

FISHING HOLE IRON LAKE

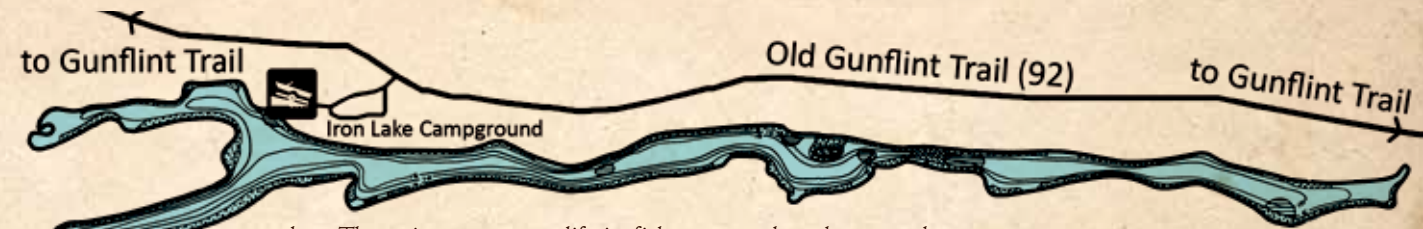
WHY GO: It's one of the few solid bluegill lakes in Cook County, with a chance at picking up an occasional walleye.

ACCESS: The main access is via a fairly easy carry-in access at the Forest Service's Iron Lake Campground on the western side of the lake's northern shore. That's on C.R. 92, or what is also known as Old Gunflint Trail, a parallel road that's just west of the Mid-Trail area. There is a portage from Portage Lake on the east side of the lake's southern shore. Steve Persons, Minnesota DNR's Grand Marais area fisheries supervisor, notes that some people also enter the lake via a channel on the west end of the lake from Little Iron Lake. But that channel is shallow and weedy, and also rocky in some spots. At times, it may be too shallow to get a boat through, he said.

VITALS: Iron Lake is a long, narrow lake with about 7 miles of shoreline, but it's only 122 acres. It has a maximum depth of 19 feet and a median depth of 6 feet. It's entirely in Cook County and the Superior National Forest, and, as mentioned, a short portage away from Portage Lake, which is a portage away from One Island Lake, a lake entirely in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness.

GAME SPECIES PRESENT: Bluegill, green sunfish, northern pike, rock bass, walleye, white sucker and yellow perch.

GILLS: Persons noted that Iron Lake is one of the few lakes in the county where one might catch a meal of bluegills on a good



day. There just aren't many bluegill options in Cook County.

"It's going to be a July-August sort of thing," he said, noting that's when a lot of bluegills will spawn on the lake.

The sampling gear has shown some fish in that desirable 8-inch range.

"There are keepers in there," he said, noting that fish up near 10 inches have been caught in the lake. "You are getting close to the one-pound size."

In a 2016 fisheries survey, 56 percent of the bluegills caught in standard trap nets were 6 inches or greater in length.

As for a winter bluegill bite, Persons said he's only heard of a few people targeting them then.

"It's pretty limited," he said. "People were still trying to figure out how to catch them and where they might be located in the winter. I don't think there's more than a couple of people who have tried."

WALLEYES AXED: A 2007 lake management plan shot for the goal of 3 walleyes

per net lift in fish surveys, but the second survey (done in 2016) since that plan was implemented turned up only 1.7 walleyes per lift, according to Persons.

Persons said DNR made the decision in 2017 to stop stocking walleyes in the lake, and the last batch of fish was stocked in 2016.

"We don't expect them to go away or become less abundant than they are now," said Persons. "We assume it will continue to hold a few walleye."

That's because most of the walleyes that were sampled were naturally produced.

There is little for walleyes to eat.

"A person who knows the lake pretty well and works it hard will still be able to find some walleyes," Persons said.

PALTRY PIKE: While there are plenty of pike in Iron Lake, most are small. In fact, the 2016 survey did not turn up any fish over 25 inches and most were under 22 inches.

Persons didn't think the state's new pike zones (with a two-fish bag and requiring all

fish between 30 and 40 inches to be released in this area) will have a big impact on Iron. Even if anglers could keep and possess more northerns on this lake, there just aren't many anglers targeting Iron's pike, which are likely limited by the lack of forage. There's not a lot of yellow perch in the lake, and most of the white suckers sampled were too big for most of the pike in the lake.

"It's a lake where you have pretty limited forage and that sets a limit on a lake's ability to produce big fish," Persons said.

CAMPING: There is a seven-site Superior National Forest campground on Iron Lake, with most of those sites on a reserve basis. One of those sites (No. 6) is on a first-come, first-serve basis. They are fee sites that cost \$22 per night, and are all set by the water.—
Javier Serna

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