

Status of the Fishery

Big Sand is located 2.5 miles north of Dorset in Hubbard County. Big Sand has a surface area of 1,635 acres and a maximum depth of 135 feet. A public access is located on the southeast shore of the lake at the outlet. Access with small boats is also available from the inlet connecting to Lake Emma and from the outlet connecting to Lake Ida. Big Sand is noted for its outstanding walleye fishery. Big Sand has exceptional water clarity and lots of structure to challenge the angler. Big Sand has a protected slot length limit on walleye that requires the release of all walleye between 20 to 28 inches, with only one fish over 28 inches allowed in possession. An angler creel survey was conducted during the summer of 2011.

Walleye abundance (9.2 walleye/gillnet) was above the current management goal, and similar to past surveys. Sampled walleye had an average length and weight of 13.7 inches and 1.0 pounds, with fish measured up to 24.8 inches. Multiple year classes and sizes of walleye were sampled, however, the 2007 and 2008 year classes were the strongest. Fall electrofishing surveys the past several years have shown excellent natural reproduction of walleye. Big Sand has several rock and rubble shoal areas that provide excellent walleye spawning habitat. In past years Big Sand was receiving light walleye fingerling stockings to supplement natural reproduction. Walleye stocking was discontinued after 2004, when evaluations indicated natural reproduction could sustain the population.

Yellow perch and tullibee (cisco) provide an important forage base for walleye in Big Sand. Yellow perch were sampled in low numbers, with the gillnet catch rate of 4.1 perch/gillnet below the range "typical" for this lake class. Yellow perch abundance in past surveys has generally fluctuated within this "typical" range. Tullibee (cisco) were not sampled in 2011. Summer gillnet sampling of tullibee (cisco) can be quite variable and gillnet catch rates in past surveys have fluctuated widely from low to high abundance. Some local anglers have expressed concern about low numbers of tullibee in Big Sand the past decade. Anglers are not observing schools of tullibee on their graphs or seeing them surface in the evenings as had been common in the 1970's and 1980's. Anglers have also commented about the absence of larger walleye (> 25 inches). It is unknown whether low abundance of yellow perch and tullibee and changes in walleye growth, condition and size structure are a trend or normal fluctuations of those populations, and whether the changes were caused by the walleye regulation (slot length limit) or other environmental factors.

Big Sand has a low northern pike population, however, it is known for producing some large-sized pike. Northern pike abundance was below the range "typical" for this lake class, but similar to past surveys. Northern pike up to 36.2 inches were sampled.

Tullibee (cisco) and white sucker provide an excellent forage base for growing large pike.

Both smallmouth bass and largemouth bass are present in Big Sand, with smallmouth bass the more abundant of the two species. Big Sand has excellent smallmouth bass habitat of rock, rubble, and sand bottom areas. Good numbers and sizes of these "brown bass" are present in Big Sand. Largemouth bass are present in low to moderate numbers and are concentrated in areas of preferred largemouth bass habitat.

Panfish abundance was up from past surveys. Bluegill were sampled at their highest abundance (33.2 bluegill/trapnet) for all surveys on Big Sand. Bluegill abundance in surveys prior to 2000 was low, generally below the range "typical" for this lake class. Anglers will find bluegill in the 6-7 inch size range. Black crappie abundance was up slightly from past surveys, but still low compared to other area lakes. Black crappie have been sampled in very low numbers in past surveys. Rock bass were abundant, with catch rates well above the range "typical" for this lake class. Angler comments from the 2011 summer creel expressed concern about an overly-abundant and possibly increasing rock bass population. Rock bass trapnet catch rates have been high for all surveys, however, gillnet catch rates have been very high the since 2001.

Other species sampled include moderate numbers of yellow bullhead and white sucker, and low numbers of pumpkinseed.

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