Fish in the Red River

Walleye are the most sought after fish in Minnesota and North Dakota. The average walleye is about 14 inches long and weighs slightly over a pound. The sauger is a close relative of the walleye, but its distribution is more limited. The two species look similar, but you can tell them apart by looking at the lower part of the tail, which is white on a walleye but not on a sauger.

Drum are abundant in much of Minnesota and North Dakota. A typical freshwater drum weighs about two pounds. The drum gets its name from the distinctive rumbling sound that the male makes during the spring breeding season to attract mates.

White bass are between ten and sixteen inches long and weigh between one and four pounds on average. They are carnivores and easy to catch with live bait.

Dams

The Red River has eight low-head dams, and many of its tributaries have them as well. Low-head dams are dangerous, because as water rolls over the dam, it creates a hydraulic current that pulls objects back to the face of the dam and to the bottom of the river. Called a hydraulic roller effect, this has caused many people to drown at these dams. These dams also inhibit upstream fish movement because of the roller effect and the vertical wall of the dam presents a barrier that fish cannot swim over. Because many fish must move upstream to spawn, dams have hindered the populations of many fish species.

As of 2009, five of the eight dams have been retrofitted with inclines made up of large rocks and boulders below the dams. The rocked passage eliminates the hydraulic roller effect and provides large boulders for fish to rest behind which allows fish to move over the dams and to their spawning areas.

Helping Fish Populations

People living in the Red River Valley can help the river’s fish and wildlife populations by keeping their grass clippings out of the river and by using minimal amounts of chemical pesticides and fertilizers. Pollutants can enter the river through storm drains and drainage ditches and can be harmful to the river’s aquatic life. Fish in the Red River currently contain acceptable levels of pollutants, but this could change over time as development continues.

The Fish on Display

The stuffed fish on display are all species commonly found in the Red River. Northern pike are one of the easiest fish to catch because they bite lures and bait so willingly. Most northerns caught are two to three pounds, but anglers regularly catch trophy northerns of over 20 pounds.

A northern caught in the Red River.

A catfish caught in the Red River.

A lake sturgeon caught in 1905 in the Roseau River, which flows into the Red River.