



# 2024 SPRING FISHERIES SURVEY SUMMARY

## LAC COURTE OREILLES, SAWYER COUNTY

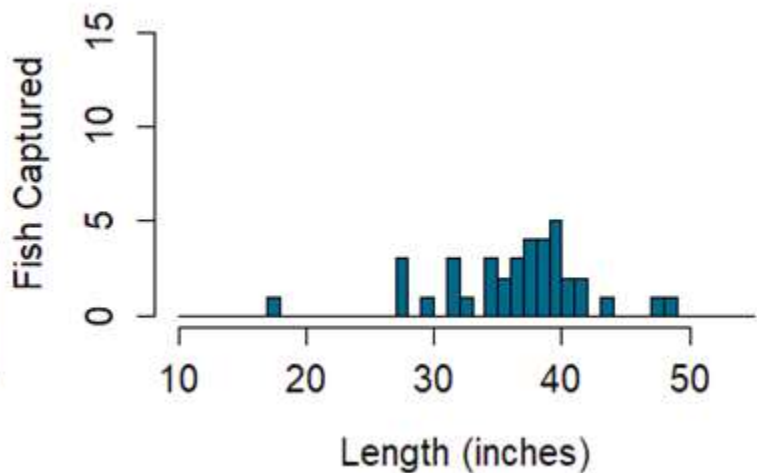
Report by Max Wolter

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Hayward Fisheries Management Team conducted a fyke netting survey on Lac Courte Oreilles (LCO) from March 10-15 and April 8-14, 2024 (data are reported from both time periods). The primary targets were muskellunge, walleye and northern pike, but useful data was also gathered on black crappie. Up to 12 nets were set overnight for 10 total nights which resulted in 86 total net-nights of effort. An electrofishing survey was conducted on June 3, 2024 to target largemouth bass, smallmouth bass and bluegill and included eight miles of shoreline. Quality, preferred and memorable sizes referenced in this summary are based on standard proportions of world record lengths developed for each species by the American Fisheries Society.

### MUSKELLUNGE



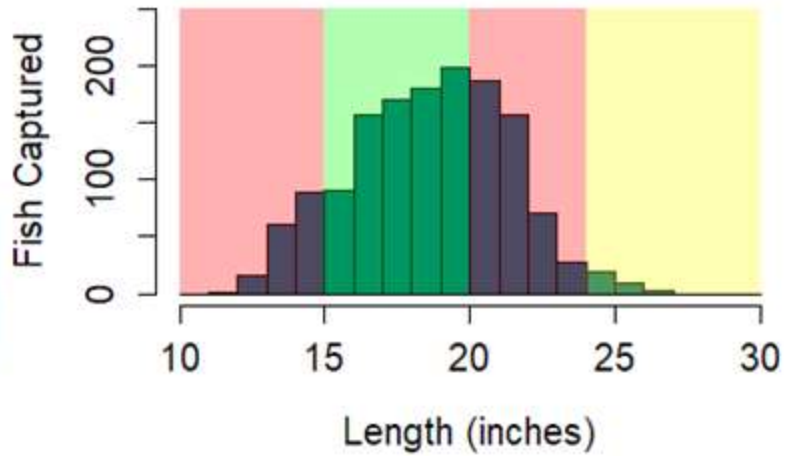
Captured 0.8 per net-night $\geq$ 20 inches	
Quality Size $\geq$ 30"	88%
Memorable Size $\geq$ 42"	9%



### WALLEYE



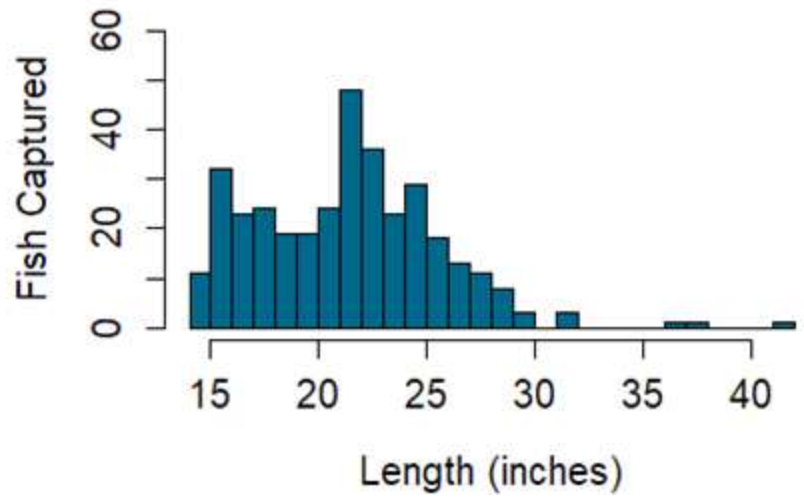
Captured 15 per net-night $\geq 10$ inches	
Quality Size $\geq 15''$	88%
Preferred Size $\geq 20''$	33%



### NORTHERN PIKE



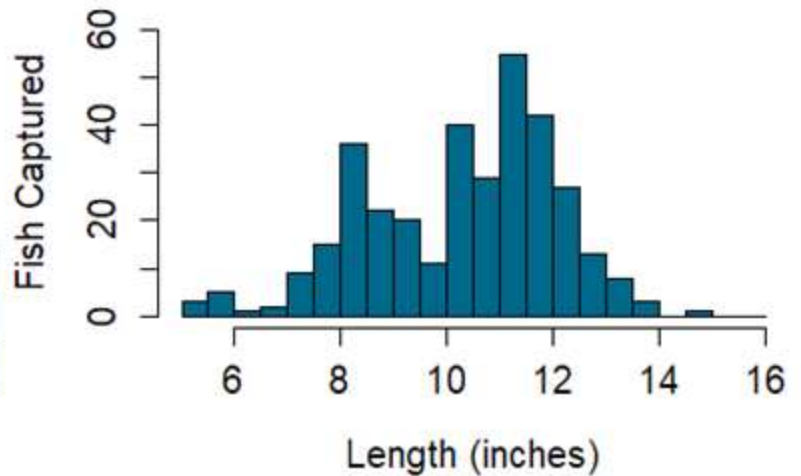
Captured 7 per net-night $\geq 14$ inches	
Quality Size $\geq 21''$	56%
Preferred Size $\geq 28''$	5%



### BLACK CRAPPIE



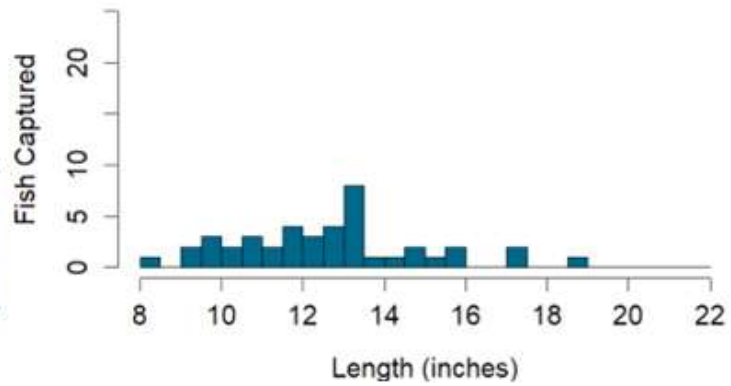
Captured 9 per net-night $\geq 5$ inches	
Quality Size $\geq 8''$	90%
Preferred Size $\geq 10''$	64%



### LARGEMOUTH BASS



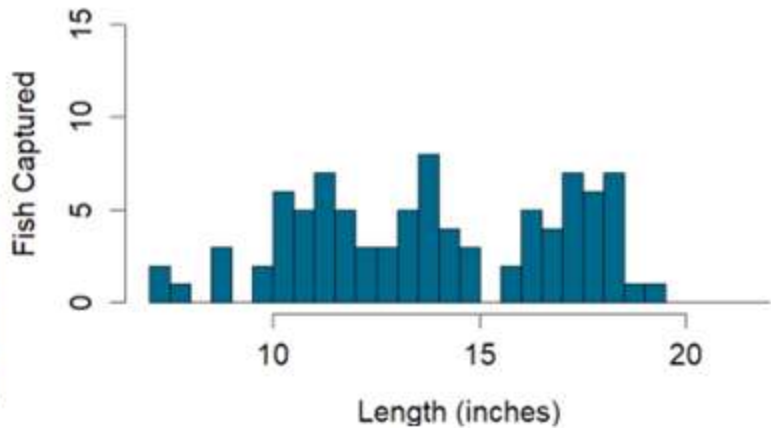
<b>Captured 5 per mile <math>\geq</math> 8 inches</b>	
<b>Quality Size <math>\geq</math> 12"</b>	<b>60%</b>
<b>Preferred Size <math>\geq</math> 15"</b>	<b>14%</b>



### SMALLMOUTH BASS



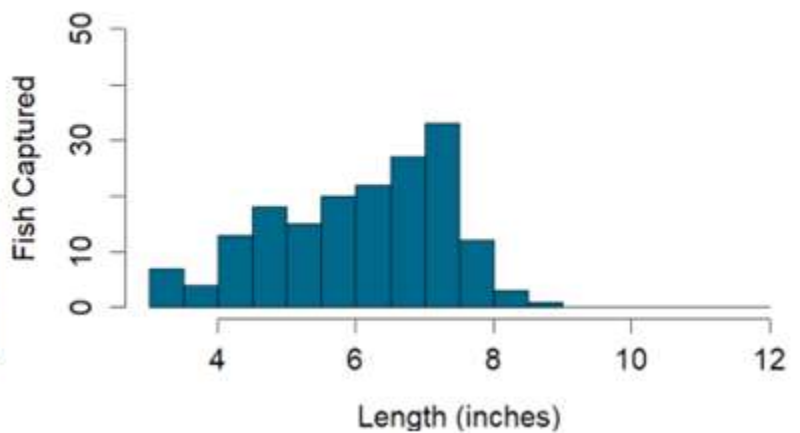
<b>Captured 12 per mile <math>\geq</math> 7 inches</b>	
<b>Quality Size <math>\geq</math> 11"</b>	<b>79%</b>
<b>Preferred Size <math>\geq</math> 14"</b>	<b>44%</b>
<b>Memorable Size <math>\geq</math> 17"</b>	<b>24%</b>



### BLUEGILL



<b>Captured 90 per mile <math>\geq</math> 3 inches</b>	
<b>Quality Size <math>\geq</math> 6"</b>	<b>56%</b>
<b>Preferred Size <math>\geq</math> 8"</b>	<b>2%</b>



## SUMMARY OF RESULTS

This intensive survey effort had several purposes, including estimating the total number of adult walleye, evaluating muskellunge stocking success, and providing relative abundance and size structure of other gamefish and panfish species. A first round of netting was attempted in March following an exceptionally early ice off in Musky Bay. We found fish were not ready to spawn at that point in time and the catches for most species were low. A second round of netting targeted the peak of the walleye spawn, but also captured other species. Lastly, the electrofishing survey was well-timed for pre-spawn smallmouth bass and bluegill. Data from all efforts are synthesized here to provide a look at all species that are of interest to anglers in this lake.



DNR fisheries staff members Angelena Sikora and Evan Sirianni with a big muskellunge captured in Lac Courte Oreilles in 2024. Photo courtesy of Max Wolter

### MUSKELLUNGE

The muskellunge catch rate (0.8 per net night) was strong, especially in comparison to what had been observed in the recent past. The population has been bolstered by strong stocking success from a 2017 year class. Those fish are marked with tags and are now in the 35-43 inch range in their 8<sup>th</sup> year of life. Subsequent stocking, including in 2021 and 2024 seeks to continue to grow the abundance of muskellunge in this historic fishery. The size potential remains excellent, and a pair of female muskellunge just under 50 inches (see photo), along with a 48-inch tiger musky, should give anglers plenty to be excited about now and into the future.

### WALLEYE

Walleye were captured at a relatively high rate during the second netting effort in 2024. Survey timing appeared to be very good, and many fish were captured on several rocky spawning points that were targeted with nets. However, the estimate of total adult walleye tells a somewhat different story. The 2024 estimate of adult walleye (conducted jointly by DNR and the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission) came out to just 1.2 adults per acre ( $\pm 0.4$ ), a relatively low rate. Natural reproduction has been very low for over 10 years and the population has been more reliant on stocking. The population is mostly larger/older adults at this point, with the vast majority of fish appearing in the survey being over 15 inches and a third also

over 20 inches. There is a 15-inch minimum length limit for walleye on LCO, with no harvest between 20-24 inches and only 1 over 24 inches as a part of a 3-daily bag limit (corresponding to the colors in the figure above).

## BLACK CRAPPIE

Black crappie have had an impressive presence in recent surveys of LCO including 2024. Catch rate was moderate overall, but in certain times and locations crappie are very abundant. Over half of crappie captured were over 10 inches with a large percentage over 12 inches and the biggest approaching 15 inches. Panfish in LCO are managed with a 25-fish daily bag limit (all species combined).

## NORTHERN PIKE

Northern pike have been a species of interest in LCO since an effort began in 2017 to improve pike size and increase musky abundance. Pike size has indeed improved since before that time, but the 2024 survey showed some signs of backsliding into poorer size structure. Pike in the 21-28 inch range, which had become the norm in LCO since 2017, are still present and available to anglers. Trophy pike are also present in the lake, as evidenced by a 42 inch pike collected in this survey. However, a higher number of smaller pike (<21 inches) also appeared in this survey. That result is not unexpected, but action may need to be taken to maintain a lower density of pike which has led to better size. Anglers are encouraged to harvest pike, particularly smaller ones. The daily bag limit for pike in LCO is 10 and there is no minimum length limit.

## LARGEMOUTH BASS

Largemouth bass are moderately abundant overall in LCO, with only small portions of the lake having suitable habitat for this species. Abundance can be fairly high in bays that offer shallow water habitat and dense aquatic plants (Musky Bay, Stukey Bay, Anchor Bay). Size of largemouth bass in LCO is fair, with a lot of fish around 13 inches and some larger. There is no minimum length limit for largemouth bass in LCO and the daily bag limit is 5.

## SMALLMOUTH BASS

Conversely, the bulk of the shorelines, bars and points in LCO are very suitable habitat for smallmouth bass, and this is reflected in their higher abundance. Smallmouth bass of all sizes were captured in this survey, including many younger fish. But almost half of the smallmouth captured were over 14 inches, many of which

were in the 15-20 inch range. Smallmouth bass in LCO are managed with an 18-inch minimum length limit and 1 fish daily bag limit.

## BLUEGILL

Bluegill were captured at a low-moderate rate in LCO, and like largemouth bass, their abundance is patchy and concentrated in shallow bays. Size of bluegill is solid, with many fish in the 6-8 inch range and some larger. Hybridization between bluegill and pumpkinseed is common in LCO, with the resulting hybrid fish often reaching nice sizes as well.

Survey Crew: Max Wolter, Scott Braden, Evan Sirianni, Angelena Sikora and volunteers Pat Eaton, Mike Persson and Brent Sirianni.

*Reviewed and approved by Aaron Cole*