

FISHING HOLE

LAKE SAGANAGA

BY JOE SHEAD

WHY GO: Lake Saganaga is often called the crown jewel of the Boundary Waters. This border lake boasts trophy walleyes and good-sized lake trout and northern pike. Plus, this sprawling lake offers amazing scenery.

ACCESS: Lake Saganaga lies at the very end of the Gunflint Trail. There are two access points at the very southern end of the lake in Saganaga Narrows. To reach the first one, from Grand Marais, travel 54 miles up the Gunflint Trail (Cook County Highway 12). Turn right onto Moose Pond Drive and follow the road about one-third of a mile to the landing at the lake. The other landing is slightly farther. Travel up the Gunflint 54.3 miles, then turn right onto Sag Lake Trail. Follow this road about 0.8 miles to the landing. Although there is room for some boat trailers at each landing, the parking lots are better suited to vehicles with canoes.

VITALS: Lake Saganaga spans 18,766 acres. Most of the lake is in Ontario. The Minnesota portion is characterized by numerous islands while the Canadian side is more open. Motor-boats with a 25-horsepower limit are allowed on the U.S. side of the lake east of American Point. There are no motor restrictions in Canadian waters. The lake's maximum depth is 280 feet, which would make it the deepest natural lake in Minnesota, but the deep spot is in Canada. Most of the U.S. portion of the lake lies within the Boundary Waters. There are 78 remote campsites in the Boundary Waters. Visitors will need to go to recreation.gov to secure either an

overnight paddle or motor permit, or a day-use motor permit, to visit Lake Saganaga. A limited number of permits are available each day.

GAME SPECIES PRESENT: Walleye, lake trout, northern pike, smallmouth bass, and black crappie.

WALLEYE: "The shining gem of the region is still Saganaga, given its ability to produce 30-plus-inch walleyes with great consistency," said E.J. Isaac, DNR area fisheries supervisor in Grand Marais. "It's one of the area's premier walleye destinations." Isaac noted that walleye growth on Sag is faster than the area average. That may well be thanks to a fatty forage base that includes rainbow smelt and juvenile ciscoes. Walleye season here also opens later than the general opener to protect fish, which spawn later here, due to the far-north location. Walleyes are the main attraction for anglers, particularly in the summer, because of their ability to grow large. But in recent years, there has been a concern about the lack of smaller fish in the population. This led to a decade-long special regulation allowing anglers to keep three walleyes with a minimum size limit of 17 inches, but only one could be over 20 inches. That regulation expired in 2025, but the three-fish daily bag continues. "The goal of the 17-inch size minimum and three-fish bag was to protect those smaller fish and give them a couple more spawning opportunities," Isaac said. "It just didn't seem to do much. A lot of the public was in favor of having some protective measures to help the walleyes." Isaac said the Ham Lake and Cavity Lake fires from the mid 2000s may be to blame



for the lack of young walleyes.

"We saw some different changes to the way the lake functions after those big wildfires. You get all that ash in the water and it fills all the crevices between the rocks. If eggs get covered up in those rocks, survivorship is close to zero." The DNR has been stocking 4.5 million walleye fry two out of every four years to help the population, but Isaac said stocking has had limited results. Despite the struggles with walleye recruitment, Sag still produces trophy-sized fish and remains a premier walleye destination.

LAKE TROUT: If walleyes are the stars of summer, lake trout steal the show in winter. "Lake trout numbers in our surveys have been steady," Isaac said. "There's a lot of opportunity to catch big lake trout, given our forage base of cisco and smelt." Isaac said lake trout average 20 inches, but it's possible to catch fish up to 30 inches. One unique aspect of the lake is snowmobiles are allowed along the main corridor up to Canada. Isaac said some anglers will snowmobile to Ca-

nadian waters to fish. Others will snowmobile to Canada and then walk back to the United States to fish, since sleds aren't allowed outside that narrow corridor. With remote border crossing regulations currently in limbo, be sure to check with border patrol prior to your trip.

NORTHERN PIKE: With a quality forage base, there's the opportunity to grow big pike. "The average size pike is fairly good," Isaac said. "There's good size structure and relatively decent numbers of pike."

SMALLMOUTH BASS: Most anglers don't visit Sag for smallmouths, but bass are now widespread in the lake and offer quality fishing. "We see good size structure with fish up there in that 19-inch range," Isaac said. He said some anglers have even described the smallmouth fishing as "world class."

BLACK CRAPPIES: The DNR first found black crappies in their nets in 2014. Crappies have now gained a small fin-hold in the lake and are here to stay, although don't expect to find them all over the place. Look for them in a few of the sheltered bays.

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