

Iowa DNR News

CONSERVATION AND RECREATION

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

April 29, 2025

- [Black bear sightings on the rise in Northeast Iowa](#)
- [Exceptional season allows DNR crews to achieve walleye egg collection goals](#)
- [Walleye season opens May 3 on Iowa's Great Lakes](#)
- [DNR to temporarily close Clare Wilson Bridge for repairs](#)
- [Time to start planning to control plants in Iowa ponds](#)

Black bear sightings on the rise in Northeast Iowa

Black bears in Iowa?

Yep, it's a thing, and seeing one is likely to become more common.

The Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has been meeting with officials from local conservation boards, police departments, sheriff's offices and dispatchers from counties in northeast Iowa to discuss how to respond when black bears come strolling through later this spring.

"Bears emerge in the spring looking for food, generally feeding on the early greens and don't really care about humans, they're just being a bear," said Vince Evelsizer, state furbearer and wetlands biologist with the Iowa DNR.

In Iowa, the spike in bear activity occurs in late May and June, which is the breeding season when a few black bears are more likely to disburse from Minnesota and Wisconsin, where populations are much larger and growing. Minnesota has an estimated 16,000 black bears, while Wisconsin's population is around 24,000.

"Black bears are not that far from Iowa's border," Evelsizer said. "We typically have two to five bear sightings each year, which we believe are usually younger males. They are relatively timid, and just looking for food and/or females. It's new and exciting, but can lead to human-bear conflicts."

Bears have been responsible for destroying bee hives and have been found on back decks and in back yards emptying bird feeders. If a bear does show up around the house, he said try to scare it from a safe distance because bears don't like loud noises.

"Use loud noises, like yelling at it, clapping two pieces of two- by- fours loudly, or banging pots and pans," he said.

"Give bears plenty of space to move on and also, take away food attractants," he said. "Do not feed bears as that rewards the bear for coming into town and associate's humans with food. Removing any outdoor pet food dishes, bird feeders, trash cans and grills into secure locations will help to avoid conflicts and encourages the bear to move on."

Meetings were held in Dubuque and Fayette with city and county officials from Winneshiek, Allamakee, Clayton, Fayette and Dubuque counties, connecting officials who will likely be involved in one way or another when a bear appears this spring.

"We don't want to block the bear's travel, or back it into a corner. If a bear climbs a tree to escape onlookers, it can jeopardize the safety of the bear itself – you need to give it plenty of space. Folks can enjoy seeing a bear, but from a safe distance. It's a neat thing, but give it space – as in 100 yards or more," he said.

"It would be nice, in an ideal world, that we would know when a bear is coming through ahead of time, to notify citizens so they can remove any attractants," he said. "Sometimes that happens, thanks to our citizens, area DNR staff and local partners, and that helps us track the bear's location occasionally to keep tabs on its travel."

Iowa has gone from having an occasional visiting bear, to more frequent visiting bears to now having two- to- four bears move in and over-winter. And could see more in the future.

"Sightings are still of individual bears. We haven't documented cubs or a breeding population yet," Evelsizer said.

Students from Drake University modeled habitat across Northeast Iowa favorable to black bears, as part of a capstone project, and determined that with its larger sections of timber, Northeast Iowa could support up to 1,100 black bears.

Black bears are native to Iowa, but had been eliminated by the late 1800s as the state was settled. Since the species was gone, black bears were not listed as a furbearer species by the Iowa legislature of the day, and currently have no protection in the state.

"The public is keenly interested in bears and we hope to be proactive with education and outreach as the bears move in to the state," he said.

“It’s pretty exciting to think about that - there might be a bear in the woods,” Evelsizer said. “Some people love bears; some people are scared to death of bears and bear attacks, because of the amount of misinformation out there.”

The biggest takeaway, he said, is that between 1900 and 2009, there was only one black bear fatality in Minnesota, none in Wisconsin, and two in Michigan. Bear attacks are extremely rare, and most incidents involved unsecured food sources, he said.

“We encourage Iowans to give black bears space if they see one. It is a large, wild animal. Also, enjoy the sighting and continue to enjoy the outdoors. Residents in Minnesota and Wisconsin have learned to live with bears,” he said.

The Iowa DNR is a member of BearWise, a national organization that provides information on living responsibly with black bears around the home, when recreating in the outdoors, and more at www.bearwise.org.

Media Contact: Vince Evelsizer, State Furbearer and Wetlands Biologist, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 641-231-1522.

Exceptional season allows DNR crews to achieve walleye egg collection goals

Walleyes spawn once a year using water temperature and photoperiod (length of day) as cues to spawn. DNR crews captured 1,910 adult female walleyes at East Okoboji, Rathbun, Spirit, and Storm lakes, as well as the Mississippi River.

Crews began netting operations on Rathbun Lake on April 5, while gillnetting at Storm Lake started on April 7. Operations at East Okoboji and Spirit lakes began the night of April 9. The last night of netting was April 10, but the spawning of fish continued as “green” females ripened in the hatchery until egg quotas were met.

“The 2025 walleye netting season represents another highly productive and very efficient broodstock collection season,” said Jay Rudacille, DNR Warm and Coolwater Fish Culture supervisor. “This year is one of the shortest, if not the shortest, netting seasons in our walleye gillnetting history as enough females were collected to meet our egg quota in eight combined nights of netting operations at four locations across Iowa.”

A quick netting season led to a brief spawning season as well. “Typically, it takes five to seven days of spawning to collect enough eggs to meet fry production requests, but this year, only three days were needed,” said Kim Hawkins, Hatchery

Manager at Spirit Lake Fish Hatchery. “During this time, Spirit Lake Hatchery staff spawned more than 540 female walleyes, yielding about 560 quarts of eggs.”

Along with some walleye adults that stay at the hatchery all year long, netting crews collected enough walleyes to produce in excess of 682 quarts at the Rathbun Fish Hatchery. Crews at East Okoboji and Spirit lakes collected females that produced 562 quarts of walleye eggs now incubating at Spirit Lake Fish Hatchery. Storm Lake crews spawned enough females to produce 151 quarts of walleye eggs. The Storm Lake satellite hatchery transferred their eggs to the Rathbun and Spirit Lake fish hatcheries to be incubated and hatched.

“Our goal was to collect 1,324 quarts of walleye eggs to produce nearly 116 million walleye fry (newly hatched fish) that we can stock in Iowa lakes or raise to a larger size in hatcheries before being released,” Rudacille explains. “In total, 1,399 quarts of walleye eggs are currently hatching or are being incubated.”

“Walleye populations in our ‘broodstock lakes’ are in exceptionally good shape thanks to our district fisheries management teams who manage these lakes, as well as the walleye culture and stocking program of DNR coolwater hatcheries,” Rudacille stated.

“The walleye population in Rathbun Lake is at a 10-year high,” said Mark Flammang, District Fisheries Management biologist. “This is mostly due to very little precipitation in recent years which has resulted in good water quality and excellent survival of our stocked walleyes.”

Further evidence of the strength of walleye populations in lakes where broodstock are collected for spawning purposes is that over 1,800 walleyes were collected by just four crews in two nights of netting in Spirit Lake. “Mississippi River walleye populations are phenomenal and have been for some time. This population is naturally reproducing and self-sustaining and not dependent on annual stockings like the walleye populations in Iowa’s lakes and reservoirs,” Rudacille stated.

Efforts to produce 116 million walleye fry is a team effort with most DNR Fisheries employees having a role in the project. “Many employees work a night shift during this season to collect walleyes into the wee hours of the morning,” explains Rudacille. “Several employees work at stations more than 100 miles from their homes and away from their families during collection efforts.”

Participation in the annual walleye broodstock collection and spawning operations extends outside of the Fisheries Bureau with employees from the DNR’s Law Enforcement and Parks Bureaus. Entities outside of the DNR play an important role in this “once a year” operation. DNR staff from Fairport Fish Hatchery and the Bellevue Fisheries Station teamed up with staff from the fish hatchery associated with the Quad Cities Clean Energy Center just north of Cordova, IL, as they have for several years.

Personnel from DNR and the Quad Cities Fish Hatchery joined forces to collect broodstock and spawn fish to meet egg quotas for both facilities. This team worked collaboratively to produce 79 quarts of eggs from Mississippi River females that were transferred to Rathbun Fish Hatchery for incubation and hatch. Fry hatched from these eggs will be used in an important research project comparing their survival rate to fry produced from lake strain females.

Iowa is one of the top producers of walleye fry in the United States, surpassed only by Minnesota in annual production. While some walleye eggs have already hatched, hatchery staff will keep a watchful eye over the remainder of the eggs during the 12-21 day incubation period. Walleye fry will be stocked into 32 public bodies of water and 10 watershed rearing ponds. While the majority of walleyes are stocked as fry, some are cultured in Iowa DNR hatcheries and stocked at different sizes. More than 1 million two-inch walleyes are expected to be stocked into lakes, rivers, and streams across Iowa this summer. Larger 6- 9-inch fingerlings (nearly 310,000) will be stocked in lakes later this fall.

With little natural reproduction in most Iowa lakes and rivers, Iowa's walleye populations depend on stockings. Walleyes are stocked throughout Iowa into natural lakes, interior rivers, flood control reservoirs and selected larger man-made lakes.

Media Contact: Jay Rudacille, DNR Warm and Coolwater Fish Culture Supervisor, 641-647-2406 ext. 223.

Walleye season opens May 3 on Iowa's Great Lakes

The 150th walleye fishing season officially opens May 3rd at Spirit Lake, East and West Okoboji lakes.

"A very robust and healthy walleye population was observed this spring during broodstock collection efforts at the Spirit Lake Fish Hatchery," said Mike Hawkins, Northwest Regional Fisheries Management supervisor for the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR). "In two nights, three crews collected all the necessary fish for this year's spawning efforts."

Walleye season opens the first Saturday in May and runs through February 14 each year on Spirit Lake, East Okoboji Lake and West Okoboji Lake. The protected slot limit on walleyes is 19 to 25 inches, with only one walleye over 25 inches allowed per day. The protected slot limit applies to Spirit Lake, East and West Okoboji Lake, Upper and Lower Gar Lake and Minnewashta Lake. The daily limit is three walleyes with a possession limit of six.

The walleye season will be opening in the Iowa Great Lakes, but the lakes offer great fishing for a variety of other species. Panfish, northern pike, and smallmouth and largemouth bass fishing can be very good as waters warm. Water levels on the Okoboji chain are just barely above crest level with water flowing over the Lower Gar spillway. Spirit Lake remains a few inches below crest.

For many anglers, this will be their first trip on the water for the season. Checking your safety equipment and making sure your boat is ready ahead of time can help ease congestion at busy boat ramps.

The Iowa Great Lakes Chamber of Commerce will host the 43rd annual Iowa Great Lakes Walleye Weekend Fishing Contest in conjunction with the opener. For more information on the contest, visit their website at <https://okobojichamber.com/walleye-weekend/>.

Anglers are also encouraged to participate in the Midwest Walleye Challenge hosted by the Iowa DNR Fisheries Bureau. Angler catch information from this citizen science data collection effort provides valuable data to help fisheries biologists manage Iowa's walleye populations. For more information and to sign up visit <https://www.anglersatlas.com/event/835/2025-midwest-walleye-challenge-iowa>.

Media Contact: Mike Hawkins, Northwest Regional Fisheries Management Supervisor, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 712-336-1840.

DNR to temporarily close Clare Wilson Bridge for repairs

Okoboji, Iowa – The Iowa Department of Natural Resources announces a temporary closure of the bridge, fishing piers and parking lot at Clare Wilson State Recreation Area beginning May 5, 2025, for critical repairs. The project, expected to last approximately six weeks, will address deteriorated decking and railings caused by years of heavy use, as well as damage from last summer's floods.

The iconic bridge, a key feature in the area's recreational infrastructure, will undergo structural upgrades to improve safety and aesthetics. During the closure, bikers and hikers on the Great Lakes Spine Trail are advised to use the designated trail route along US Highway 71, which will remain fully accessible.

DNR Contact: Mike Weis, Parks, Forests and Preserves NW Iowa Supervisor – (712) 330-8127, Michael.Weis@dnr.iowa.gov or Chase Gehrke, Park Ranger – (712)-320-1007, Chase.Gehrke@dnr.iowa.gov

Time to start planning to control plants in Iowa ponds

A healthy pond needs aquatic plants, but too many plants can limit the pond's use and cause imbalances in the fish population. If you had problems using your pond last year because of aquatic plant growth, you could have similar problems this year.

In an existing pond, mechanical and chemical control methods are the best options for immediate control. They usually work best if you start early, when plant growth is not at its maximum level. If you wait until growths are thick, control will be difficult, take longer, and chemical control could cause water quality issues that harm fish.

Mechanical methods include bottom blanketing, shading, removal and lowering water levels. Temporarily blanket the bottom of a private pond and leave it in place for 30 days early in the season to limit plant growth in fishing or swimming areas. Use weighted commercial weed barrier products or thick black plastic (punctured to allow gasses to escape).

To shade a pond, apply a pond dye in April, before most plants are actively growing, to reduce the amount of light needed for plants to grow. This works best in ponds with a small watershed. Many blue and black pond dye products are available for pond beautification. Re-apply the product at a reduced rate throughout the spring and summer since inflowing water can dilute it and ultraviolet light can degrade it.

Removal is a low-cost way to take out plants from high-use areas. It can be done by hand or with special rakes and cutters (make your own or buy from retail outlets).

Herbicides will control pond plants chemically, but you may need to reapply during the summer to get season-long control. Follow these five steps when you apply any herbicide: 1) correctly identify the plant you want to control; 2) measure the area you are going to treat (surface area and average depth); 3) read the herbicide label to determine the correct timing and amount to apply; 4) identify possible restrictions on uses of the water (e.g., irrigation or watering animals) and 5) apply according to label directions. Most aquatic herbicides work best if applied on a calm, sunny morning.

Find more information on aquatic plants in ponds on the DNR website at www.iowadnr.gov/ponds.

Media Contact: Jason Euchner, Fisheries Biologist, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 515-230-4789.