

# The BUCKET LIST

THE DON'T MISS  
LAKES FOR 2014

By Dave Baker



Ветти Литтл/PHOTO

**T**ELL THE BOSS you're sick. Leave the painting for another day. Plant a Wildlife Management Area sign in the grass and leave the mowing for next week. Find another day to change the oil in your truck. Another 1,000 miles won't make much of a difference, anyway.

Do whatever it takes to make time for fishing because it's spring. Spend those saved minutes by spooling new line onto your fishing reels and organizing your tackle box. Then head out for some of the best fishing that Kentucky has to offer.

Read on for the Kentucky Afield bucket list of places to go fish this year.

### **CEDAR CREEK LAKE**

#### **Largemouth Bass**

Fisheries biologists intended to create a monster at Cedar Creek Lake near Stanford.

Volunteers and employees of the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources stacked wooden pallets, anchored trees, dumped rock and set down other cover throughout the basin before the 784-acre lake filled in 2002. Then they set a one fish, 20-inch size limit for largemouth bass.

Anglers fishing Cedar Creek Lake today won't be disappointed with the results. "As far as catching fish over 5 pounds, I think it's as good or better than anywhere in the state," said Southeastern Fisheries District Biologist John Williams. "We're kind of in the sweet spot now."

Fish sampling studies conducted at Ce-

dar Creek Lake show the overall bass population is growing older. "Six to eight years ago, we were seeing a lot of small to medium bass," Williams said. "Now we're catching a lot of big ones."

Biologists are seeing fewer bass under 8 inches, but that is not unexpected in a lake where numbers of big bass are on the upswing and many anglers are choosing to release their trophies. Williams said he's heard reports of 8-pound fish being caught in the lake.

"Our catch rate on large bass is essentially at an all-time high," Williams noted. "I don't know that it could get much better – but I think we can stay at this level for a while."

### **GREEN RIVER LAKE**

#### **Largemouth Bass**

At 8,210 acres, Green River Lake south of Campbellsville has far more fishing room than Cedar Creek Lake. Green River Lake also has exceptional numbers of largemouth bass over 15 inches and strong numbers of bass exceeding 20 inches.

"The number of fish over 15 inches is the highest since I've been here," said Southwestern Fisheries District Biologist Eric Cummins. "In fact, it's the highest since the fish shocking studies began in the early 1990s."

The lake's rockier underpinnings are a contrast to the habitat of Cedar Creek Lake. Cummins credits Green River Lake's strong, sustained spawns as a key to the reservoir's bass numbers. "We've had sev-

eral good year classes moving through," he said. "The spawns have been well-timed and spread out."

April is a key month for largemouth bass. A variety of sizes and age classes start their spawn as the daylight increases and water temperatures rise into the low 50s to early 60s. Generally, bigger fish spawn sooner than the smaller ones. Depending on conditions, the overall spawn may last for over a month.

Anglers target bass in the spawning shallows with top water baits, lizards, Carolina rigs and shallow crankbaits. The upper lake warms first and may be two weeks ahead of the lower lake.

In summer, bass key on gizzard shad and alewives. Alewives will stay in cooler water while gizzard shad are more temperature tolerant and may be found closer to the banks. Anglers should target bass with bait-fish-imitating lures.

### **ROUGH RIVER LAKE**

#### **Hybrid Striped Bass**

Because hybrid striped bass generally stay in deeper water rather than hang around shoreline or structure, biologists deploy gill nets to gauge how the fish populations are doing. At Rough River Lake, a 5,100-acre impoundment located north of Leitchfield, the nets are consistently heavy with fish measuring from 15 to 26 inches long.

Northwestern Fisheries District Biologist Rob Rold said the lake's stability in its



DAVE DREVES PHOTO



DAVID BAKER PHOTO

Facing page: Phillip Little (center), with the help of Maggie Little and Hayden Cook, caught this hybrid in Fishtrap Lake. Paul Wilkes (above) and Jeff Crosby (right) show why Green River and Cedar Creek lakes made the bucket list.

hybrid striped bass population makes it a go-to destination for anglers.

“Rough River Lake is one of the best areas in state for hybrids,” he said. “We’re seeing a lot of fish in the 15-20 inch range in the nets, with many fish exceeding 20 inches.”

Fishing shifts to the upper lake in April as hybrids attempt to undertake a spawning run. They’ll cruise the submerged creek channels, feeding on shad and invertebrates.

Anglers target hybrids with spoons and grubs, fishing the headwaters all the way up to the Eveleigh Boat ramp.

Locals also score big with night crawlers if the boat ramps go underwater in spring. “When it floods, a lot of anglers will fish the parking lots if they’re covered with water,” Rold said. “The hybrids are on the concrete feeding on worms. You can certainly catch the fire out of them if you’re fishing these areas.”

In summer, hybrids migrate to the main

wait around areas where the fish are feeding and stay in that area.

### **FISHTRAP LAKE Hybrid Striped Bass**

President Lyndon B. Johnson dedicated Fishtrap Lake in 1968. This was a flood control project which impounded the Levisa Fork of the Big Sandy River, creating a 1,130-acre lake in Pike County. Fishtrap is one of eastern Kentucky’s best fishing lakes.

“Fishtrap is the only reservoir in the area with a decent sized river feeding into it. A lot of the other lakes are fed by creek,” said Eastern Fisheries District Biologist Kevin Frey. “This provides more food and flow into Fishtrap.”

Netting studies performed at the lake reveal two-thirds of the hybrids are longer than 15 inches. About one-third of the hybrids top 20 inches while 5 percent surpass

anglers to be prepared for changing lake conditions created by spring rains.

“I generally carry some white and some black grubs when I’m fishing from the bank,” Frey said. “Usually one of these colors will work. When it’s clear, I’ll use the white grub. If it’s muddy, I’ll go more towards black.”

Summer anglers have opportunities to fish the jumps, those times when hybrids chase baitfish out of the water. Anglers should target the jumps with blade baits, Rattletraps or white curly-tailed jigs. Look for activity on the main lake near mud flats.

Some anglers prefer trolling a crankbait along the main lake in summer. Another effective method is dead drifting a chicken liver on a bare hook until a fish takes it.

### **KENTUCKY and BARKLEY LAKES Redear Sunfish**

Go west for the best redear (shell-cracker) fishing in the state. Both Kentucky and Barkley lakes in western Kentucky – better known for their outstanding crappie fishing – also offer good numbers of 8-10 inch redear sunfish.

Western Fisheries District Biologist Paul Rister said the best time to fish for redears is during the spring spawn. Water temperatures in the low to mid 70s trigger the spawning movement in late April through mid-May.

Gravel is the key to fishing success. Find gravel under the right conditions and you’ll find spawning fish.

Look for flooded clumps of yellow mustard flowers in the back of bays. “Mustard flowers grow in gravelly substrate, which is favored by redears,” Rister said. “The foliage draws snails and bugs, which the redears eat. You want to be fishing in front of these plants, along the edges.”

Anglers use 1/16-ounce spider jigs or a variety of live bait – including mealworms, wax worms and crickets – but Rister reports good luck using red worms threaded onto a hook. No matter the bait, the secret is fishing on the bottom. That’s where redears are feeding on bugs, snails and small mussels.

Flooding in the spring can cover shoreline lawns and create some unusual fishing opportunities. “Under flood conditions, there are fish all the way into the submerged yards,” Rister said. “That’s because there are



JOHN WILLIAMS PHOTO

**Biologists using gill nets to gauge hybrid striped bass populations found a significant number of 15-20 inch fish in Rough River Lake.**

lake, where they hang around points and bigger tributary-fed bays to feed on shad. Trolling these areas with shad-imitating lures is an effective strategy.

The jumps begin in late July and continue into August. These are times when hybrids corral shad against the surface, causing the baitfish to jump out of the water. Anglers fishing the jumps target hybrids with topwater lures or spoons.

Jumps are unpredictable and may occur at any time. Rold said it’s best not to try to chase jumps all around the lake. Instead,

24 inches.

“Most of the fish you’re going to catch are in the bigger size ranges,” Frey said. “We have a good range of fish in the 20-24 inch class and solid numbers of fish through the 26-inch range.”

A 20-inch hybrid weighs 4-5 pounds; a 26-inch fish weighs 8-10 pounds.

In spring, anglers follow the hybrids upstream to the lake’s headwaters and into the Levisa Fork itself. A common lure is a 3-inch grub matched to a lead-head jig weighted just enough to bump the bottom. Frey advised



**LAKE BARKLEY**

PHOTO COURTESY DAVID DICKENS



**CAVE RUN LAKE**

JOHN WILLIAMS PHOTO

**Left: Bonnierville resident David Dickens caught this 11½-inch shellcracker out of Lake Barkley. Above: Anglers should see an increased number of muskies around 36 inches at Cave Run Lake. Joe Mabry (left) and Kevan Lane hold muskies sampled from the lake.**

a lot of snails in the grass.”

If water rises into the trees, a small boat can work to an angler’s advantage. “One of the best places to fish is atop of gravel, since redear like the gravelly substrate,” Rister said. “Submerged gravel roads leading to docks or sheds are good places to fish.”

If the lake is at normal level and you can’t locate mustard flowers, then try fishing small pockets tucked into rocky shorelines. As a bonus, you might just pick up some black crappie.

#### **NOLIN RIVER LAKE, White Bass**

Rold, the Northwestern Fisheries District biologist, believes Nolin River Lake, a 5,795-acre reservoir located just north of Mammoth Cave National Park, is the state’s top pick for white bass.

“I don’t know of a better white bass population than in Nolin River Lake,” he said. “We have a very stable population and an excellent growth rate.”

Nolin River Lake is home to a sizable population of hefty white bass as well: netting studies conducted last fall show 40 per-

cent exceeded 14 inches. A 14-inch white bass weighs approximately two pounds.

White bass start their spawning run in April. At that time, the area around the Bacon Creek boat ramp is still riverine and a popular fishing spot. Anglers also concentrate on areas upstream of Bacon Creek, including Broad Ford and Wheeler’s Mill. These areas are located where bridges cross the river and feature pool-riffle habitat.

Good baits include ¼-ounce lead-head jigs matched with white or chartreuse 3-inch grubs. If it’s muddy, anglers may shift to reddish-orange colors. Anglers also enjoy some success using red worms or small crayfish as bait.

Night fishing for white bass is popular at Nolin during the summer. Anglers float lights to attract baitfish and then fish just above the thermocline – generally located at 14-16 feet – with minnows or jiggging spoons. Favorite spots to night fish include longer main lake points and rock walls.

#### **CAVE RUN LAKE, Muskellunge**

An average day for Fred Howes on Cave Run Lake is 150 muskies in the boat. Of course Howes, the Northeastern Fisher-

ies District biologist, has the advantage of being able to shock fish to the surface of this 8,270-acre lake near Morehead using an electrical current.

Howes said this is the telling year for a change that raised the minimum size limit for muskie from 30 to 36 inches in 2010.

“Since it takes three years for a muskie to reach 36 inches, the results should start being visible this year,” he explained. “From this point on, we will start to get a better handle on how the new size limit is working out.”

Muskie harvest is not heavy at Cave Run Lake. Howes noted that only 28 percent of the anglers who catch a legal-size muskie keep it. To help gauge the effect of the 36-inch size limit, a creel clerk will be interviewing anglers and looking at livewells at Cave Run Lake this year.

Cave Run is also undergoing an underwater facelift this year. Hundreds of pallets, trees, concrete blocks and other materials are being placed along a bare stretch of bank extending for nearly a mile. Altogether, habitat improvement projects are planned for six sites ranging from a half mile to a mile in length in the coming years.

“These projects should benefit a variety of fish species and increase the catch rate for anglers,” Howes said. ■