



Rock River

River Status Summary

Location - The Rock River arises in Washington County, Wisconsin and enters Illinois near Rockton, IL. It flows in a general southwesterly direction for approximately 163 miles before entering the Mississippi River near Rock Island, IL. The river drains 10,280 square miles with about ½ of this area in Illinois. The Illinois portion of the river has major population centers at Rockford, Dixon, Sterling/Rock Falls, and Rock Island. The remainder of the Illinois portion of the basin is primarily agricultural. The Rock River has low-head dams at Rockton, Rockford, Oregon, Dixon, 2 at Sterling/Rockfalls, and a split dam at Milan.

Status of the Sport Fishery – There are more than 80 species of fish in the Rock River Basin, including several species of sport fish. The most sought after of the sport fish are the catfish, with both channel catfish and flathead catfish abundant and of trophy size. Smallmouth bass and walleye fishing are also popular, and close to 70,000 walleye are stocked each year to support this excellent fishery. Panfish such as bluegill and crappie can be found in some of the back water areas, along with largemouth bass. Northern pike can be found in the northern end of the river near Rockford, but in limited numbers.

Smallmouth Bass – Smallmouth bass are common and abundant in the Rock River. A survey conducted in the summer of 2013 found very large numbers of young fish indicating an excellent spawn despite the drought and low water levels. The catch rate was low for the larger fish though, (> 7”) with a rate of only 0.5 fish/minute, but the catch rate of 1.2 fish/minute for all sizes was within the target rate. The overall number of adult fish (>11”) collected was low, with only 20% of the population in this size range. These results coincide with the survey results of 2011 and 2012 which found low numbers of fish in the 11-13” range, indicating at least one if not two missing year classes, those of 2008 and 2009. With the strong year classes produced in 2012 and 2013, the number of larger fish should improve significantly in the near future. Best fishing areas are in South Beloit, below the dam in Dixon, and downstream of Prophetstown State Park where the largest number of fish 14” or larger were found.

Walleye – Walleye are stocked each year into the Rock River to provide a quality sport fishery for this species. Fishing is generally good below the dams and at the mouths of the tributaries. Walleye ranging in size up to and over the state record weight have been caught in recent years in the upper Rock River and the Pecatonica River, a tributary of the Rock near Rockford. A survey conducted in the fall of 2012 near Dixon found a catch rate of 1 fish/2 minutes with a total of 30 fish of all sizes collected in one hour, well over the target rate for stocking success. Fishermen regularly report catching memorable size walleye from Sterling up through Rockford. Best fishing for walleye is in the upper Rock River, north of Sterling, however anglers sometimes report good fishing near Prophetstown State Park.

Channel Catfish – Channel catfish are extremely abundant in the Rock River in most all areas. A study done in 2011 found that 93% of the adult size fish in the population were over 16” in length, and 29% of these were over 24”, which bodes well for fishermen looking for good size fish. The average weight of the 115 fish collected in this study was 4.3 pounds with the largest fish over 33 inches in length and weighing 15.6 pounds.

Flathead Catfish – The Rock River is one of the best rivers in the state for catching trophy size flathead catfish. A study done in 2011 found that of a total of 394 adult size flathead catfish collected, 73% were over 24” in length, 49% were over 28”, 13.5% were over 36”, and 5.8% (23 fish) were over 40”. The 36” fish averaged 22 pounds in weight. The largest flathead catfish collected during this study was a 45” fish weighing 48 pounds.

Fishing Regulations: *Consult the current Illinois Fishing Regulations Booklet for more detailed information.

Species	Creel Limit	Minimum Length Limit
Black Bass (Largemouth, Smallmouth) Entire river including tributaries in State of Illinois.	6 singly or in combination with no more than 3 smallmouth bass in the daily creel	14” for Smallmouth Bass (see note below)
Walleye, Sauger, or Hybrid Walleye Wisconsin state line downstream to the Sears and Steel dams at Milan.	6 either singly or in combination	14” minimum length limit
Walleye, Sauger, or Hybrid Walleye Sears and Steel dams downstream to confluence with Mississippi River, State of Illinois (Rock Island County).	6 fish daily creel with no more than 1 walleye greater than 27” in total length	15” minimum length limit with a 20-27” protected Slot Length Limit.
Northern Pike	3 fish daily creel	24” minimum length limit

- Note: There is a closed season on smallmouth bass. All smallmouth bass caught between April 1 and June 15 must be immediately released alive and in good condition back into the waters from which they came.