

FISHING HOLE

BY JOE SHEAD

WHY GO: Rice Lake has good fishing for walleyes, smallmouth bass and yellow perch, with an outside chance at a big pike. The lake is somewhat hard to reach, but for the ambitious, you can actually launch a small motorboat on this scenic, undeveloped lake.

ACCESS: There are a couple ways to access Rice Lake. From Lutsen, travel 8.2 miles up the Caribou Trail (Cook County Hwy. 4). Turn left onto Clara Lake Road (Forest Road 339) and proceed about 13 miles to the intersection with Rice Lake Road and the Clara Lake public boat access. Turn left onto Rice Lake Road, then almost immediately, turn right onto a small, undeveloped road. This road is pretty rough in places and isn't ideal for trailers, especially large ones, although there is a small turnaround at the end. Follow the road roughly a mile to the south shore of Rice Lake. Alternatively, from the intersection with Rice Lake Road and the Clara Lake public access, continue north on Clara Lake Road (FR 339) about two-thirds of a mile. On your left is a parking lot. At the west end of the lot you'll see a small sign indicating an 80-rod portage to Rice Lake. If you follow the portage straight, you'll end up on interconnected Silver Lake. If you catch

the subtle left turn about three-quarters of the way down the portage trail, you'll end up on Rice Lake. You can easily paddle the short distance between these two entry points. The portage trail to Rice Lake is a fairly popular shore fishing spot.

VITALS: Rice Lake spans 222 acres with a maximum depth of 10 feet. You'll find a rustic campsite just around the corner from the main access on the south shore. A much nicer campsite is found on the lake's largest island.

GAME SPECIES PRESENT: Walleye, northern pike, smallmouth bass and yellow perch.

WALLEYE: "It's historically been a pretty good walleye lake," said Matthew Weberg, assistant area fisheries supervisor in Grand Marais. "We've seen walleye abundance decline since around 2000, but it's all-natural reproduction. The potential change to walleye abundance is the introduction of smallmouth bass on the Poplar River system and Crescent Lake." Weberg said anglers should expect to find good numbers of eater-sized walleyes on this shallow lake. The oldest walleye he has ever personally aged was a 26-year-old fish from Rice Lake, although this ancient fish measured less than 25 inches.

RICE LAKE



NORTHERN PIKE: "Northern pike appear relatively stable, although there's maybe a little bit of decline following that same timeframe," Weberg said, referring to the introduction of smallmouth bass. Anglers should expect to find moderate numbers of medium-sized pike, but you never know when a large one might show up. The latest lake survey in 2021 turned up a 42-inch pike.

SMALLMOUTH BASS: Smallmouth bass were illegally introduced into Crescent Lake in the 1990s and have made their way down the Poplar River into Rice Lake. They are now established in the lake and grow to quality size. An 18-inch bass isn't out of the question. Look for smallies around the large, rocky island.

YELLOW PERCH: Currently, perch numbers are good in Rice Lake, with some decent-sized fish available. About one-third of the perch caught in gill nets in the 2021 survey measured 8 inches or larger, with the largest perch topping 11 inches.

BONUS MUSKIES: Once in a while, a muskie shows up in Rice Lake, but not often. "The Shoepack strain of muskies was introduced into Crescent Lake in the 1970s," Weberg said. "They did fairly well for themselves. Occasionally, we have picked up a muskie in Rice."

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