

SHABBONA LAKE "LAKE OF THE MILLENNIUM"

A Review Of The 1999 Fishing Season

By Denny Sands

And the category is ? "Lake of the Millennium." And the winner is ? "Shabbona Lake." If we could give out Oscar nominations or answer questions on "Who Wants To Be A Millionaire" for the "Best All Around Fishing Lake", I would venture to say that one would be hard pressed to find a "final answer" better than "Shabbona Lake", Illinois' most favorite "Fishin' Hole". This very popular lake is located in Northern Illinois' DeKalb County, about halfway between Rockford and Chicago.

Let's check out Shabbona Lake's portfolio to see if it really qualifies for "Lake of The Millennium". It has four State Of Illinois Record Muskie (No other lake even has two!). It has a tremendous population of twenty plus inch Largemouth Bass. It has several potential State Of Illinois Record Walleye swimming about. It has a Crappie population that just wouldn't let that bobber lie still. Catfish average a whopping 5 pounds per fish ! Newly introduced Smallmouth Bass and Stripers are growing faster than weeds.

Let us review the 1999 fishing season at Shabbona Lake, with hopes of insights as to why this Illinois Department Of Natural Resource's gem has earned such bragging rights ! We should of realized that 1999 was going to be a special fishing year when on May 1st the biggest Largemouth Bass ever caught at Shabbona Lake was brought into Shabbona's Lakeside Bait, Tackle & Boat Rental. It was a huge 7 pound, 10 ounce, Largemouth that took a white spinner bait. Next came three of the biggest Muskie caught in Illinois during 1999. On May 15th, a 47 incher, on May 19th, a 48 incher, and on June 5th, a 49 incher. All within a 4 week period !!! Have I got your attention yet !

But let's back up to the beginning of the season and follow it through looking for those precious insights. Shabbona Lake is a man-made impoundment built in the early 1970's. It is 318 acres with a maximum depth of 40 feet and an average depth of 17 feet. It has 47 fish attractors, 3 major brush piles, drop-offs, a submerged roadbed with an underwater bridge, standing trees in 10 -15 feet of water and also standing trees in 30 - 40 feet of water, as well as a ½ mile earthen dam face lined with a rocky shoreline.. The Lake has 6.5 miles of shoreline and a 10 horsepower limit on motors.

We started out with a normal Spring with gradual warming. We did not have any huge rainfalls, so the water clarity remained excellent during the Spring. This is important because it allows the Crappie, Bass and Muskie to utilize the No Motor Zone (shallow end) during their spawning runs. (While Muskie do not actually have a successful spawn in Shabbona Lake, they do go through the motions.)

Although we had a good crop of shoreline weeds, the big weed beds in the East Bay and in the center of the lake never fully materialized. This made Walleye fishing extremely

tough in 1999. Walleye became an open water, suspended fish, which are harder to catch. But this phenomenon, of no large weed beds, forced the Crappie and Bluegill to seek the fish Cribs, Brush Piles and Standing Trees as their major cover. This allowed anglers to easily catch Crappie and Bluegill all year, instead of just early Spring.

Summer was a hot and very dry season. But it did not seem to effect the fish near as much as the fishermen. I went out on purpose on one of the hottest day of the year with Jerry Thompson and we both caught a limit of Crappies in less than an hour. I had a standing bet with our bait shop employees that I could catch a legal Bass within 30 minutes, but no one would bet with me. So, despite the hot weather, Summer was good fishing.

The Fall brought excellent weather until the end of November. We had almost no rainfall and the water clarity was outstanding. The Park did repair work on the spillway by lowering the lake about 12 inches. As of the writing of this article, we have not had enough rainfall to fill the lake back up. But it will fill rapidly with the Winter rains and snowfall.

Fish Sizes : As mentioned earlier Shabbona Lake's biggest ever Largemouth Bass, 7 pounds 10 ounces, was caught in 1999. Several other 20+ inch Bass were caught throughout the year. I know I caught more Bass over 4 pounds this year than in any previous year ! In addition to the 47", 48" and 49" Muskie referred to earlier, many other Muskie in the 30 inch to 40 inch range were caught. Crappie were significantly larger than last year. As Fall approached, they really fattened up to an average of ½ pound each. Catfish continued their surprising catch rate from 1998. Many an angler was pleasantly surprised when a 5 - 10 pound catfish would end up on the end of their line. Bluegill also continue to get larger and heavier.

Number Of Fish Caught : The number of fish caught varied from species to species, compared to the last few years. Bass continued to get more plentiful and larger. Muskie showed a dramatic comeback from 1998, which was, by all accounts, an abnormal year for Muskie at Shabbona Lake. Crappie were definitely more plentiful, being the #1 species anglers caught in 1999. Bluegills showed up on many more stringers, as their size was excellent. Catfish kept being the unexpected bonus to many an angler in 1999. Walleye, due primarily to their suspended-open water life style in 1999, were the most frustrating fish to pursue. Well, at least we know they will be there in the next millennium !

Fish Locations : Fish locations of the various species were fairly predictable, based on weather and water temperature. This does not insure that they are catchable, only that at certain times of the year fish will hold in and inhabit comfort zones where they will have ample food, shelter and a preferred temperature zone. Crappies used the fish cribs and submerged treetops almost exclusively. Since the big weed beds did not form, they set up in the next best available habitat. Bass became a shoreline weed line fish. The massive schools of shad that attracted several Bass in the past also did not materialize in 1999. This forced more Bass to utilize the shorelines, and to some extent the fish cribs.

Walleye found the few available weeds along the shoreline full of Bass, so they foraged on the schools of shad in open water. It appears that perhaps the Walleye is better suited to open water, suspended feeding than the Largemouth Bass. Muskie were found in the No Motor Zone, in the bays, on the feeding flats and at the ends of the earthen piers with surprising regularity. Bluegill were found in good numbers in weed pockets, particularly in the East Bay. Catfish were everywhere, with excellent catches on the barn foundations, along the dam face and off of the earthen piers.

Best Baits : The top Muskie presentation was two 10 - 12 inch sucker minnows, slowing trolled while casting the shoreline. Two anglers would cast the shoreline attempting to catch or at least have a Muskie follow up. They would have two sucker minnows set up on bobbers. One directly behind the Boat and the other about 25 feet behind the boat. The most likely strike (you guessed it !) occurred on the sucker closest to the boat !

The best Bass baits were Rapalas, Shad Raps, spinnerbaits, nightcrawlers and leeches. The best color for the lures was again blue. Crappies were caught in large numbers on Mini Mite Jigs and Crappie Minnows. Catfish were taken on Sonny's Stink Bait and Chicken Liver. Walleye were tuned in on minnows and leeches. Bluegill liked wax worms and leaf worms.

Next Millennium :If you want to have a successful fishing trip in the new millennium, try the "Best All Around Fishing Lake Of The Last Millennium" SHABBONA LAKE !!!