



A Rock Lake Conversation with the DNR-Jefferson's County's Rare Gem

Recently, members of the Rock Lake Improvement Association -Fisheries Committee, had a conversation with Laura Stremick-Thompson who is the area Fisheries Supervisor for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR). The discussion centered around the current status of the various fisheries within Rock Lake and what if anything, needs to be worked on in the future.

Stremick-Thompson advised that the last comprehensive fish survey was done in 2014 for Rock Lake. The DNR had plans to survey the lake in 2020 however the COVID outbreak derailed those plans. The lake is tentatively rescheduled for a survey in 2022. These surveys would consist of spring fyke netting for northern pike and walleye, spring electro fishing for estimating northern pike and walleye population size, summer electro fishing to assess bass and panfish populations, and fall electro fishing to assess the success of walleye, bass and panfish recruitment (how many young fish produced in the previous spring and summer are present in the fall).

According to the 2014 survey, all game fish species except walleye, were described as self-sustaining, and did not require any kind of supplemental stocking. The survey noted the lake has good populations of northern pike, largemouth bass and smallmouth bass, growth rates on these species were all close to the state average.

The survey documented the following species under the "Panfish" label; bluegill, yellow perch, pumpkinseed, green sunfish, rock bass, and black crappie. Bluegill were noted in the last survey to be below the statewide average for growth rates for ages 1-4 then after age 6, they exceed the statewide average for growth rates.

The walleye population has historically struggled in Rock Lake. In the 1970's, walleye were the dominant predator in the lake however numbers and size have decreased significantly since then. The walleye population in the lake is considered not self-sustaining and does require stocking to ensure the fishery will continue.

Over the years, Rock Lake has been stocked with different sizes of walleye to try to increase the population size. Stremick-Thompson said the DNR began stocking the lake with the smallest stockable size, called fry. With no noticeable improvement in population size, fry stocking was discontinued and replaced with small fingerling stocking. The DNR is currently evaluating the use of extended growth walleye stocking and since 2015, the lake has been stocked with extended growth walleye fingerlings, every other year, in odd years. Currently, the lake is stocked with approximately 15 extended growth walleye fingerlings per acre.

Rock Lake also supports a variety of “non-game” fish species including bowfin, longnose gar, grass pickerel, white sucker, brook silverside, golden shiner, emerald shiner, blacknose shiner, mimic shiner, bluntnose minnow, fathead minnow, longnose gar, black bullhead, yellow bullhead, central mudminnow, blackstripe topminnow, johnny darter, Iowa darter and common carp.

The lake also supports a significant population of mud puppies, which are entirely aquatic salamanders that have external gills. All of the above-mentioned species play a critical part in the ecological balance of Rock Lake. As such, anglers and lake users are asked to release bowfin (dogfish), longnose gar and mudpuppies back to the lake unharmed.

Three species of fish that the DNR labels “Special Concern” inhabit Rock Lake, the lake chubsucker, banded killifish and least darter. Special concern means a species has the potential to become threatened or endangered due to biological characteristics and identified threats.

Pugnose shiners have also been documented in the lake, they are considered a threatened species. The DNR advises a threatened species has the potential to become endangered. A threatened species may qualify for special protections and regulations through state and federal governments.

Stremick-Thompson described the lake as a “Rare Gem” and said for the most part, the lake is really in good shape. She advised that the ecosystem of the lake is in overall good balance and nothing appears to be out of synch. She said she is excited to see the results of the 2022 survey to determine how things are progressing in the lake.

Stremick-Thompson was asked how the Rock Lake Improvement Association (RLIA) can work with the DNR on continuous improvement of the fishery. The one idea that was discussed was to continue to expand upon the fish sticks program that was started in 2018 on the northeast side of the lake. Fish sticks are multiple newly felled full-size trees, bunched together and anchored to the shoreline to provide crucial woody habitat. Fish sticks provide shelter and feeding areas for a diversity of fish species and also provide nesting and sunning areas for birds, turtles, and other animals above the water. Nearly all fish species utilize woody habitat for at least one portion of their life cycle.

The RLIA will be focusing on continuing the fish sticks program in 2021-2022, at a location yet to be determined.

In order to continue to protect Rock Lake, we encourage you to visit the RLIA website at Rocklake.org and to join the association. There are a boatload of resources there including a variety of past studies done on the lake. There are a lot of opportunities to get involved to help protect our lake to pass this “Rare Gem” onto our future generations.