

# The Oneida Lake Bulletin

Spring 2016

www.oneidalakeassociation.org

## State of Oneida Lake 2016

*Provided by Staff at the Cornell University Biological Field Station*

Look at an aerial photograph of central New York and Oneida Lake stands out. Along with its central place in the landscape, Oneida Lake is significant to the local culture and economy.

Angler surveys conducted by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation show Oneida Lake to be second only to Lake Ontario in the amount of fishing effort attracted each year – in excess of 300,000 hours of fishing annually, resulting in more than 12 million dollars a year flowing into the Oneida Lake community.

In recent years, 60-70% of the angling on Oneida has been directed at walleye, long the lake's primary fishery, but bass also support an excellent fishery that has grown over the past two decades. Yellow perch continue to be a favorite of fall and winter anglers.

Scientists at the Cornell Biological Field Station have been monitoring the lake for 60 years and appreciate the opportunity to share with readers of the OLA Bulletin an update on the state of the lake in 2016.

### Walleye

Our mark-recapture population estimates of walleye give us the most accurate measure of population size. In 2013, our last mark-recapture year, we estimated the number of adult walleye at just over 350,000 fish.

Catches from our gears since that time indicate that survival of the 2010 year class (those fish hatched

in spring of 2010) was very good, and the population now may be closer to 425,000 adult fish. The population has fluctuated between 350,000 and 450,000 fish over the past decade or so, and current years are no exception. We will be conducting another mark-recapture estimate in 2016.

trend of harvest rates of around 60,000 fish per year over the past several years.

The walleye population should be able to sustain current levels of effort and harvest into the near future, but we are concerned at how infrequently we see larger year classes such as the 2010

*If you are approached by one of our clerks, please take a few minutes to answer their questions, as it will help us better understand current trends in the walleye fishery so we can make sure quality fishing opportunities continue into the future.*

Recent population size is well above levels observed from 1994 through 2003 when the population was undergoing severe declines, and the population appears to have stabilized for the time being. While walleye numbers are still lower than in the 'good old days' of the 1960s-1980s, the walleye population is capable of generating angler catch rates as high as they were when walleye were more abundant.

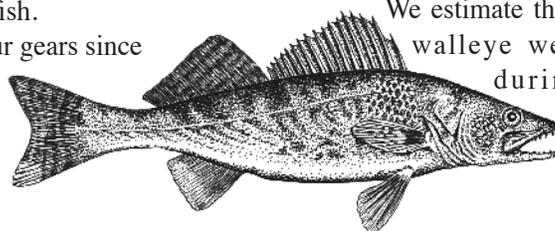
The quality of fishing on Oneida Lake has not suffered – it is still one of the premiere walleye lakes in New York State. Anglers in 2015 experienced excellent fishing, with catch rates as high or higher than we've seen in a number of years.

We estimate that some 57,000 walleye were harvested during the open water season, continuing a

year class that currently is carrying much of the fishery. On average, walleye year classes over the last decade contribute around 50,000 fish to the fishery each year, less than the number harvested in a good fishing year, so periodic strong year classes are important if the population is to remain at current levels.

In 2011, we initiated an angler interview program at lake boat ramps to monitor walleye catch and harvest rates, and we will continue that program this year. If you are approached by one of our clerks, please take a few minutes to answer their questions, as it will help us better understand current trends in the walleye fishery so we can make sure quality fishing opportunities continue into the future.

*(Continued on page 3)*



## President's Message

**WATER:** March is the time we change the clocks and our attitudes in approaching water. Ice converts to liquid. Snowmobiles and ice shanties are packed away, boats come out. As the last weekend in February again demonstrated, seasonal rains lifted the lake ice free from shore, curtailing hard water anglers and travel through Rattlesnake Gulch.

So the first ice on the lake was seen a month later than usual, and strength not reliable lake-wide until mid-February. Regardless of who wins the 2016 nominations, the OLA is committed to appropriately lobbying our government when our lake's ecosystem and economy warrant action.

Alien and invasive species (NAIS or AIS) are belatedly and unfortunately becoming more newsworthy. Fanwort is a new threat, potentially moving downstream from Kasoag Lake into Fish Creek and Oneida Lake. OLA members who frequent Fish Creek and who would like to be trained to identify and report sightings of the plant are asked to speak to a Board member. OLA will again host a volunteer water chestnut pull July 29-30 in the Big Bay area; if you have kayak and would like to participate, please contact a Board member. NYSDEC is imposing a new invasive species regulation on boaters, and OLA is supporting programs to educate boaters. This summer if you see stewards at boat launches, please take the time to listen to them and learn of good habitats and new facilities to keep boats pest-free on all waterways.

I hope that many of you have received our new email newsletters, and more will provide e-addresses as you renew. If you request, your Bulletin will come electronically, saving on print and postage – keeping your dues at a meager \$5! The Board has posted many new features on your website, so look there too.

Are you a long-standing Member with an avocation for protecting and enhancing Oneida Lake? Have you ever considered an inclination to become a Director? If yes, please contact one of the Board members.

I hope to see some of you at our Earth Day Route 81 spring cleanup on April 23, and speak with many of you at our April 27 Annual Meeting!

Think Spring!



Scott Shupe  
President, Oneida Lake Association  
president@oneidalakeassociation.org  
info@oneidalakeassociation.org

### The Oneida Lake Association, Inc.

Founded in 1945

*The Bulletin* is published by the Oneida Lake Association, Inc., so that its members may be informed regarding the activities of the association. The Oneida Lake Association, Inc., was organized in 1945 to restore and preserve the natural resources of Oneida Lake and its environs.

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## Mark your calendar for the OLA Annual Meeting

Wednesday April 27 • 6 pm

Cicero-North Syracuse High School

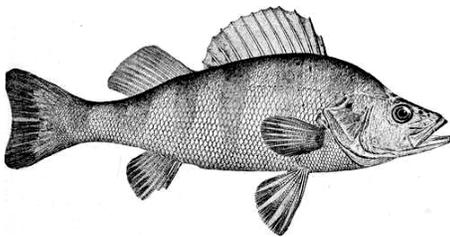
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## State of Oneida Lake

(Continued from page 1)

### Yellow Perch

Our catches of yellow perch suggest a decline in numbers from the recent high of 1.6 million fish we estimated in 2013. Catches in 2015 indicated the population may have declined to just over 900,000 fish. As with walleye, yellow perch are below levels observed from the 1950s to 1980s. We suspect that changes in the lake associated with establishment of zebra and quagga mussels have reduced survival of very young yellow perch, and for the immediate future we expect abundance to remain below long-term averages. Anglers can still enjoy good catch rates of yellow perch, and they should continue to be a staple of the winter ice fishery.



### Smallmouth Bass

Our catches of smallmouth bass continue to indicate a population that is about three times larger than it was in the 1980s. Our monitoring indicated very successful reproduction in 2014, and our catches of adult bass in gill nets remain high. Angler catch rates of bass are competitive with some of the best inland bass fisheries in the state, and the lake now hosts many bass tournaments annually, including out of state groups.

Oneida hosted the Bass Pro Shops Northern Open in 2015, the most recent in a string of high profile tournaments bringing attention to the lake's bass fishing. Bass fishing in Oneida Lake is attracting national attention and bass fishing is providing a real boost to the local fishing economy.

*We have consistently seen a strong relationship between angler success and the amount of food available to walleye and bass, with catch rates declining in years when forage is plentiful.*

### Other Fishes

White perch continue to be very abundant in the lake. Many of the white perch have reached respectable sizes, and can put up a nice fight for anglers using lighter tackle. They can provide an excellent added fishing opportunity to anglers on the lake, so seek them out and take advantage of their abundance.

As shoreline vegetation has increased with the clearer water conditions brought about by zebra and quagga mussels, so have our catches of fishes typically associated with shallow, vegetated habitats. We continue to see more largemouth bass, pumpkinseed, gar, pickerel and bowfin in our samples, all signs that the nearshore fish community is expanding in response to the increase in their preferred habitats. Anglers fishing shallower waters should enjoy a diverse catch.

### Round Goby

Confirmed reports from anglers of round goby in Oneida Lake came to us in 2013. We did not catch gobies in our routine monitoring gears until mid-summer of 2014, but by the end of that year they were quite common.

By the end of the sampling season in 2015, gobies were the most common fish in our trawl samples, so it seems safe to say they are in the midst of the rapid expansion so common to new invasive species. Only time will tell what impact the gobies will ultimately have on our lake.

Their primary food is the zebra and quagga mussels, so they are unlikely to act as serious competitors for food resources with our native fishes. We have

already seen gobies become important in diets of our sport fish, including walleye, bass and yellow perch. The added food resource could lead to more rapid growth in our sport fish and enhanced survival of young yellow perch that historically make up much of the prey base for walleye.

In other systems where round goby have become established, such as the eastern basin of Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River, cormorants have been observed to show a preference for them as a food source, providing a value buffer for other, more valuable, species. We have consistently seen a strong relationship between angler success and the amount of food available to walleye and bass, with catch rates declining in years when forage is plentiful. It is possible with an abundance of gobies it may become more difficult to catch fish in Oneida Lake, or at least require an adjustment of techniques.

We will continue to monitor both gobies and angler success in order to better understand how this new species will affect our fisheries.

### In Conclusion

As we head into the summer of 2016 we expect Oneida Lake will continue to offer diverse and high quality fishing and recreational opportunities for all who visit. The lake will continue to be a vital resource for our region even while it adjusts to all the changes that have occurred over the past decades. It is not the same lake it was in the 1970s and 1980s, but it is still one of the area's most valuable natural and economic resources.

*Thank you to all of the Fire Departments that serve Oneida Lake!*

## **Featuring: Brewerton Fire Department WR-1**

The *Oneida Lake Bulletin* will feature the seven fire departments that serve Oneida Lake. We start our series with the Brewerton Fire Department.

The department uses a 30' Metal Craft Marine with twin Honda 225 hp 4-stroke outboard engines for Oneida Lake Water Rescue Calls. This is a multipurpose vessel that does: Search & Rescue; Fights Boat & Shore Fires; Provides a platform for scuba divers; provides EMT'S with full medical supplies which include extrication back boards for medical emergencies on the Lake; provides a water supply to fire apparatus on land; and can be a Command Platform for public safety operations on any major event on Oneida Lake.

Firefighting capable with a 64 hp water pump drafting water from the Lake and feeding a fire monitor that can deliver 500 gallons per minute of water off the front bow, and two gated valves for fire hose lines to be utilized off the stern. WR-1 also carries multiple handheld fire extinguishers and a large capacity extinguisher.

The boat is also equipped with search instrumentation such as: radar & plotter; GPS, Depth & Side Sonar, and FLIR (Forward Looking Infrared) for night vision across the water.

WR-1 provides a light package that has: a Flood/Spot adjustable search bow light; Flood lighting systems on all four sides of the vessel (Forward, Stern, Port and Starboard sides) for night operations on the Lake; and an emergency light bar for Fire Boat identification.

When the need is there the boat has a portable drafting pump to draw water out of a distressed boat taking on water and sinking.

WR-1 is an all-purpose search & rescue vessel: they can muster scuba divers; do fire suppression from the water; and provide EMT'S for the emergencies on the Oneida Lake. You will see them practicing water rescue from the boat and in the water each summer.

Brewerton Fire Department also has an Air Boat WR-4 for Ice Rescue during the winter months.



*The 30' Metal Craft Marine in action.*



*The crew with the Air Boat WR-4.*

### **Water Rescue Fire Departments That Serve Oneida**

We are fortunate to have seven Water Rescue Fire Departments that serve Oneida Lake. They are:

- Brewerton Fire Department
- Bridgeport Fire Department
- Cleveland Fire Department
- Constantia Fire Department
- South Bay Fire Department
- Sylvan Beach Fire Department
- West Monroe Fire Department

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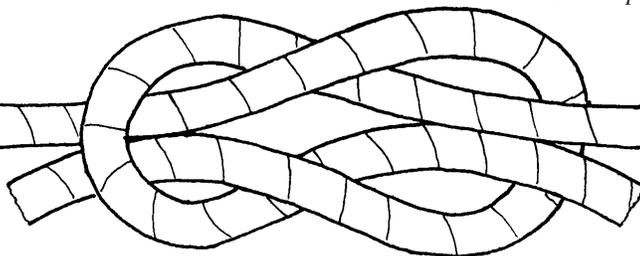
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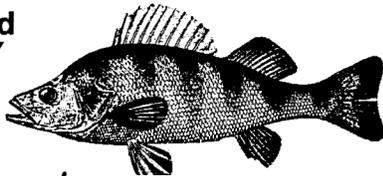
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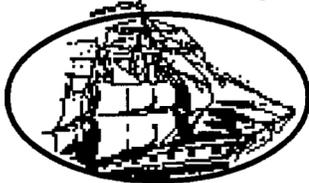
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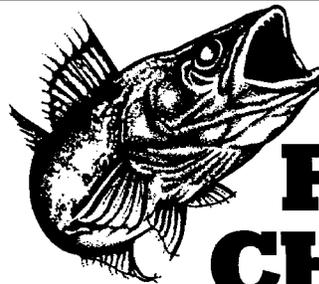
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