WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

2025 Rock River Fisheries Survey

Indianford Dam

WATERBODY: Rock River **COUNTY:** Rock **YEAR:** 2025

Mitchell Trow – DNR Fisheries Biologist

Introduction

The Rock River, a large tributary to the Mississippi River, has one of the most popular walleye fisheries in southern Wisconsin. The 300-mile river begins near Horicon, Wisconsin at Horicon Marsh where the south, east and west branches of the Rock River meet to create the mainstem of the river. While in Wisconsin, the Rock River flows for 138 miles and travels through many cities including Fort Atkinson, Janesville and Beloit. There are 3 dams on the Rock River in Rock County which include Indianford Dam, Janesville Dam and Beloit Dam. The Rock River enters Illinois in the city of Beloit and eventually dumps into the Mississippi River in western Illinois.

The Indianford Dam is in the town of Fulton in northern Rock County, Wisconsin. The dam was built in 1851 to create Lake Koshkonong, a 10,595-acre impoundment of the Rock River. The Rock River below the Indianford Dam is known for its spring and fall runs for walleye and sauger. In the summer, it serves as a popular location to target channel catfish. Other species often captured by anglers on the Rock River include northern pike, black crappie and various bass species. Indianford Park, owned by Rock County Parks, provides parking and shore fishing access on the east and west side of the Indianford Dam. No public boat launch is nearby to access the tailrace below the dam. The closest public boat launch below the Indianford Dam is in Janesville, approximately 8 miles downstream.

Unlike most of Wisconsin's inland rivers and lakes, the Rock River from Indianford downstream to the state line is open to fishing year-round for all species except muskellunge. This section of river follows all statewide daily bag limits and length limits including a 15-inch minimum size limit for walleye and sauger (Table 1). The Rock River from the Indianford Dam upstream to the lower Watertown Dam (includes Lake Koshkonong) follows an 18-inch minimum size limit for walleye and sauger. Gamefish refers to all varieties of fish except rough fish and minnows. In this report, panfish are considered types of gamefish. Panfish refers to black crappie, bluegill, pumpkinseed and yellow perch.

Methods

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) conducted a single night electrofishing survey on the Rock River below Indianford Dam on Oct. 27, 2025 following standard procedures (Simonson 2015). A standard DNR maxiboom electrofishing boat was used to sample 2 miles of shoreline, a mile on each side of the river. All gamefish were collected throughout the survey. Each fish collected was measured to the nearest tenth of an inch. All fish were immediately released after processing. The goals of this survey were to determine relative abundance and size structure for gamefish species. Catch-per-unit-effort (CPUE) was calculated by dividing the total number of one individual fish species captured by the total number of miles shocked in the survey. The CPUE is the number of fish captured per mile. Walleye and sauger under 10 inches were considered young-of-year (YOY) which would represent fish born in the spring of 2025.

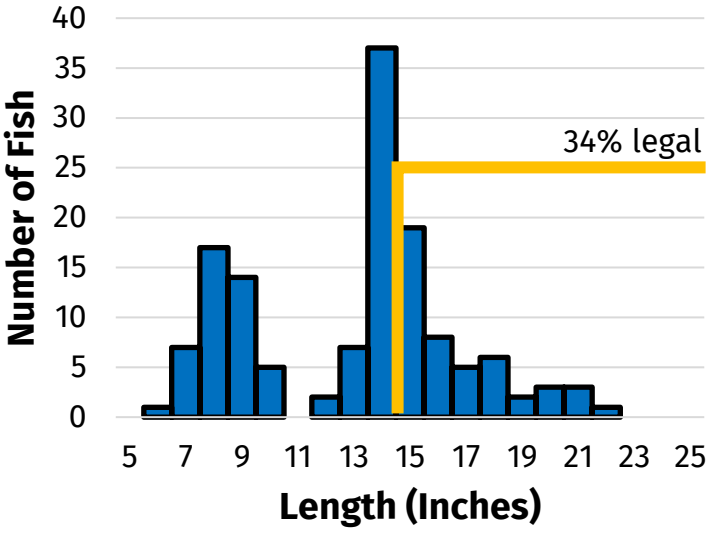
Annual fall electrofishing surveys are performed on the Rock River in the Fort Atkinson area, a popular walleye fishery north of Indianford and Lake Koshkonong in Jefferson County. Annual electrofishing surveys are also performed at the Wisconsin Dells Dam and Prairie Du Sac Dam tailwaters on the Wisconsin River. This is the first ever electrofishing survey performed below Indianford Dam. Since there have been no prior surveys at Indianford, this 2025 survey will be compared to surveys at Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin Dells Dam and Prairie Du Sac Dam throughout the report.

Fish Assemblage

A total of 16 species was collected at the Rock River below Indianford Dam (Table 2).

WALLEYE

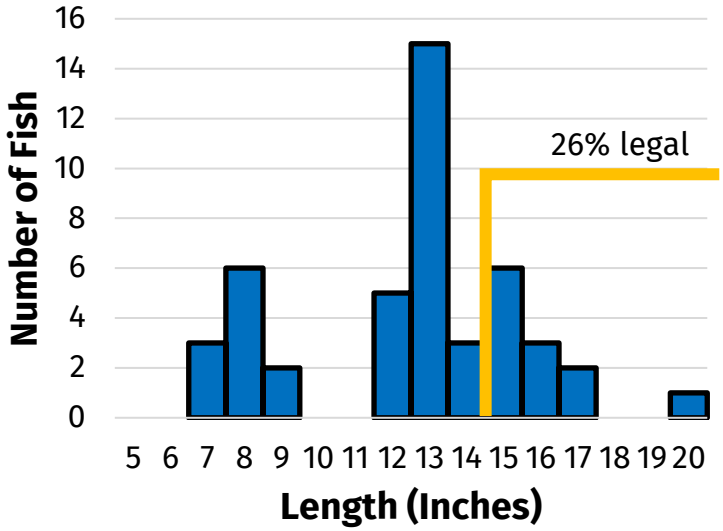
In total, 137 walleyes were sampled which resulted in a catch rate of 68.5 fish per mile. The average length of walleye collected was 13.5 inches with sizes varying from 6.1 to 22.4 inches. Out of 137 walleyes sampled, 34% were legal size (15 inches or greater). Compared to recent electrofishing surveys at other popular fisheries in southern Wisconsin, the walleye catch rate at Indianford ranks high (Table 3). Evidence of successful walleye natural reproduction was observed in the survey which found a YOY CPUE of 22 fish per mile (Table 4).



RIVER	LOCATION	YEAR	CPUE (FISH/MILE)
Rock River	Indianford Dam	2025	68.5
Rock River	Fort Atkinson	2025	51.1
Wisconsin River	Prairie Du Sac	2025	29.0
Wisconsin River	Wisconsin Dells	2025	27.4

SAUGER

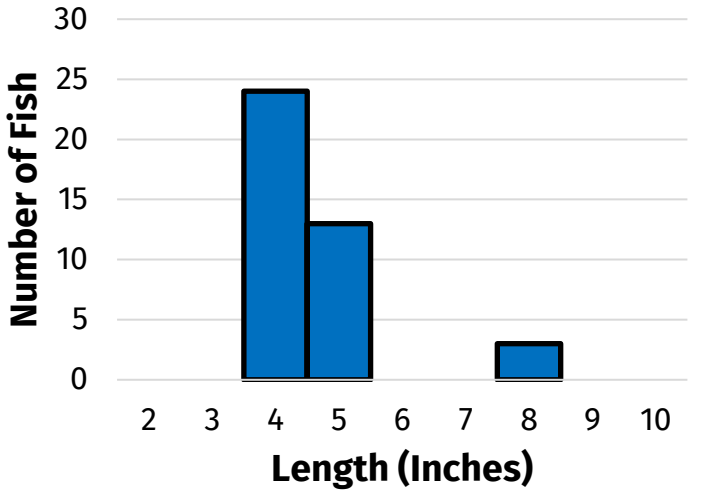
In total, 46 sauger were sampled which resulted in a catch rate of 23 fish per mile. The average length of sauger collected was 13 inches with sizes varying from 7.2 to 20.3 inches. Out of 46 sauger sampled, 26% were legal size (15 inches or greater). Compared to most other recent surveys at popular fisheries in southern Wisconsin, the sauger catch rate at Indianford was high (Table 5). The YOY sauger CPUE for the survey was 6 fish per mile (Table 6).



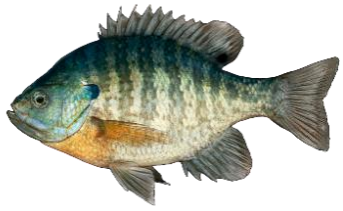
RIVER	LOCATION	YEAR	CPUE (FISH/MILE)
Rock River	Indianford Dam	2025	23.0
Rock River	Fort Atkinson	2025	10.1
Wisconsin River	Prairie Du Sac	2025	14.0
Wisconsin River	Wisconsin Dells	2025	16.7

YELLOW BASS

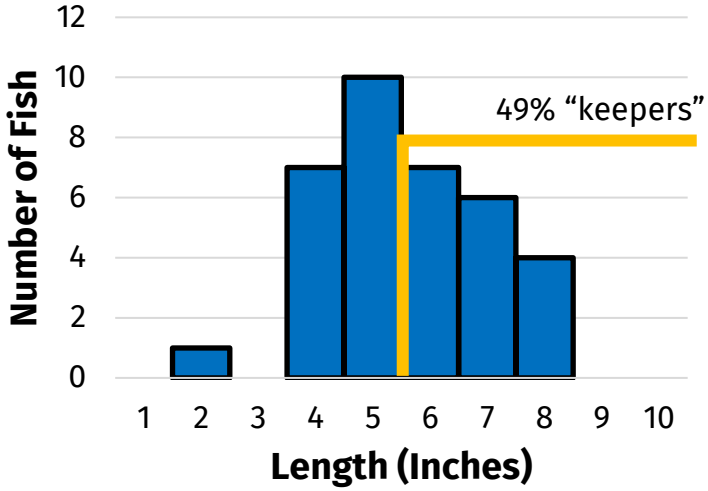
In total, 40 yellow bass were sampled which resulted in a catch rate of 20 fish per mile. The average length of yellow bass collected was 5.1 inches with sizes varying from 4.3 to 8.5 inches.



BLUEGILL

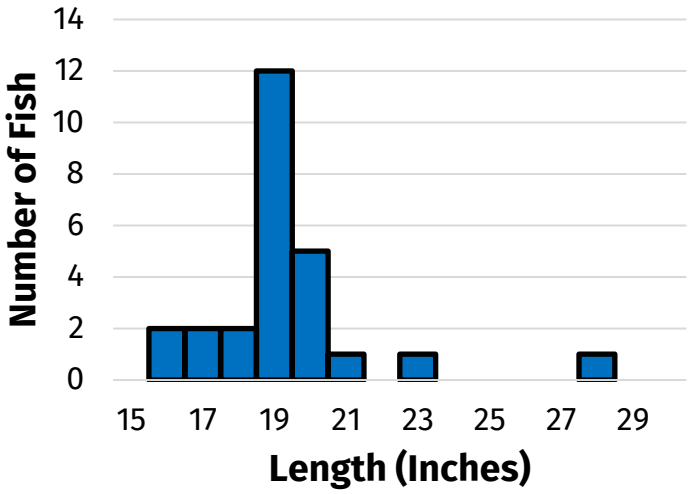


In total, 35 bluegills were sampled which resulted in a catch rate of 17.5 fish per mile. The average length of bluegill collected was 6.0 inches with sizes varying from 2.6 to 8.5 inches. Out of 35 bluegills sampled, 49% were over 6 inches (quality size or “keepers”).



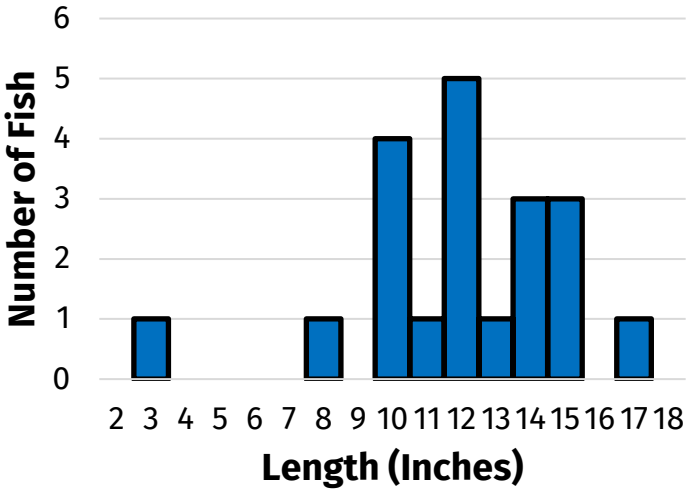
CHANNEL CATFISH

In total, 26 channel catfish were sampled which resulted in a catch rate of 13 fish per mile. The average length of channel catfish collected was 19.7 inches with sizes varying from 16.6 to 28.6 inches.



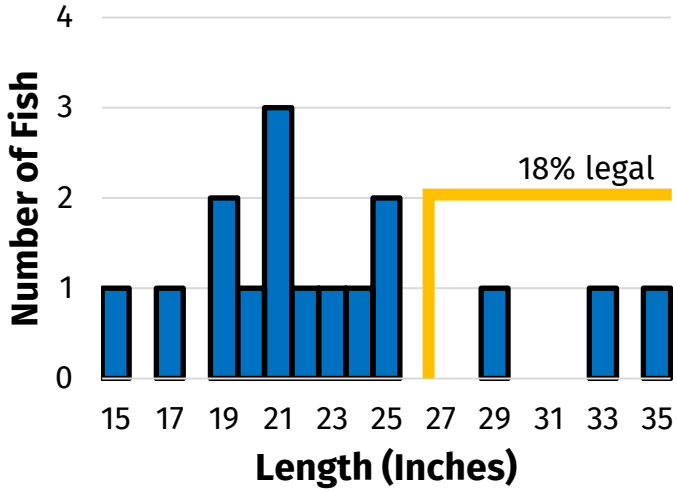
LARGEMOUTH BASS

In total, 20 largemouth were sampled which resulted in a catch rate of 10 fish per mile. The average length of largemouth bass collected was 12.4 inches with sizes varying from 3.9 to 17.2 inches.



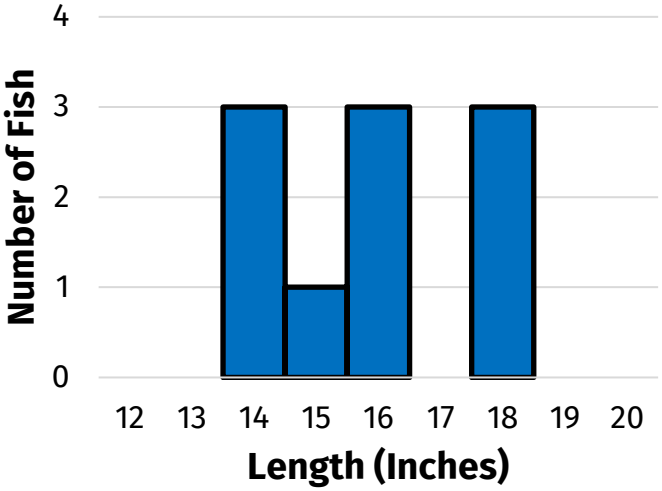
NORTHERN PIKE

In total, 17 northern pike were sampled which resulted in a catch rate of 8.5 fish per mile. The average length of northern pike was 23.3 inches with sizes varying from 15.9 to 35.5 inches. Of the 17 northern pike sampled, 18% were legal size (26 inches or greater).



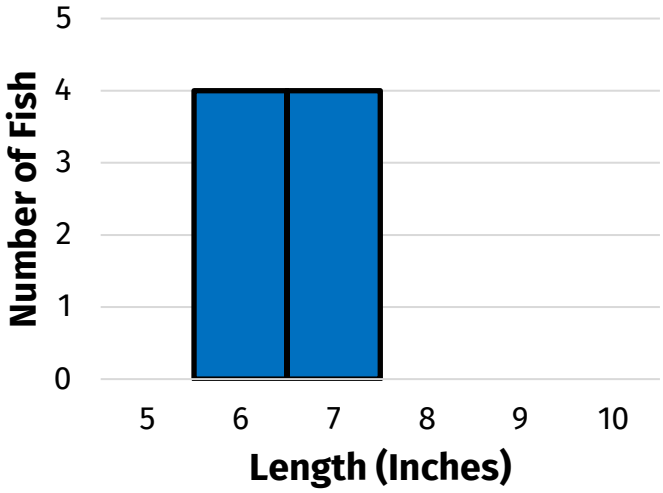
SMALLMOUTH BASS

In total, 10 smallmouth bass were sampled which resulted in a catch rate of 5 fish per mile. The average length of smallmouth bass collected was 16.0 inches with sizes varying from 14.3 to 18.4 inches.



WHITE BASS

In total, 8 white bass were sampled which resulted in a catch rate of 4 fish per mile. The average length of white bass collected was 7 inches with sizes varying from 6.0 to 7.4 inches.



OTHER SPECIES

Walleye and sauger can hybridize to create saugeye, which can be difficult to identify (Figure 1). Saugeye are found in the Rock River and two saugeye were found below Indianford Dam during this survey. Many other species of interest to anglers were sampled below the Indianford Dam including black crappie, flathead catfish, pumpkinseed, rock bass and yellow perch (Table 2). Common carp and freshwater drum were abundant throughout the survey but were not collected. Since the Indianford area has not been surveyed, a bowfin was collected to document its presence in this section of the Rock River (Figure 2). Bowfin are a native Wisconsin species that are often associated with backwaters or weedy areas on rivers. Rough fish species such as golden redhorse, shorthead redhorse and white sucker were collected prior to the electrofishing survey for a research study at St. Norbert College as well.

Figure 1. Walleye (top), saugeye (middle) and sauger (bottom) sampled at Indianford on the Rock River in 2025.

Figure 2. Image of a bowfin sampled at Indianford on the Rock River in 2025.

Summary

The Rock River in the Indianford area has diverse habitats that support quality gamefish populations. The Rock River has a robust walleye and sauger fishery with respectable size structure that provides sufficient harvest opportunities. No aging data was collected, but walleye and sauger length frequencies suggest that multiple different year classes are present in the Rock River indicating balanced, healthy populations. Walleye abundance ranks high at Indianford (68.5 fish per mile) when compared to Fort Atkinson (51.1 fish per mile), which is a high-profile walleye fishery (Table 3). Similar to walleye, sauger abundance found at Indianford (23 fish per mile) also ranks high compared to Fort Atkinson (10.1 fish per mile; Table 5).

Many areas below Indianford Dam have substrate composed of exposed rock and gravel which serve as ideal locations for walleye and sauger to spawn in the spring while deep holes provide overwintering habitat for adults. The 2025 survey found evidence of successful natural reproduction for walleye (22 YOY per mile) and sauger (6 YOY per mile). The YOY CPUEs for walleye and sauger at Indianford are high compared to Fort Atkinson (Tables 4 and 6). High levels of natural reproduction and recruitment are critical to maintaining a successful fishery. Future surveys will show if these year classes recruited to the population as adults.

Annual fall electrofishing surveys from 2020 to 2025 in the Fort Atkinson area on the Rock River found a mean total CPUE of 40.6 fish per mile for walleye and 12.0 fish per mile for sauger (DNR unreported data). Mean YOY CPUEs during these same surveys were 10.1 fish per mile for walleye and 3.5 fish per mile for sauger. Moving forward, a goal for the walleye and sauger fishery at Indianford will be to keep the CPUEs for both species at or above the benchmarks set in Fort Atkinson surveys (40.6 per mile for walleye and 12.0 fish per mile for sauger).

Yellow bass were found to have high abundance, but low size structure. Yellow bass and white bass swim in schools and many rivers in Wisconsin are known for having white bass “runs” in the spring and fall where anglers can catch large quantities. Yellow bass and white bass are often confused with one another, so anglers often refer to both species as “stripers”. Understanding yellow bass and white bass population metrics can be difficult since these species sporadically move in schools throughout the year and DNR does not have effective sampling protocols for either species.

Although most anglers typically associate bluegill with lake or pond habitats, rivers (including dam tailwater areas) can provide excellent bluegill fishing opportunities as well. Bluegill were the fourth most common species captured on the Rock River. Cover such as downed wood or rock in current breaks provide cover that is beneficial to panfish species like bluegill or black crappie. Good size structure of bluegill was found with 46% of fish being over 6 inches. Communication with anglers and local bait shops suggests “keeper” bluegill are consistently captured during summer months between Indianford and Janesville on the Rock River.

Channel catfish are also a common species targeted by anglers in the Indianford area on the Rock River, which is known for having good densities of “eater” channel catfish. Even though 26 channel catfish were captured during the 2025 electrofishing survey, catfish species are not consistently captured using electrofishing gear. Hoop nets are a more efficient way to capture catfish species, and it is likely that the Rock River holds higher abundances than what was found in the survey. A recent hoop net survey found a fishable population of channel catfish in the Rock River near Janesville (Trow and Jonet 2023). The report is linked here: Rock River and Yahara River Hoop Net Surveys 2020, 2021, and 2022

Due to the popularity of this fishery, fisheries management will consider adding this as an annual electrofishing survey to track walleye and sauger recruitment and monitor how the gamefish populations change over time. All gamefish populations are self-sustaining, so no stocking on the Rock River below the Indianford Dam is necessary. The Rock River from Indianford Dam down to the state line will continue to follow its current fishing regulations (Table 1).

Figure 3. DNR staff Josh Jonet (left) holding a walleye and Kyle Olivencia (right) holding a sauger sampled at Indianford on the Rock River in 2025.

Acknowledgements

Data collection for this survey was completed by DNR staff Josh Jonet, Kyle Olivencia and Mitchell Trow. Tim Simonson, Nathan Nye and Kyle Olivencia provided feedback and edits for this report.

If you have questions or comments about fisheries management activities on the Rock River below Indianford Dam, please contact:

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References

Simonson, T. 2015. Surveys and Investigations – Inland Fisheries Surveys. Fish Management Handbook Chapter 510, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources internal publication. Madison, Wisconsin.

Trow, M. and Jonet, J. 2023. Rock River and Yahara River Hoop Net Surveys Rock County, Wisconsin 2020, 2021 and 2022. Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, Madison, Wisconsin. 20pp.

Table 1. Fishing regulations for the Rock River from Indianford Dam down to the state line in Rock County, Wisconsin.

SPECIES	SEASON DATES	DAILY BAG LIMIT	SIZE LIMIT
Largemouth & smallmouth bass	Open All Year	5	14" or larger
Rock, white & yellow bass	Open All Year	None	None
Panfish	Open All Year	25	None
Bullheads & rough fish species	Open All Year	None	None
Channel & flathead catfish	Open All Year	10	None
Muskellunge	1st Saturday in May to December 31	1	40" or larger
Northern pike	Open All Year	2	26" or larger
Walleye, sauger, & hybrids	Open All Year	3	15" or larger

Table 2. Summary of total catch, catch-per-unit effort (CPUE), length (inches) and mean length sampled during the 2025 electrofishing survey of the Rock River at Indianford, Rock County Wisconsin.

SPECIES	TOTAL CAPTURED	CPUE (FISH/MILE)	LENGTH RANGE (INCHES)	MEAN LENGTH (INCHES)
Walleye	137	68.5	6.1 – 22.4	13.5
Sauger	46	23.0	7.2 – 20.3	13.0
Yellow bass	40	20.0	4.3 – 8.5	5.1
Bluegill	35	17.5	2.6 – 8.5	6.0
Channel catfish	26	13.0	16.6 – 28.6	19.7
Largemouth bass	20	10.0	3.9 – 17.2	12.4
Northern pike	17	8.5	15.9 – 35.5	23.3
Pumpkinseed	10	5.0	4.9 – 6.9	5.7
Smallmouth bass	10	5.0	14.3 – 18.4	16.0
White bass	8	4.0	6.0 – 7.4	7.0
Yellow perch	7	3.5	4.2 – 7.3	5.2
Black crappie	2	1.0	5.3 – 8.0	6.7
Rock bass	2	1.0	5.6 – 8.4	7.0
Saugeye (walleye x sauger)	2	1.0	8.0 – 15.3	11.7
Bowfin	1	0.5		13.4
Flathead catfish	1	0.5		15.9

Table 3. Total walleye CPUEs found in fall electrofishing surveys in southern Wisconsin rivers.

RIVER	LOCATION	YEAR (S)	CPUE (FISH/MILE)
Rock River	Indianford	2025	68.5
Rock River	Fort Atkinson	2025	51.1
Rock River	Fort Atkinson	2020-2025 (mean)	40.6
Wisconsin River	Prairie Du Sac	2025	29.0
Wisconsin River	Wisconsin Dells	2025	27.4

Table 4. Young of year (YOY) walleye CPUEs found in fall electrofishing surveys in southern Wisconsin rivers.

RIVER	LOCATION	YEAR (S)	CPUE (FISH/MILE)
Rock River	Indianford	2025	22.0
Rock River	Fort Atkinson	2025	20.6
Rock River	Fort Atkinson	2020-2025 (mean)	10.1
Wisconsin River	Prairie Du Sac	2025	16.8
Wisconsin River	Wisconsin Dells	2025	11.9

Table 5. Total sauger CPUEs found in fall electrofishing surveys in southern Wisconsin rivers.

RIVER	LOCATION	YEAR (S)	CPUE (FISH/MILE)
Rock River	Indianford	2025	23.0
Rock River	Fort Atkinson	2025	10.1
Rock River	Fort Atkinson	2020-2025 (mean)	12.0
Wisconsin River	Prairie Du Sac	2025	14.0
Wisconsin River	Wisconsin Dells	2025	16.7

Table 6. Young of year (YOY) sauger CPUEs found in fall electrofishing surveys in southern Wisconsin rivers.

RIVER	LOCATION	YEAR (S)	CPUE (FISH/MILE)
Rock River	Indianford	2025	6.0
Rock River	Fort Atkinson	2025	0.7
Rock River	Fort Atkinson	2020-2025 (mean)	3.5
Wisconsin River	Prairie Du Sac	2025	1.6
Wisconsin River	Wisconsin Dells	2025	0.9