

FISHING HOLE

ALTON LAKE

BY JOE SHEAD

WHY GO: Alton has a good smallmouth bass and walleye fishery in a picturesque setting. The lake is in the Boundary Waters, but it's accessible via a short, well-maintained portage from Sawbill Lake. Because of its quality fishing and easy accessibility, it's a popular day-use lake for anglers who want to fish the Boundary Waters without the burden of hauling in camping gear.

ACCESS: From Tofte, travel 23 miles up Highway 2 (Sawbill Trail) to the Sawbill Lake Campground at the end of the road. Launch at the Sawbill Lake boat access and paddle northwest to the portage trail to Alton Lake. There is a wide, well-maintained 30-rod portage to Alton. Sawbill Lake has a carry-down access with a rustic outhouse and parking for 100 vehicles. Alton Lake has 14 campsites. Self-registration day-use passes are available at the Sawbill Lake Campground, however, you'll need to apply for a permit in advance during the summer season for an overnight stay within the BWCAW.

VITALS: At 963 acres and with a maximum depth of 72 feet, Finland area fisheries supervisor Dean Paron described Alton Lake as "a lake trout lake without the lake trout." Alton is deep and clear, with 14-foot water clarity. The DNR actually did experiment with lake trout stocking decades ago, but the fish didn't survive and the program was discontinued. "For a Boundary Waters lake, I do think it receives a fair amount of pressure," Paron said. "It's a quick, easy portage from Sawbill."

GAME SPECIES PRESENT: Smallmouth bass, walleye, northern pike and tullibee.

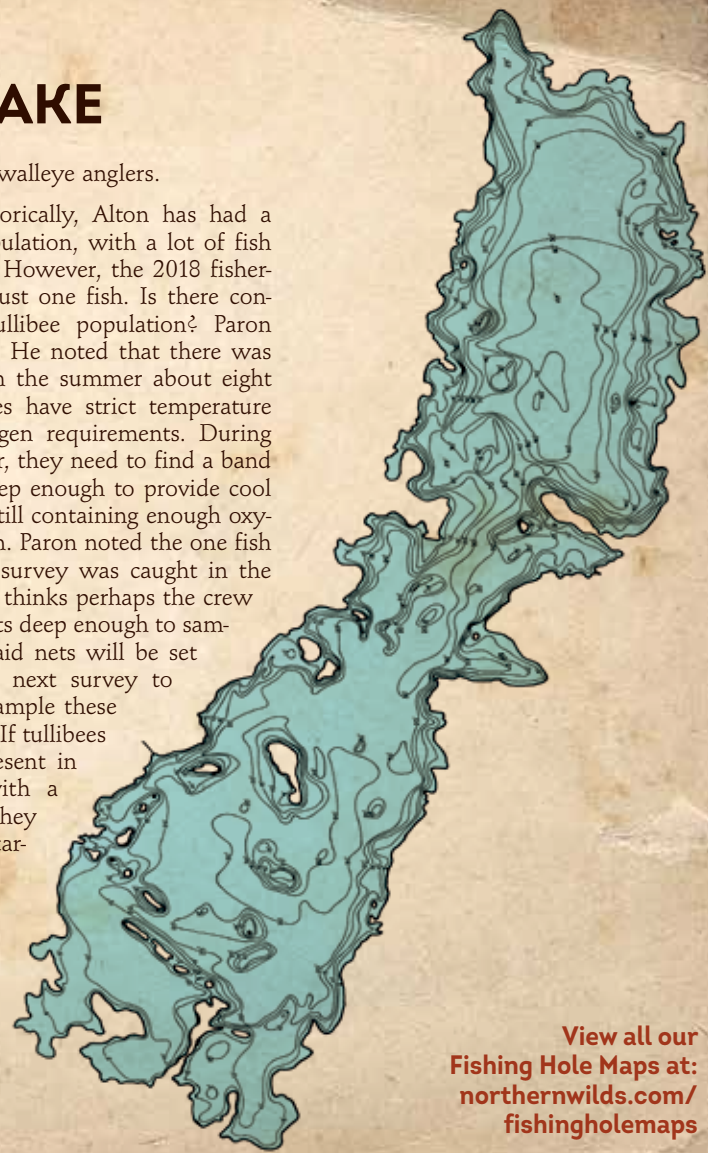
SMALLMOUTH BASS: "I've always considered Alton a good lake for targeting smallmouths," Paron said. "I personally find Alton a little bit harder to fish, especially during the summer. The good water clarity, combined with fairly high fishing pressure, may have something to do with the tough summer fishing, so Paron recommends anglers visit in the spring and fall. The bass are there, however. The lake has good numbers of smallies. The average size in the 2018 DNR fisheries survey was a respectable 14 inches, with bass up to 18 inches sampled. Paron recommends trying around the islands and anywhere you find a sharp drop-off for smallmouths.

WALLEYE: You'll find above-average numbers of walleyes in Alton, and they are usually eater-sized. The lake has a long history of steady walleye recruitment. Trolling a crank-bait or jigging with live bait will often net you an evening fish fry, but there's always a chance of connecting with a respectable walleye in the 25-inch range. They're not numerous, but they're out there. The perch population is low, but Paron said walleyes likely prey on minnows or some of the lake's numerous suckers. Larger walleyes may take down pelagic tullibees as well. Rocky points and drop-offs abound, providing plenty of good walleye structure.

NORTHERN PIKE: Alton isn't a destination pike lake. Northerns are present in low numbers and are usually just a bonus (or an annoy-

ance) for bass and walleye anglers.

TULLIBEES: Historically, Alton has had a robust tullibee population, with a lot of fish topping 15 inches. However, the 2018 fisheries survey netted just one fish. Is there concern about the tullibee population? Paron said hopefully not. He noted that there was a tullibee die-off in the summer about eight years ago. Tullibees have strict temperature and dissolved oxygen requirements. During the heat of summer, they need to find a band of water that is deep enough to provide cool temperatures, yet still containing enough oxygen to sustain them. Paron noted the one fish caught in the last survey was caught in the deepest net and he thinks perhaps the crew just didn't place nets deep enough to sample tullibees. He said nets will be set deeper during the next survey to more adequately sample these deep-dwelling fish. If tullibees are indeed still present in good numbers, with a high average size, they would be worth targeting.



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