



Lower Illinois River

2013 River Status Summary



The Illinois River is formed at the confluence of the Des Plaines and Kankakee rivers near Channahon in northeastern Illinois. It runs southwest for 273 miles across the state to enter the Mississippi River near Grafton. There are five dams along the Illinois forming pooled reaches named (upstream to downstream) Dresden Pool, Marseilles Pool, Starved Rock Pool, Peoria Pool and La Grange Pool. The downstream reach is called the Alton Pool because it is influenced by Mel Price Lock and Dam on the Mississippi River at Alton.

LOCATION: The Lower Illinois River is comprised of the Alton and LaGrange pools. The Alton Pool extends from mile 0 at the mouth near Grafton to mile 80.2 at the tailwater of the La Grange Lock and Dam near Meredosia. The La Grange Pool of the Illinois River extends from the La Grange Lock and Dam at mile 80.2 to the tailwater of the Peoria Lock and Dam at mile 157.7.

RIVER ACCESS: The lower Illinois River is characterized by slow water velocities and soft substrates of mud and sand. There are a number of islands and associated side channels in the Alton Pool. Several boat ramps and numerous bank fishing areas are available on State properties in Jersey and Calhoun counties, collectively called the Mississippi River Fish and Wildlife Area (see below). The area between Grafton and Nutwood has many backwater lakes that provide good sunfish and bass fishing opportunities. The Stump Lake Fish and Wildlife Area boat ramp just north of Pere Marquette State Park provides access to Flat, Long, Fowler and Upper Stump lakes. The Stump Lake complex provides excellent bluegill, crappie and bullhead fishing. Boat ramps at Grafton and Pere Marquette State Park provides access to Lower Illinois River. Other boat ramps along the Alton Pool are near the towns of Pearl, Florence, Naples and Meredosia. There is a ramp upstream of the La Grange Lock and Dam but access to the tailwater requires lock passage. The run from the Meredosia ramp to the La Grange tailwater is about 9 miles. The swift currents below the dam add a diversity of habitat conditions which provides excellent white bass fishing, along with concentrations of sauger, largemouth bass and catfish. The large number of backwater lakes and sloughs made the LaGrange reach historically one of the most biologically productive river reaches in the world for waterfowl and fish. Isolated backwaters managed for fishing by IDNR include State fish and wildlife areas at Anderson Lake, Spring Lake, Rice Lake, and Banner Marsh as well as the restored Thompson Lake at Emiquon Preserve. Bath Chute, a river side channel has excellent panfish and largemouth bass populations and is accessible from a boat ramp in Bath. Boat access to the LaGrange Pool is available at LaGrange Lock and Dam, Beardstown, Browning, Havana, Liverpool, Kingston Mines and Pekin. A ramp about 3 miles south of Bartonville on Mendenhall Road off of Rt. 24 provides the easiest access to the Peoria Lock and Dam tailwater. A 3-mile run gets access to excellent fishing for white bass, sauger, catfish and largemouth bass.

STATUS OF THE SPORT FISHERY: Historically the Lower Illinois River was one of the most productive freshwater fisheries in the world, but in the past 50 years there has been aquatic habitat degradation associated with sedimentation of backwaters. Asian carp have recently invaded the river and now dominate the fish biomass of this reach. To date there is no decline in native game fish attributable to Asian carp, and excellent fishing opportunities remain. In addition, bowfishing for all carp species is growing in popularity.

Channel catfish – Channel catfish are the primary game fish of the Lower Illinois and they are abundant throughout the reach. A 2012 hoop net survey in the Alton Pool yielded 229 channel catfish with an average of 5 fish per net set. Hoop netting in the LaGrange Pool in 2013 yielded a slightly lower average of 3.6 channel catfish per net set. The dominant length group in both pools was 16 to 24 inches, with average weights of 3.3 to 3.4 pounds. Several individuals in the 28 inch, 10 to 11 pound range were netted. The population appears robust. Electrofishing data from 2013 indicate the presence of high numbers of young catfish up to 16 inches as well.

Flathead catfish – Flathead catfish are common throughout the Lower Illinois throughout the range of size classes. Trophy-sized fish exceeding 40 inches and 30 pounds are present. Hoop net surveys in the Alton Pool 2012 and LaGrange Pool 2013 each produced 1.4 fish per net set. Individuals in the 24 to 28 inch length group made up roughly 20% of the catch and weighed an average of 7 pounds. Young up to 16 inches made up 26% of the netted flathead catfish but 76% of those captured in 2013 electrofishing surveys. The difference is due to size selectivity of each gear type.

Largemouth Bass – Largemouth bass maintain a presence in the Lower Illinois but larger fish are typically scarce in our electrofishing samples. Like other sunfishes they experience population increases after a big flood year, but the numbers decline in subsequent years when they should be recruiting to larger sizes. Largemouth bass numbers climbed in 2010, particularly in the LaGrange Pool, but declined after that. The highest bass numbers in 2013 surveys were from the LaGrange tailwaters (20 bass per hour) and Otter Creek confluence near Nutwood (17 bass per hour). The largest bass measured 16 inches and 2.3 pounds.

White bass – The white bass is a schooling species that is present throughout the Lower river. The largest individuals (11 to 14 inches) and highest numbers (56 per hour) of white bass observed in 2013 were in the tailwaters of Peoria Dam. Though they were present in high numbers at Pearl, LaGrange tailwater, and Meyers Ditch near Liverpool, they were smaller in size.

Sauger – Like white bass, sauger are most abundant near dam tailwaters of the Lower Illinois. Relatively high numbers (average 6 per hour) of young sauger under 8 inches were captured by electrofishing Lower Illinois River sites in 2013. They were most abundant near the Peoria Dam tailwater where the catch rate was 45 sauger per hour. Hopefully that reproductive spike will result in larger individuals next year.

Crappie – Black crappie are common in slackwaters of the Lower Illinois. White crappie are usually present in lesser numbers. The best population detected by 2013 electrofishing was at the Otter Creek confluence where 22 crappie per hour were measured. Most black crappie were in the 10 to 12 inch range with the largest individuals exceeding 12 inches and 1.25 pounds. White crappie were all under 10 inches.

FISHING REGULATIONS:

There is a 12 inch minimum length limit for largemouth and smallmouth bass. Waterfowl management areas along the Alton Pool have fishing access restrictions that are listed in the Illinois Fishing Information Booklet and posted on-site. Also, fishing information and current water levels can be found on the website: www.ifishillinois.org

Call the IDNR offices at (618) 376-3303 or (309)543-3316 for details.

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