The detective's spring/summer lake review, '24

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For the second summer in a row, weedy conditions were common in many lakes. Below: Recent fish surveys are showing good fish survival, even in shallow lakes, following a mild past winter. Photos courtesy of Steve McComas

The 2024 spring/summer started out wet and hot. Above-average precipitation from April to June, along with higher-than-average temperatures through August were recorded. Then the rain spigot was turned off in September and October, and lake levels started dropping but the days were still warm. It was a roller-coaster season.

On the land side, early-summer conditions produced premature dandelion and lilac blooms, and even red-winged blackbirds were chirping earlier than usual. In lakes, the crazy summer produced interesting conditions as well.

Algae

Heavy rains in March and April and subsequent run-off produced mixed algal conditions in lakes.

If wetlands were common in the watershed, the wet spring conditions washed nutrients into the lakes from the reflooded wetlands that accumulated nutrients during the dry 2023 conditions. The excessive nutrient-loading from wetlands resulted in early algal blooms in some lakes.

However, in watersheds without significant wetlands, the excessive rain actually diluted lake nutrients and lakes were clearer than normal. With clear lake water, floating filamentous algae became a noticeable feature in a number of lakes.

With extended warm weather in September and October, summer-like weather has extended into fall, and I'm noticing late algal blooms in many lakes as well.

Aquatic plants

The early-summer heat kickstarted aquatic plant growth and, in particular, non-native curlyleaf pondweed.

As spring was approaching, it was predicted that curlyleaf pondweed would produce a bumper crop because of the light snowpack and good light penetration through the ice, into lakes. But it turned out, with heavy precipitation in March and April, that the increase in lake levels dampened sunlight penetration to the bottom, and curlyleaf pondweed did not take off in every lake as predicted.

But in an unusual twist, the early warmup of water actually stimulated native aquatic plant growth, and native plants sprouted ahead of schedule. The early start allowed extra growing days for native plants, and they produced abundant summer growth.

In 2023, low lake levels enhanced aquatic plant growth, whereas in 2024, it was early ice-out and warm weather that did the same. For the second summer in a row, it was a weedy plant year in many lakes.

The heat in September and October also extended the aquatic plant-growing season. I've seen some resprouting curlyleaf pondweed, along with Eurasian watermilfoil in a number of lakes.

However, as we get into more typical autumn weather, lake water temps will drop, aquatic plants will die back, and a new crop will come in next year.

Fish

It's hard to believe that just a couple of years ago, one of the longest, snowiest winters occurred (2022-23). Then, in a stunning reversal, we experienced one of mildest winters in memory in 2023-24.

Last winter offered a couple of benefits to the overall fishery: with poor ice, there was reduced ice-fishing pressure, allowing a better standing fish crop this summer. And with late lake ice and early ice-out, there was reduced winterkill in shallow lakes, allowing for good over-winter fish survival.



With adequate spawning year-classes in the past few years, fish numbers were there in 2024. For angling success, knowing how to work weedlines in weedy lake conditions was helpful.

If you have any lake questions, drop me a line. Maybe I can crack the case. <u>LakeDetective@gmail.com</u>



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