

# A Guide to Fishing Wolf Lake, Illinois Side

## Location and Directions

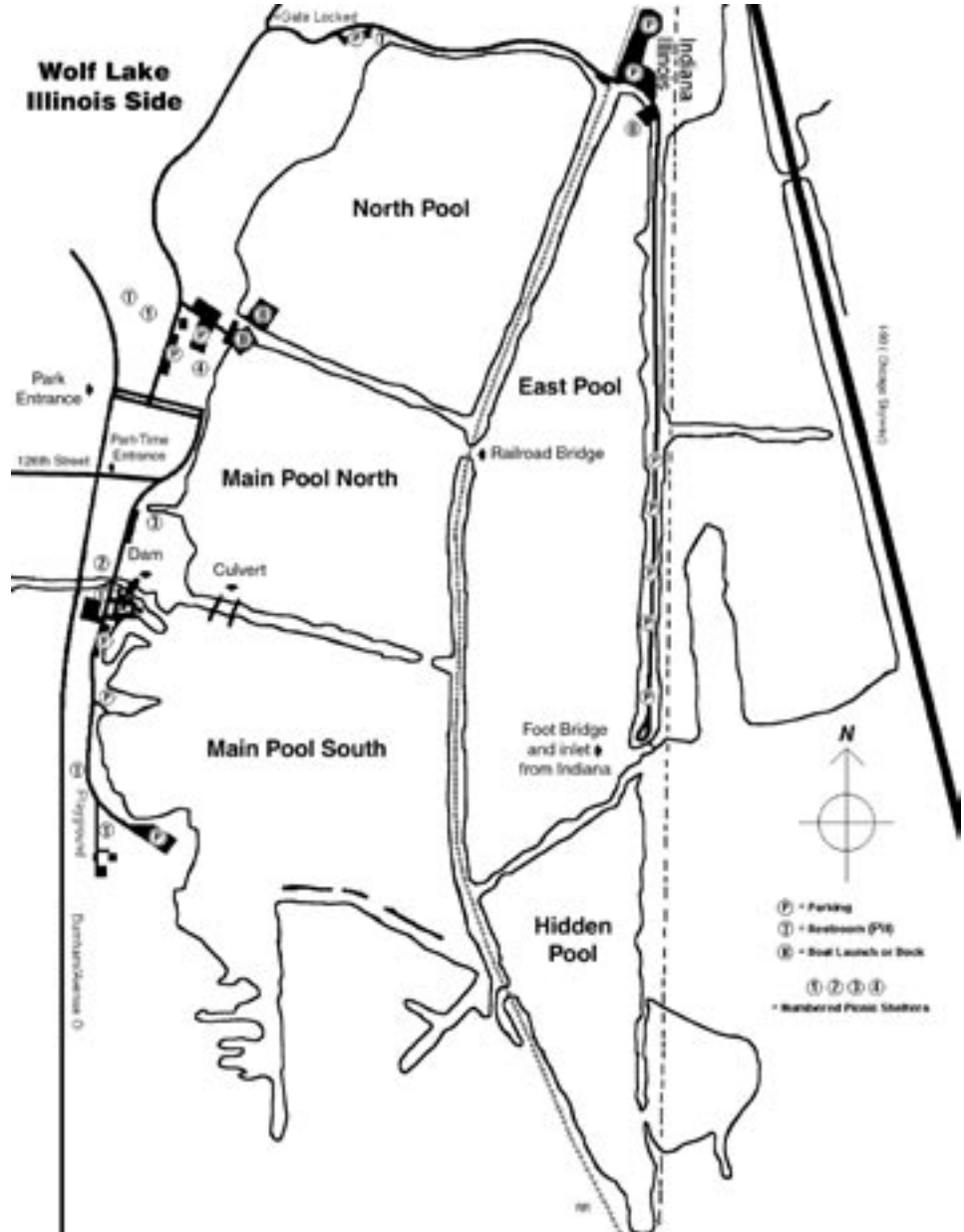
William W. Powers Conservation Area, 126th St. and Avenue "O" (Burnham Ave.), Chicago, Illinois. From the Bishop Ford Freeway (I-94) exist east on 130th Street. Go east to Torrence Ave. (be careful of the potentially rough railroad crossing just before Torrence). Go north on Torrence, past the Ford Motor Company plant, to the stoplight at 126th St. (just before the bridge over the Calumet River). Go right/east on 126th Street to the stoplights at Burnham Avenue (aka Avenue "O"). While you can enter the park by going straight, this entrance is not open all of the time, especially early in the day. The most direct route to the boat launches is to turn left/north on Burnham Ave. to the main park entrance.

## Size and Layout

The five pools of Wolf Lake on the Illinois side take up approximately 390 acres of surface area. The lake is divided into 5 "pools," with each pool being approximately 50-100 acres in size. These pools have been named by this writer as Hidden Pool, East Pool, North Pool, Main Pool North, and Main Pool South. Some locals refer to North Pool as "Clear Lake," but it appears that the pools have no official names.

## Water Description

Source is from the Indiana side of Wolf Lake with its source reportedly being from an underground culvert running from Lake Michigan to "The Corn Channel" on the Indiana side. Other sources claim that this culvert was blocked off years ago and that all of Wolf Lake is a seepage lake. Water enters the Illinois side from the Indiana side at the southeast corner of East Pool where it flows under a footbridge at the end of what is called State Line Dike, the dike that marks the boundary between Illinois and Indiana. The water flows under the railroad bridge on the dike between East Pool and Main Pool North. Water leaves the lake as it flows over a small concrete dam and into Indian Creek in Main Pool South. Water tends to be rather clear, especially in North Pool. The deepest portion of the Illinois side appears to be the opening in the dike between Main Pool South and Main Pool north



with a depth of about 12 feet. The water in Wolf Lake was about 18 inches higher until 1998 when the Illinois Department of Natural Resources removed several beavers and their dams that had been built across Indian Creek. The subsequent drop in water depth encouraged weed growth and changed fishing conditions.

## Vegetation and Cover

Lots of (and some say excessive) coontail and milfoil, but some cabbage weeds do exist. Lily pads are rather limited in number. The Illinois Department of

Natural Resources has placed numerous used Christmas trees into the lake over the years, especially into North Pool. Following a drop in water level in the late 1990s, vegetation became very thick, hampering boating, especially in the mid-to late-summer period. Herbicides have been used from time to time. While the Indiana side underwent a severe herbicide treatment in 2004, the Illinois side does limit applications with the last one taking place in 2001. Sandbars and piles of slag from area steel mills exist in various portions of the lake. A large area of reeds

exist in North Pool. Areas of riprap exist in the north end of North Pool, in a small portion of Main Pool North, and along both sides of the dike with the railroad tracks. The dikes were apparently built out of waste materials from the nearby steel mills and whatever this material is, it does not seem to attract fish in great numbers. Remnants of a number old duck blinds exist in the shallow portions of the lake so boaters should take care when going through these areas.

### **Access and Boat Launches**

The William W. Powers Conservation Area is open from 6 a.m. to sunset except for New Year's Day, Thanksgiving Day, and Christmas Day. Those within the park are expected to begin preparing to leave at least 30 minutes before sunset. The gates are locked at sunset. Boat launches exist on the far north end of East Pool, the southwest corner of North Pool and the northwest corner of Main Pool North. Access to Main Pool South is through a cut in the dike at the far southeast corner of Main Pool North/northeast corner of Main Pool South. The large culvert in the dike between Main Pool North and South is unsuitable for boating access. There is no known launch ramp at Hidden Pool. The ramp on East Pool is somewhat shallow and may not be suitable for all boats. An "unofficial" launch ramp exists in the state park's portion of the K Channel at the far end of Main Pool South, but this "ramp" should be used with extreme caution, if at all. The ramps at East Pool, North Pool, and Main Pool North all have adjacent docks that are removed at the end of the season. Fishing access is closed at the start of waterfowl season in early- to mid-October, reopening at the close of the season or on January 2, whichever comes first. During "warm" winters it is possible to launch your boat and fish open water on Wolf Lake. The lake is open to ice fisherman after the end of waterfowl season, but the park staff do not monitor the ice for thickness and you fish at your own risk. Boats with motors of 10 horsepower or less have no speed restrictions. Boats with motors of more than 10 horsepower are limited to "idle speed only." Persons with boats with electric motors can easily fish these pools all day, though an extra battery may be necessary and is recommended. Iceout on Wolf Lake tends to take place mid-March to April 1 and the lake warms quickly in the spring. Given its close proximity to Lake Michigan the phrase, "cooler by the lake" should be taken into account when dressing for the weather.

### **Park Facilities and Rules**

The concession stand in Main Pool South is not open on a regular basis (and in some years it is not open at all) so it is suggested you purchase your live bait elsewhere and bring your own food. There are no places in the park where one may purchase gasoline or any boating supplies or rent a boat. The park has a very strict prohibition on alcoholic beverages. While anglers arriving early in the day are not always searched, the Illinois Conservation Police and the Chicago Police will search cars arriving in the park later in the day, confiscating alcoholic beverages and issuing tickets. Anglers fishing the State Line Dike (the one marking the Illinois/Indiana border) are required to have licenses from both states, even if, for example, one's fishing line is in one state or the other.

### **History of the Park**

Established after World War II, the park is named after William W. Powers, an area legislator. Wolf Lake has been known since the earliest days of area history as it is a natural lake. There is much speculation as to the source of its name, but most claim it is because wolves lived near the lake during the days of the earliest settlers. Settlers, however would not recognized the lake now as the shoreline has been drastically altered and the size of the lake significantly reduced, mainly due to industrial plants from Chicago and northwest Indiana dumping their waste products in the adjacent wetlands and into the lake itself. The outlet has also been moved from its former location about a block south of its current one. The dikes were put in during the 1950s and on the south end of Main Pool South and east of the K Channel (behind the small islands) one can still see the remnants of the old Nike missile base that was in operation until the 1960s. The most famous incident involving Wolf Lake took place in 1924 when Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb dumped the body of their murder victim, Bobby Franks, at the railroad bridge that separates East Pool and Main Pool North. Leopold and Loeb were later convicted of this sensational crime. Various organized crime figures are reputed to have their final resting spot here in the lake.

### **The Fishery**

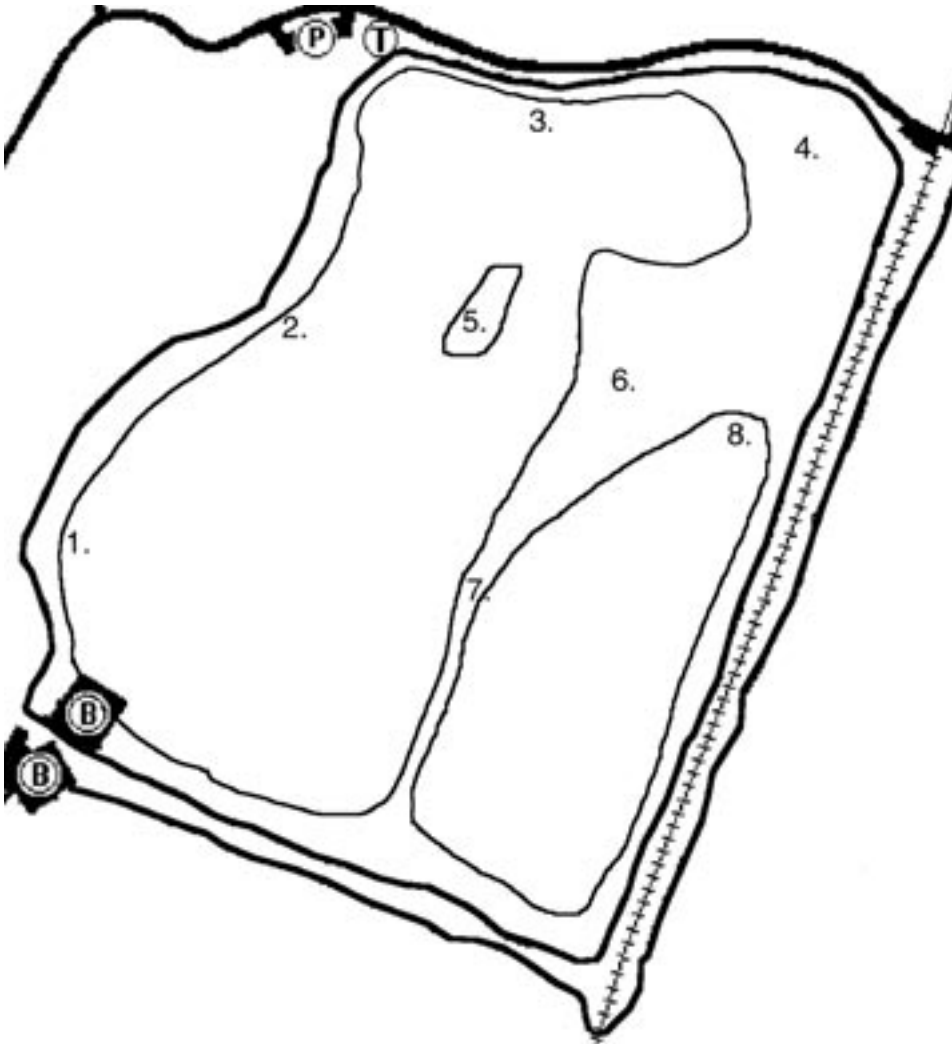
Primary gamefish are largemouth bass and northern pike. Largemouth bass are self-sustaining and reproduce well on their own. Largemouth exceeding 18 inches in length are rare but do exist. Most adult bass are in the 10-14 inch size range. Northern pike do not reproduce very

well and as a result the Illinois DNR has stocked pike from time to time. After a late 1990s stocking, the pike fishery exploded in 2000, but then dropped off. The state stocked pike into Wolf Lake in 2004, meaning another pike explosion might happen in 2006, 2007, or 2008. Occasional pike exceeding 30 inches are caught each year but most pike are less than 24 inches. Up until the late 1990s, the state stocked both tiger muskys and walleye into the Illinois side of Wolf Lake, but surveys showed that both species migrated to the Indiana side and the Illinois DNR stopped their stockings (Walleye are now stocked in the Indiana side by the Perch America organization and the Indiana DNR has conducted some musky stockings since 2000). Few, if any, of the walleyes and muskies stocked by the state of Illinois remain in the Illinois side. The state also stocks smallmouth bass from time to time, especially into North Pool. Smallmouth do appear to migrate throughout Wolf Lake, perhaps from Lake Michigan, from the Indiana side, or perhaps through the culvert that reportedly connects North Pool with East Pool. However, this culvert has not been located by this writer. Smallmouth do not appear to be available in large numbers or sizes outside of North Pool. The dominant panfish are bluegill and numerous small perch. The annual crappie run that takes place each year after iceout in the K Channels is a well-known local event, though the crappies do tend to run on the small size. The lake has many carp and numerous catfish. Reports do surface from time to time of a wayward trout or salmon finding its way into Wolf Lake (perhaps through the culvert that reportedly connects Lake Michigan with the Indiana portion of Wolf Lake, or perhaps also through either the Calumet River or the Chicago River and into Lake Calumet and then to Indian Creek). In about 1997 a lake sturgeon, originally tagged by the Wisconsin DNR near Green Bay, was caught by an angler in East Pool.

### **Fishing Techniques**

All regular largemouth bass presentations—especially those that do well in weeds—will work in Wolf Lake on both bass and pike. Regular presentations include shallow-running crankbaits (like a Mann's Minus One) that run a foot or so below the surface (a good spring tactic when the weeds are beginning to emerge), spinnerbaits (both tandem and single), surface baits (especially buzzbaits in the summer when the weeds get thick), and a Johnson Silver Minnow tipped with pork or plastic. Slower baits include a Texas rigged plastic worm, jigworm, a tube, or

## North Pool



a jig and pig work too, but with the pike, expect a biteoff or two

### Fishing Locations

The official maps that do exist are inaccurate although they do vaguely represent the bottom contours. And given the thick weeds that exist in the lake, it can at times be quite difficult to determine the precise bottom contours. A visit to Wolf Lake immediately after iceout and before the weeds begin to grow will prove educational. The maps that accompany this article show only the five-foot contours.

### Hidden Pool

This writer has never fished Hidden Pool and during his few visits to this pool, no other anglers were seen here. The quality of its fishing and bottom content is thus unknown. Access is probably best gained by carrying in a cartop boat or canoe.

### East Pool

Though this writer has not been able to

launch his boat onto East Pool, in walking the shorelines numerous times it appears that the deeper portions of the lake are the center one-half with the shallow portions being the northern and southern ends. Both ends do become weed-choked in the summer and in the winter, ice anglers are seen in the center section of the lake.

### North Pool

The overall pattern to fish North Pool is to fish the contours of the two deep holes that are seen on the map, casting toward the shallows. Numerous Christmas trees have been planted into this pool by the Illinois DNR, and while they may be decaying after several years underwater, several still exist and serve as fish attractors. Anglers should take the time to find these still existing fish cribs. The drop in the water levels on Wolf Lake in the late 1990s served to speed up weed growth in this pool. Where before there were little weeds in the deeper, 10-foot depths, now large mats of coontail and milfoil survive

and thrive. Limited recent fishing in North Pool has not given this writer the opportunity to explore any "deep water" fishing on this pool. It is quite likely that there are unknown patterns to fishing these deep water weed clumps. When fishing North Pool there are several areas of which the angler should be aware:

**Area One ("Big Rock"):** Located near the launch ramp, there is a large, granite, pinkish rock on shore. Thoroughly fish the adjacent area as there appears to be several fish cribs in the area.

**Area Two:** There is another old fish crib near this point.

**Area Three ("The Rip Rap"):** Fish this riprap and adjacent weeds along the roadway on the far north end of the pool. The better fishing is generally nearer the parking lot as fishing habitat seems to deteriorate as one moves east.

**Area Four:** This large expansive flat looks inviting, but there seem to be few weeds or other forms of cover on this flat. Fish will use this flat in the spring, but given the clear water are quite spooky and difficult to catch.

**Area Five ("The Submerged Hump"):** The area not just around this hump but also the weeds on the saddle that lead to the patch of reeds can be quite productive. If unsuccessful on the hump, concentrate on the nearby weeds. Do not think that the hump is the only spot in this area that produces fish.

**Area Six ("The Reed Patch"):** These reeds grow and get green toward late May/early June and are best fished under low light or cloudy conditions.

**Area Seven ("The Weeds on the Ridge"):** Coontail and milfoil grow on this portion of the ridge separating the two holes. Low light and cloudy days are best for this spot.

**Area Eight ("The Inside Corner"):** The relatively small area of this one inside turn is among the most productive portions of this pool. Take the time to fish this area a couple of times during a fishing trip.

**Overall Summary:** Bright skies and high sun can make a difficult fishing trip on this pool. However, given its small size, it can be easily fished in half a day and totally fished in less than a full day of fishing.

### Main Pool North

The most productive pool for bass and pike, it has a good mix of shallow flats and deep water, in addition to lots of shallow water cover.

**Area One:** This weedbed flat adjacent to the launch ramp is worth your time, though the shore is frequently occupied by bank anglers. If bank anglers are present,

## Main Pool North

you can go to the dropoff and fish there, beyond the range of their casts. If there are no bank anglers, cruise in a zigzag pattern through the weeds, noting the location of the two sand bars in the weeds.

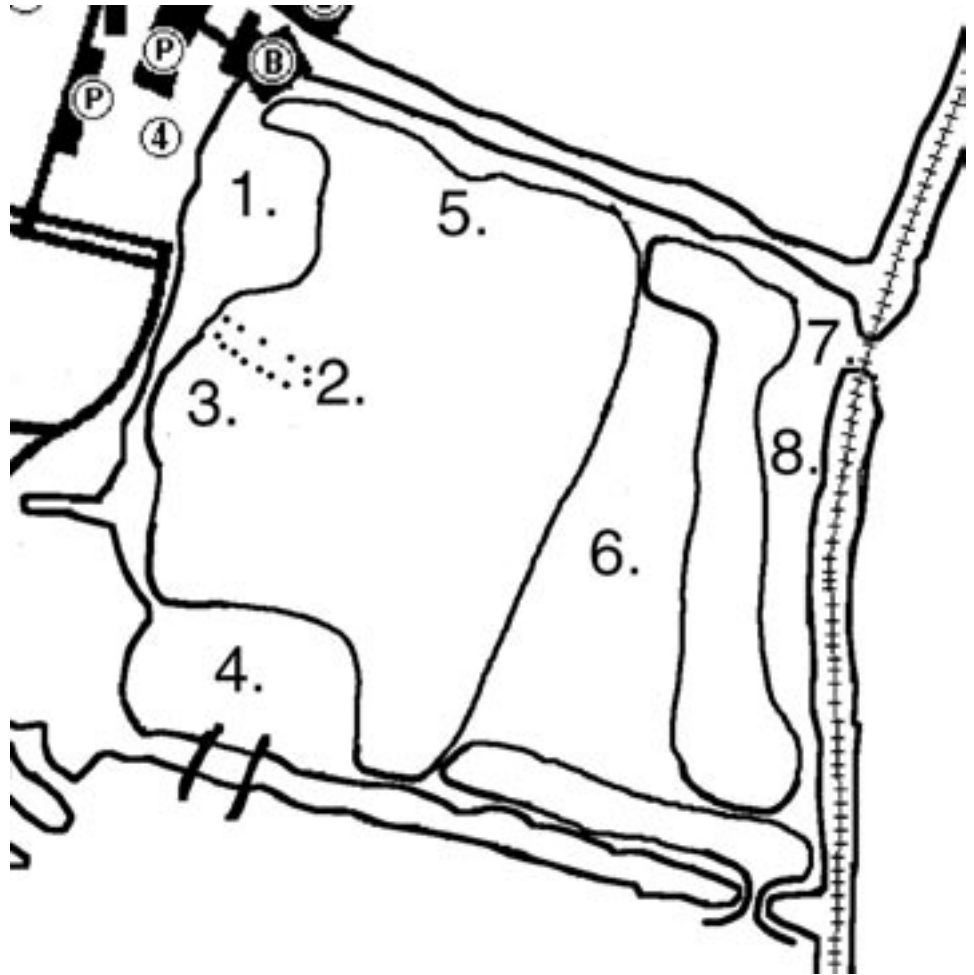
**Area Two (“The Weed Finger”):** In years when the weeds are not as thick, there is a distinct finger of weeds going at an approximately 45-degree angle to the flagpole. Work your lures into the north or shady side of the weeds and there should be some bass or pike there. Take the time to go all the way to the very end of the point and make a mental note as to its location.

**Area Three:** This area, which starts when The Weed Finger runs into the shore, has riprap along the roadway, adjacent weeds, and dropoff. The fish, however, just have not been there through the years. Perhaps there are deeper areas near here which will produce.

**Area Four (“The Corner”):** This weed flat has produced numerous bass and pike through the years. The northern portion that runs west to east away from the roadway has a weedline that has receded from the dropoff. Fishing here can be difficult, but as one gets closer to the outside turn, fishing improves. The saying is that if one catches a fish on the outside turn it will be a good day as the fish will generally be active. The eastern dropoff has produced most of the fish in this area. Anglers should bear in mind that like Area One there are areas in the weeds where one thinks one is on the edge of the weeds. Until one learns this portion of the weeds, take the time to retrace your path to ensure that one has fished all of the edges here.

**Area Five:** This intriguing rocky area was built up when slabs of concrete were put on the dike between North Pool and Main Pool South to limit erosion. Concrete fell to the deeper portion, producing a rocky point that is frequently occupied by bank anglers. Though this angler has fished Wolf Lake for nearly ten years, we’ve been unable to adequately fish this area to see if it is worth the effort.

**Area Six (“The Big Flat”):** The Big Flat deserves a lot of your time on any fishing trip to Wolf Lake. This large triangular area has not only large stretches of defined weedlines, but also shallow water cover with lots of open areas, alleys, and pockets. The north and southwestern outside turns are good fish producers, while the southeastern outside turn is usually obscured by weeds with an ill-defined weededge. Fish not only the outside edges and any adjacent deeper water weed clumps, but—especially on cloudy days—cruise the shallow flats



with surface lures or other fast moving baits. Numerous duck blinds have been constructed on this flat so old posts still remain just under the waterline. Exercise some caution when on this flat.

**Area Seven (“The Inlet”):** This inlet (where Leopold and Loeb dumped the body of their murder victim Bobby Franks in 1924) looks inviting and does attract a steady stream of bank anglers. However, shallow water cover is limited. Perhaps fish live in the deeper water adjacent to the dropoff.

**Area Eight (“The Railroad Weedbed”):** Before the 18-inch drop in water levels in the late 1990s, this was almost as productive as The Big Flat. Since then, fishing in this area has declined, though it is still worth checking. The edge between the railroad riprap and weeds produces bass and pike early and late in the season and dropoff fish are caught from time to time. The further east one goes (and closer to the entrance to Main Pool South) the more weed choked the lake becomes and the more ill-defined the edges are.

**Overall Summary:** If fishing one pool

on one fishing trip, make it Main Pool North.

## Main Pool South

The main drawback to Main Pool South is that while a portion is similar to Main Pool South, much of Main Pool South is flat, has water depths of three feet or less, and is choked with weeds in the summer. During spring when weeds are emerging, Main Pool South is worth your time. But by summer, weeds can get so thick that it is almost impossible to get your boat through them. When one finds productive areas on Main Pool South, note the location of the several sandbars that are in this pool to get your bearings.

**Area One:** Though located near the deepest portion of the Illinois side of Wolf Lake, this area just does not seem to hold fish like it should. The well-defined weed edge and deeper water should produce fish, but it doesn't. Other anglers may find out why.

**Area Two:** This large flat takes up perhaps half of Main Pool South. Anglers should look for the thicker clumps of

## Main Pool South

weeds and work those areas. In the spring, bass and pike do congregate in the far southern portion of Main Pool South near where the railroad tracks make a turn to the southeast. Though the water behind the small islands will support a boat, the water is too shallow and clear to hold fish.

**Area Three (“The Old River Channel”):** This area is the probable location of the Indian Creek channel. The channel is narrowest at the Main Pool North/South cut, but widens as one heads west. Spend your time casting to the south, not towards the dike, and follow the edge. This is generally a productive area in the summer if one can get through the weeds.

**Area Four:** This shallow sandbar is impassible except for all but the smallest of boats.

**Area Five:** This small bay is where bank anglers catch crappies in the spring. By summer, it becomes weed choked and difficult to fish from shore. When there was a boat rental on Wolf Lake years ago, the livery was located here.

**Area Six:** This small bay is known as a site for spawning bass. Please leave them alone and let them spawn. Getting to this site by boat will prove difficult due to the shallow sandbar in Area Four.

**Area Seven:** This mid-lake weededge is worth the effort in the summer if you can get there. In the fall, when weeds begin to die off, the thicker, remaining clumps will hold bass. This writer’s biggest pike and bass from the Illinois side were caught in this area in the fall.

**Area Eight (“The K Channel”):** Well known for its spring crappie run, it is little fished in the summer and fall except by shore anglers. The straighter portion of the “K” is deeper than the rest, while the adjacent channels are too shallow to hold lots of fish for any period of time. Boaters should note the sunken, rusty car in the channel. The “unofficial” and risky boat launch is located at the far southern end of the “K” channel.

