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Northland anglers, bait shop owners concerned about new minnow-harvesting ban

Spottail shiners, a favorite early season bait for anglers on Lake Winnibigoshish and other lakes, could be in short supply this year as the result of a new minnow-harvesting ban starting next month.

By: [Sam Cook](#), Duluth News Tribune



An angler holds an Odd'Ball stand-up jig baited with a spottail shiner minnow while fishing for walleyes on Leech Lake. (File / News Tribune)

Spottail shiners, a favorite early season bait for anglers on Lake Winnibigoshish and other lakes, could be in short supply this year as the result of a new minnow-harvesting ban starting next month.

The ban also could have serious consequences for bait harvesters and bait dealers, who say few spottails are likely to be harvested on Lake Winnibigoshish this year before the ban goes into effect on May 22. The spottails won't have moved into the shallows before that date, they say, and that's the only place trappers can get to the highly valued minnows.

"The bait dealers depend on the first three weeks of the season with shiners," said Grand Rapids fishing guide Tom Neustrom. "(Shiners) probably represent 30 percent of the minnow business for the whole year. It's going to kill them."

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources has imposed the minnow-harvesting ban from May 22 through Oct. 31 on Lake Winnibigoshish, where most Minnesota spottails are trapped. The ban has been imposed to prevent the spread of zebra mussel larvae. The presence of the larvae was announced in February based on water samples taken last July.

Minnesota's fishing season opens May 11.

Spottails are among the most expensive minnows and the most lucrative for bait shops to sell. They're prized as walleye bait by anglers who fish Winnibigoshish and other Mississippi-basin lakes from Bemidji to the western Iron Range, said Ben Kellin of Ben's Bait in Grand Rapids.

"Probably 75 percent of the minnows I sell in May are spottails," Kellin said.

Walleyes love them.

"It's like peanut butter and jelly and motherhood. That's what shiners are to walleyes," Neustrom said.

Bill Powell, who traps minnows and owns Fred's Bait in Deer River, estimated that sales of spottails represent one-third of his total annual revenue, not just his minnow sales. Powell estimated that, collectively,

Winnibigoshish spottails generate \$500,000 annually for bait shops in the area. The lake's spottails are smaller than other shiners and tend to stay alive longer than other varieties, Powell said.

Setting the ban

The DNR had been debating how to implement the minnow-harvesting ban on Big Winnie, but the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe acted first, setting its ban from May 22 to Oct. 31. The DNR decided to match those dates, said Jay Rendall, DNR invasive species prevention coordinator.

"We wanted to be in sync with them," Rendall said.

About a half-dozen or fewer band members harvest shiners on Big Winnie, said Steve Mortensen, fish, wildlife and plant resources program director for the band.

The ban is intended to prevent the spread of zebra mussel larvae in water that is collected with the minnows. Zebra mussel larvae, called veligers, begin to appear in the water when it rises to about 55 degrees in the spring, said Chris Kavanaugh, DNR area fisheries supervisor in Grand Rapids.

DNR data on Lake Winnibigoshish for the past six years indicates that the lake reaches 55 degrees on about May 22, Kavanaugh said, although that varies somewhat from year to year. The Leech Lake Band set the dates of its ban based on that research, Mortensen said.

"We know it's going to have a huge impact on bait dealers," Kavanaugh said. "But we also need to be concerned about the potential of transferring veligers to other waters. We know bait from Winnie goes to a lot of other lakes."

The DNR and minnow harvesters have discussed a flushing system through which spottails from Big Winnie could be processed to cleanse the water they're in, Kavanaugh said. But that couldn't be set up by this spring.

Higher costs predicted

Powell said he learned of the ban about 10 days ago. He said he is one of about six minnow harvesters on Lake Winnibigoshish. Three are members of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe, he said, and three are not band members. Those harvesters supply nearly all of the bait shops in the area.

The minnow trappers had hoped the DNR would tie the ban to a specific water temperature rather than to a specific date, Powell said. That way, the trappers could hope to catch some spottails before the ban began each year.

Powell said a few spottails are trapped as soon as the ice goes out each year, but in typical years, trappers get most of their spottails from Big Winnie starting about June 1.

Powell said he will try to find spottails elsewhere this spring.

"I'm not saying we're not going to have any shiners," Powell said. "But it isn't going to be anything like it was."

With a limited supply, anglers will see a difference when buying spottails, Neustrom said.

"It's going to drive the cost of shiners through the roof," he said.

In the past, spottails have sold for about \$5 a dozen or \$30 per quart, said Powell and Kellin. That's about twice as much as chubs sell for.

Angler impacts

“Without doubt, it's going to impact all of us who fish for walleyes, especially those anglers who steadfastly believe that the spottail shiner is the only live bait worth buying during the early part of the fishing season,” Deer River guide Jeff Sundin said.

Kellin put it more bluntly.

“In the next few years, we're not going to be fishing spottails, which is crazy to say,” Kellin said.

While anglers will have to adapt, Sundin has greater concerns.

“What concerns me even more is the economic viability of the live-bait industry,” he said. “Few, if any, realize just how dependent on the supply of spottails our bait dealers really are.”

Meanwhile, Powell is trying to make the best of the ban.

“When I first heard about it, it was pretty crushing,” Powell said. “Now, it's soaking in. By fall, I'll know what it'll do.”

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