMA their base camp on multi-day trips to the area, allowing them to hit any or all of the lakes in search of the best bite. Lodging is also available at Blue Creek Lodge, 7 miles south of the lakes.

Unlike their neighbors on the refuge, Crescent and Blue lakes allow live baitfish and gas motors with a 5 mph, no-wake limit. Only electric motors and non-powered boats are allowed on Island Lake. No boats, kayaks or even float tubes are allowed on Crane and Smith lakes. Dead smelt is allowed.

The refuge is open one hour before sunrise to one hour after sunset. For more information on the refuge, visit FWS.gov/Refuge/Crescent_Lake.

20 Crescent Lake WMA

982 Acres. Garden County, 22N of Oshkosh. Bluegill, Common Carp, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Muskellunge,

Northern Pike, Sauger, Saugeye, Yellow Perch.

The second largest of all Sandhills lakes, Crescent Lake and the adjacent Blue Lake opened to the public in 2011 after a long-running effort to lease land access to these public waters. The lakes were renovated in 2008 to remove carp that had left the lakes void of vegetation. That effort wasn't entirely successful and, combined with a partial winterkill of gamefish in 2012-13, carp have regained a foothold. Biologists are hoping to control the carp by stocking more northern pike, muskellunge, saugeye and sauger, and the lake is expected to offer good fishing for a number of years. Primitive camping is allowed in the upper parking lot. Concrete boat ramp, pit toilet.

21 Blue Lake

311 Acres. Garden County, 22N of Oshkosh. Bluegill, Common Carp, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Smallmouth Bass, Yellow Perch.

This private lake is open to the public thanks to an easement across private land via a 2.7 mile trail road. The lake has been producing quality panfish since it opened to the public in 2011. With depths of up to 20 feet, it won't be choked by vegetation in the summer. While some carp found their way into the lake during high water in 2010, fishing is expected to be good for at least the next 10 years. The lake is open only to fishing and only during daylight hours. The access road, which is closed at times due to snow or wet or dry conditions, requires a four-wheel-drive. No camping,



PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

An aerial photo shows Crescent Lake and the Crescent Lake Wildlife Management Area (at right), Blue Lake (left) and Island Lake (top right) and others on the Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge north of Oshkosh.

hunting, ATVs, horses, fires or littering are allowed. The area is closed to access during the November firearm deer season. Please stay on the road, follow the rules and close all gates to ensure the landowners renew the lease. Primitive boat launch, small boats recommended. For questions on road conditions, call 308-763-2940.

Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Garden County, 24N of Oshkosh.

22 Smith Lake

225 Acres. Bluegill, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Yellow Perch.

Open to fishing November 1 - February 15, this lake is popular among ice anglers and a few hardy souls who wade fish for big largemouth bass before ice-up.

23 Island Lake

711 Acres. Bluegill, Common Carp, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Walleye, Yellow Perch.

This shallow lake is the only lake on the refuge that is open year round. Named for the island in the south half of the hourglass-shaped lake, it offers good fishing for bass and panfish. There are three primitive boat launches on the lake, and the main ramp on the south side also includes a wildlife viewing deck.

24 Crane Lake

128 Acres. Yellow Perch.

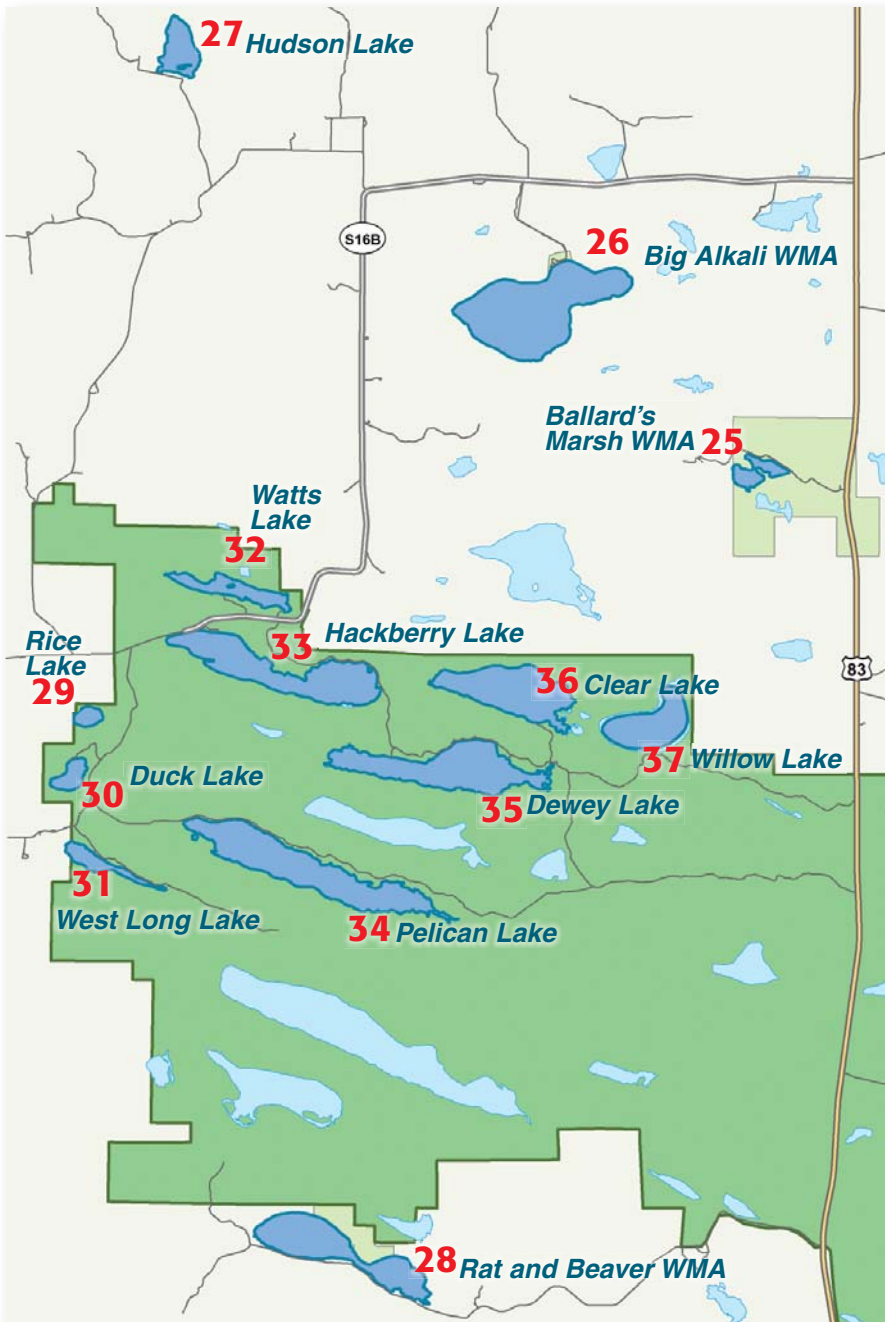
Open to fishing November 1 - February 15 only, this shallow lake is popular among ice anglers but regularly suffers from winterkill and did recently. The Commission



PHOTO BY JUSTIN HAAG

Ben Shaw of Parks pulls a perch through the ice at Blue Lake.

plans to stock yellow perch and possibly black crappie in the lake in 2016, and it should produce keeper-sized fish by 2019 if water levels stay high and it doesn't suffer another die-off.



MAP BY TRISHA SCHLAKE-IT GIS APPLICATIONS DEVELOPER



motors are allowed on Big Alkali, Rat and Beaver lakes and Ballard’s Marsh, giving anglers an option if they’re up for the weekend and the wind is too much for their electric motor to handle. Big Alkali is one of two Sandhills lakes, and the only one in the Valentine area, that doesn’t limit boats to 5 mph.

The refuge is only open from sunrise to sunset, and camping is not allowed. Camping is available nearby at Big Alkali Lake WMA, Ballard’s Marsh WMA and Merritt Reservoir SRA. Cabins are available at Big Alkali Fish Camp, Lord Ranch Resort and Merritt Trading Post, and there are several motels in Valentine.

Valentine Area

Nine lakes on the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge are open to fishing. Four more public lakes – Ballard’s Marsh, Big Alkali, Rat and Beaver – are located adjacent to the refuge. For many Nebraska anglers, that variety and the chance to catch northern pike and big panfish makes “the refuge” *the* place to fish in the Sandhills.

A few of the lakes on the refuge are large by most standards: Pelican Lake covers 798 acres and is more than three miles long. Considering only electric motors are allowed, they can seem much larger if your battery gives out or you push your luck and don’t get off the water when you see a storm approaching. Anglers need to keep this in mind or risk getting stranded on the wrong side of the lake. Gas

Use and possession of live baitfish is prohibited on all of the lakes in the area except Big Alkali. Dead smelt is allowed. On the refuge, possession of fish not taken from refuge waters is unlawful. Where there are northern pike on the refuge, only fish 28 inches or shorter may be kept.

For more information, visit FWS.gov/Refuge/Valentine.

25 Ballard’s Marsh WMA

70 acres. 20S of Valentine. Crappie, Northern Pike.

With more cattail marsh than open water, this shallow, heavily vegetated lake is better known for its duck hunting. But it also holds some pike and crappies and can be fished early or through the ice. Primitive boat ramp, primitive campground, pit toilet.



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

26 Big Alkali WMA

842 Acres. Cherry County, 16S, 4W, 1½S of Valentine. Bluegill, Channel Catfish, Common Carp, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Northern Pike, Saugeye, Walleye, Yellow Perch.

Big Alkali Lake has an excellent channel catfish population, and has a few big crappies, walleyes and northern pike. The Commission stocked saugeye in the lake in 2015, hoping to provide yet another predator to help control carp and to provide additional angling opportunities. Primitive campsites are strung along a portion of the north shore of the lake, but for decades anglers and hunters have also been enjoying the rustic cabins at Big Alkali Fish Camp. The resort also offers an RV campground, showers, fish cleaning station, a small store and a battery charging service. The cabins and other facilities were renovated in 2006 by the Commission, which leases the site to an operator. A concrete boat ramp is protected from south winds by a breakwater. Pit toilet. Snowmobiles and ATVs allowed on ice.

27 Hudson Lake

160 Acres. Cherry County, 15S, 8W, 1N of Valentine. Bluegill, Bullhead, Green Sunfish, Largemouth Bass, Yellow Perch.

This private lake is open to the public for daytime ice fishing from December 1 - February 29 only.

28 Rat and Beaver WMA

450 Acres. Cherry County, 30S, 7W of Valentine. Bluegill, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Redear Sunfish, Yellow Perch.

Rat and Beaver lakes were renovated in 2014 and with

Camping and Other Amenities

The distance between the home of many Nebraska anglers and the nearest Sandhills lake often begs for a multi-day trip. Due to the remoteness of most of these lakes, however, there are often few, if any, amenities available, including those for anglers willing to camp.

Camping is allowed on all Nebraska Game and Parks Commission state recreation areas and wildlife management areas. SRAs are typically more developed, with picnic tables, water hydrants, pit toilets and mowed campsites. A few WMAs offer some or all of those same amenities, and are mowed periodically to make them more tent-friendly, and even include a fire ring or two and some picnic tables.

At most WMAs, however, you will simply pitch your tent next to the parking lot, or park your camper in it, and fend for yourself. This is what you can expect if you're visiting one of the lakes in the accompanying list that offers "Primitive Camping," so plan on bringing everything you need, including water for drinking and dishes.

Areas with more amenities include Ballard's Marsh, Big Alkali Lake, Frye Lake, Goose Lake, Shell Lake, Smith Lake and Willow Lake WMAs and Cottonwood Lake and Walgren Lake SRAs. Big Alkali Fish Camp is the only resort on the banks of a Sandhills lake offering a campground with RV hookups. It also offers primitive cabins and showers, or campers can rough it in a few primitive sites along the lakeshore adjacent to the resort. While these areas may offer a few campsites with picnic tables, someone may beat you to them if the bite is on, so it's still a good idea to pack heavy.

Big Alkali also offers something you won't find at any other lakes in the Sandhills: a place to charge your deep-cycle trolling motor battery. Anglers should bring a spare battery or two for a weekend trip.

Open campfires are allowed only where the Commission has provided fire rings. Apart from that, fires must be contained in stoves, grills or fireplaces.

Camping isn't allowed on either of the National Wildlife Refuges, however, or on any of the private lakes on this list that are open to public fishing.

Those who don't like roughing it do have other options. Cabins are available near several Sandhills lakes, and a town with a motel is typically within 30 miles.



PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

The primitive campground at Big Alkali Lake near Valentine.



Because of the invertebrates they support, bluegills and other fish are often found in and around aquatic vegetation in Sandhills lakes, which in this photo includes pondweed and coontail.

carp removed and barriers constructed to keep them out, the lakes now boast excellent water quality and vegetation is returning. The fish are growing and reproducing rapidly and should reach keeper-sized proportions in 2017. A 12-inch minimum length limit placed on yellow perch should provide trophy potential, but it may be 2018 before fish reach that size. Monitoring in the years to come will determine if the regulation is successful and will remain in place. The lakes are connected by a narrow bottleneck. Beaver, the western lake, is the deeper of the two, reaching 12 feet in places, compared to 6 or 7 feet on Rat. A primitive boat ramp serving both lakes is located on the south side of Rat Lake on land leased from the Rat and Beaver Sportsman's Club, and anglers are asked to park within the designated areas only. While the WMA includes 240 acres of public land, all of it is located on the north side of the lake and only accessible by boat. The entire south shore is private land, and no bank fishing or other access is allowed.

Valentine National Wildlife Refuge, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Cherry County, 16S, 6W, 8S of Valentine.

29 Rice Lake

47 Acres. Bluegill, Largemouth Bass, Yellow Perch.

Rice Lake is only 6 feet deep when water levels are highest and extremely prone to winterkill when drought

takes up to half of that depth. The drought in the 2000s killed the lake, but it was restocked in 2010 and 2011 and is now producing keeper-sized fish. Access is by foot only from the parking lot at Duck Lake, a three-fourths of a mile walk. Anglers generally fish Rice Lake with waders, float tubes or through the ice.

30 Duck Lake

66 Acres. Bluegill, Bullhead, Largemouth Bass, Yellow Perch.

This lake is blessed with exceptionally clear water and can be a very productive panfish lake, boasting bluegills 10 inches or longer and yellow perch 12 inches or longer.

31 West Long Lake

62 Acres. Bluegill, Largemouth Bass, Northern Pike, Yellow Perch.

This long, narrow lake has always provided quality bluegill and perch fishing, especially during the winter months, as it does have excessive vegetation during the summer.

32 Watts Lake

230 Acres. Bluegill, Largemouth Bass, Yellow Perch.

This lake was renovated in 2015 and the response by vegetation and fish was rapid. Anglers can expect to see keeper-sized panfish in 2017. Biologists did not stock

Down with Carp

The common carp has been making a mess of lakes, reservoirs, rivers and streams since it was first brought to the United States and later Nebraska from Europe in the late 1800s. Once established, they can ruin a fishery, and have done just that to many in the Sandhills.

Carp are bottom feeders that stir up sediments and cloud the water. The aquatic vegetation that is the base of the food web doesn't grow well, if at all, in muddy water. And sight-feeding gamefish like pike, bass, bluegill and perch, unable to find what little food is left, grow slow and stay skinny. Eventually, there will be few gamefish left. Some Sandhills lakes have been infested with carp for so long that not even cattails grow in the shallows. Without vegetation, the lakes are also of little value to waterfowl and other wildlife.

For decades, the Game and Parks Commission's fisheries division has been using rotenone to remove carp from lakes. This chemical kills gill-breathing organisms, including gamefish, but by the time biologists choose that route, few gamefish remain. With carp removed, waters clear quickly, aquatic vegetation rebounds and the gamefish stocked into the "new" lakes grow fast and fat.

Unfortunately, it can be hard to kill carp in the Sandhills. These natural lakes are fed by groundwater, and springs bubbling up from a lake bottom can provide a refuge from the chemical for carp. It is also difficult to get the chemical mixed into every ounce of water that permeates the cattails and marshy areas around the lakeshore. Also, many of these lakes are connected by small streams and man-made ditches that run out of one lake, through a wet meadow or marsh and into another lake and eventually a river. Carp first found their way into some lakes by swimming up or down these streams during times of high water, and often do so again following a renovation.

Biologists have understood this fact of life in managing Sandhills lakes, but feel that even if they have to re-treat a lake in 10 or 15 years, the good fishing in the interim makes the effort and expense worthwhile. Often, they stock lakes with predators like northern pike, muskellunge or walleye, which have been shown to help control carp populations, extending that timeline.

In recent years, however, biologists have brought engineering to the battle in hopes of making the next renovation of a lake the last. Barriers that allow water but not carp to pass are being installed on streams below lakes to keep carp from swimming back up. And when lakes are renovated, so are their watersheds, ensuring that carp won't come downstream.

Water control structures built to keep water in lakes often allow managers to let water out, or can be modified to do so. With lower lake levels, water and carp are drawn out of the shoreline vegetation, ensuring none escape the



PHOTO BY JUSTIN HAAG

While carp are bad news for gamefish and some anglers search for lakes without them, others, including Joe Rydell of Alliance, appreciate the fight carp put up when they hook one while fishing for other species, as he did at Blue Lake. Still, other anglers target carp with their fly rods or with bow and arrow, and a growing number are making trips to the Sandhills in search of the non-native fish.

rotenone and allowing biologists to use less of it. Where structures aren't present, managers use high-capacity pumps to lower a lake prior to a renovation, or wait until drought lowers the levels naturally.

Work is underway on several of these types of projects in the Sandhills, the largest of which is at the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge. Nine of the 36 lakes on the refuge are open to fishing. Six of them, along with another lake not open to fishing, are connected, including the five largest fishing lakes, covering nearly 3,500 surface acres combined. A joint project between the Commission, its Aquatic Habitat Program and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is underway to improve existing or build new water control structures between the lakes to prevent movement of carp between them. A major piece of the puzzle – a new fish barrier below Willow Lake, the last in the system – is in place. When other barriers are completed, the partners plan to perform a systematic top-down renovation of the lakes, timing it so anglers will always have several lakes to fish.

Another major project is installing barriers to keep carp out of Twin Lakes WMA in Rock County, which were renovated in March 2016.

There is no guarantee any of these extra steps will work. Historic rainfalls sent water over the barriers installed at Goose Lake WMA prior to a 2003 renovation, allowing carp to re-enter the lake. It is tentatively set to be renovated again in 2016. And unbeknownst to some anglers, that bucket of crappie minnows they buy at the bait-shop often includes young carp, which is why the use of live baitfish is prohibited at newly renovated lakes.

Even without guaranteed success, the return on investment for fish and anglers, as well as hunters and fowl, is high enough that biologists will continue to do whatever they can to get carp out of Sandhills lakes and keep them out.

northern pike or muskie in Watts following the renovation in hopes of making it a quality panfish and bass lake.

33 Hackberry Lake

680 Acres. Bluegill, Common Carp, Largemouth Bass, Northern Pike, Yellow Perch.

Hackberry was renovated in 2004, but carp have found their way back into the lake. While it remains a fair fishery, it could be renovated in the near future to remove carp, as it is at the top of a series of lakes. Marshy areas on the north bank, especially in the eastern third, can be difficult to get a boat in but often hold bass and can be fished with waders and from a kayak. Restroom at refuge sub-headquarters.

34 Pelican Lake

798 Acres. Bluegill, Bullhead, Common Carp, Largemouth Bass, Northern Pike, Yellow Perch.

The longest of the refuge lakes at more than 3 miles, Pelican is very productive and holds trophy bluegill, perch and pike. Like Hackberry, Pelican lies at the top of the system and may be renovated in the near future to remove carp.

35 Dewey Lake

550 Acres. Bluegill, Common Carp, Largemouth Bass, Northern Pike, Yellow Perch.

The east half of this lake is deeper than the west, which gets choked with vegetation early in the summer. An island and stands of cattails form a peninsula that separates the two halves. That area and the marshy areas on the east and west ends of the lake can be productive.

36 Clear Lake

425 Acres. Black Crappie, Bluegill, Common Carp, Largemouth Bass, Northern Pike, Yellow Perch.

This lake holds some big pike but is hampered by carp. It is the deepest of the lakes, reaching 14 feet when at full pool. Deep water can be found along the north bank, and the marsh on the east end can be productive.

37 Willow Lake

353 Acres. Black Crappie, Bluegill, Common Carp, Largemouth Bass, Northern Pike, Yellow Perch.

A road was built around the east end of this lake in 2015 to construct a water control structure and fish barrier to replace one that washed out years ago. However, plans currently call for that road to be for maintenance only, meaning anglers will still have to walk in from a parking area on the south side. An abundance of carp and low water levels have left few gamefish in this lake, but once renovated it should provide excellent fishing, as it has in the past, and be worth the effort to drag in a kayak or float tube. ■

To Pike or Not to Pike?

Commission biologists don't stock northern pike in every Sandhills lake. While some anglers love fishing for these toothy, hard-fighting predators, the presence of pike in a lake may hamper panfish populations, which makes other anglers despise them.

Studies have found that pike can reduce both the abundance and size of yellow perch. Pike don't have as great of an effect on bluegills.

Pike are sometimes stocked in lakes to help control common carp, and according to studies on the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge, are fairly good at it, able to keep the fish from overpopulating and ruining a fishery.

Yet in cloudy water, this sight-feeding fish isn't at its best and can appear skinny. Nebraska being on the southern edge of the species range also affects its longevity, and while some fish reach trophy size, most don't live long enough.

When Commission biologists restock a lake following a renovation, they look at several factors when they decide whether or not the stocked fish will include pike. Often, it comes down to geography. If there is a good pike lake nearby, the lake may only get bass and panfish. That provides something for all anglers.



PHOTO BY STEVE FREDERICK

Author Eric Fowler with pike caught at Dewey Lake near Valentine.

This guide was written by Eric Fowler, with assistance from Nebraska Game and Parks Commission fisheries biologists, many of whom are directly involved in managing Sandhills lakes, including Al Hanson, Joe Rydell, Zac Brashears, Andy Glidden, Jeff Schuckmann, Phil Chvala, Daryl Bauer and Dave Tunink. Past work on fishing the Sandhills by longtime NEBRASKAland Magazine staffer Ken Bouc was also an invaluable resource.

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For more information, contact Commission fisheries staff in Alliance, 308-763-2940, Bassett, 402-684-2921, or

Norfolk, 402-370-3374. Additional copies of this publication can be requested by calling the Commission's Fisheries Division at 402-471-5552. Cover photo, *Hackberry Lake, Valentine National Wildlife Refuge*, by Jeff Kurrus.