

FISHING HOLE BIRCH LAKE

WHY GO: It's one of the larger lakes stocked with rainbow trout, making it less susceptible to over-fishing.

ACCESS: There's a steep U.S. Forest Service carry-in access on the north side of the Gunflint Trail, at the Laurentian Divide scenic overlook. The pullover, with parking for about five vehicles, is about 23 miles north of Grand Marais, on the lake's south shore.

VITALS: This 236-acre Cook County gem sits inside the Superior National Forest. It has a maximum depth of 69 feet. It's a clean, clear lake. Water clarity was measured at 17 feet with a Secchi dish by Minnesota DNR in 2012.

GAME SPECIES PRESENT: Rainbow trout, brook trout, lake trout and smallmouth bass.

OVER THE RAINBOW: Steve Persons, Minnesota DNR's Grand Marais area fisheries supervisor, said the size of Birch protects it to some degree from over-fishing, compared to smaller Cook County lakes that are stocked with rainbow trout. In the last survey of the lake, which was most recently stocked by DNR with 5,000 yearling rainbow trout in 2014 on an every-other-year basis, saw good numbers of fish, including fish in the 20- to 24-inch range. "There weren't many large fish, but there were some decent-sized rainbows," he said. The majority of the fish that turned up in the survey were between 12- and 14-inches. Because Birch is not designated as a stream trout lake, the use of live minnows is allowed, Persons noted.

BROOKIES NO MORE: DNR has stocked brook trout on odd-numbered years starting in 2009, but didn't this year because the fish didn't appear to be doing very well in the lake. "We have seen very few of those come back to anglers or show up in assessments," Persons said. "We will replace that with more rainbow stocking." The 2012 assessment turned up only four brook trout, though two were in the 15- to 19-inch range.

DECENT SMALLIE OPTION: Though smallmouth bass hardly showed up in the most recent assessment, the lake does have a lot of smallmouth bass in it, Persons said, much to his chagrin. "We are not happy to see them there," he said, noting that they can provide some good fishing action on the lake. Because they can compete with trout, Persons is hopeful anglers that do catch them will take home their limit. "It isn't going to hurt that lake to have some smallmouth harvested," he said, noting that most of the fish are going to fall between 8- and 12-inches.

CHANCE FOR A LAKER: Despite a lack of suitable habitat, Persons said at Birch there's the chance of catching lake trout, which would have likely been swimming in the lake naturally, though any remaining lake trout would have been planted after the lake was poisoned in the 1960s. "They are hanging on in small numbers," Persons said. "There's a small chance somebody fishing rainbow trout could find a lake trout."—JAVIER SERNA

