

FISHING HOLE

BY JOE SHEAD

WHY GO: Snowbank Lake is a big, Canadian Shield-type lake near Ely with a good smallmouth bass population, good numbers of eater-sized lake trout and a chance to catch a rare silver phase northern pike.

ACCESS: From Ely, head east on the Fernberg Road for 19 miles. Turn left onto Snowbank Road. Follow Snowbank Road about 4 miles to the boat landing on the south end of the lake. There are separate accesses for canoes and motorboats. Both have docks and there is a restroom facility. There's parking for about 10 trailers at the boat ramp and about 30 vehicles at the canoe launch. There are also three backcountry campsites on the lake with a latrine, fire grate and picnic table. These no-fee sites are available on a first-come, first-served basis.

VITALS: Snowbank Lake is a classic deep, clear, rocky Canadian Shield lake. Snowbank sprawls for 4,654 acres, with a maximum depth of 150 feet and 19.5 feet of water clarity. Several islands of varying sizes dot the lake. Snowbank is a Boundary Waters entry point, with five portages to adjoining lakes. The northern half of the lake lies within the Boundary Waters and there is a 25-horsepower limit on motorboats in that portion of the lake. In summer, the line designating the Boundary Waters isn't marked, but in winter, temporary signage marks the boundary. There are two resorts on the lake and some cabins on the south end, but most of the lake is undeveloped.

GAME SPECIES PRESENT: Lake trout, walleye, smallmouth bass, northern pike and eelpout.

LAKE TROUT: Snowbank is recognized as a pretty decent lake trout lake, with good numbers of eaters, but not much trophy po-

tential. "Snowbank has gotten hit by heavy fishing pressure over the last few years," said Jeff Mueller, DNR fisheries technician based out of Tower. "Winter fishing has gotten bigger as well. We're on the southern edge of the lake trout range and we need to be sensitive with our harvest. More people are fishing intelligently (with electronics) these days." Lake trout have a good cisco forage base to prey on and they grow quickly. There is plenty of deep, rocky habitat for lakers as well. With good natural reproduction, lake trout haven't been stocked in Snowbank since 1995.

WALLEYE: Despite good walleye numbers in DNR surveys, Mueller said walleye fishing is tough. "It seems Snowbank has a fairly decent number of walleyes, but they're not easy to catch. The people that really put in their time probably get a few," he said. Due to its high-water clarity, Mueller advised anglers to target walleyes on cloudy days or early or late in the day. Target deep reefs where walleyes target small ciscoes. Mueller said plan to lose a lot of lures on the snaggy bottom. Snowbank's walleyes come in a variety of sizes, with good numbers of eaters and some trophy potential, if you can find them.

SMALLMOUTH BASS: Snowbank has emerged as a really good smallmouth bass lake. "There are a lot of smallmouths in Snowbank," Mueller said. "A lot of them are small. If you want some action on the end of your rod, that's certainly a good place to go." Mueller said shoreline anglers will catch plenty of smallish smallmouths. For a shot at a bigger bass, he recommends fishing deep humps. Some of the bigger bass target ciscoes. Smallmouth bass numbers are excellent and there is a small largemouth bass population in Snowbank as well.

SNOWBANK LAKE



NORTHERN PIKE:

Although Snowbank is mostly deep and rocky, it does have some shallow, weedy bays, particularly on the south end, that have good northern pike habitat. Anglers will find pike here, but some of the largest fish will suspend over deep water, where they prey on schools of ciscoes. However, these large, suspended fish are hard to find. One unique thing about Snowbank's pike fishery is the presence of silver-phase northern pike. These unusual fish are simply a silvery blue color phase of northern pike and are somewhat common in Snowbank. Mueller said they'll occasionally have red spots with blue halos, similar to brook trout. There are enough of them in Snowbank that people do target them specifically. One concern about Snowbank is the presence of invasive rusty crayfish. These exotics

often decimate weed beds, which would likely have a serious impact on the northern pike fishery. Mueller said so far, they haven't had much of an impact on Snowbank's shallow, weedy bays, however.

EELPOUT: Snowbank has one of the best eelpout populations in the area. However, catching them isn't always easy. "The angling for burbot in the winter—it's not very good," Mueller said. "The success is nil. Years ago, people would catch burbot fairly regularly. Why there's such a low catch rate in the winter these days, I don't have an answer for that, but the numbers in the last assessment were really good."

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