

## Explosive fishing in Union County

Near Creston, the state, county, and community came together to make that little hook at the end of your line a big winner.

**“This is a perfect day to fish.”**

The sky is electric blue on Three Mile Lake, a few miles northwest of Afton in Union County. It's spring, though this is the kind of blaring brightness that July usually deals out, hot under a canopy of shocking azure, scraped white here and there by barely-there clouds.

Bleached-out tines of flooded timber poke out from the water's surface, like sharp memories of a time before this southwest Iowa county turned farmland into lakeland, building a sustainable tourism hub out of three small but mighty fishing lakes—Three Mile, Twelve Mile and Green Valley.

Chris Larson, southwest Iowa DNR fisheries supervisor, perches in his “retirement boat,” a sleek black Lund, beautiful in its utility, much like the lake it's currently motoring through. He reels in a 6-pound walleye, admiring his catch through mirrored wraparounds. Tanned, sure, and appearing younger than his 50 years, Larson looks like he was born for this job, for this boat.

Fisheries biologists no longer subscribe to the “build it and fill it” mentality when creating a new or renovating an old lake. Biologists now take an entire ecosystem approach, taking into consideration habitat, community support, water quality and methods to reduce siltation.





He's catching something about every other cast with his red and white tube jig.

Around here, he says, that's a slow day.

"This walleye would be good eating, but it'll get bigger if I put it back," he says, returning the fish to its green-gray home.

It's all part of Larson's grand plan. Because of recent efforts aimed at improving water quality, if you're looking for fish, southwest Iowa is and will be for the foreseeable future, your best bet.

### The Making of a Lake

Union County is a good example of the DNR's broader focus on ecosystems, habitat and community when crafting a fishing hole.

It's a policy change that's taken place over the last few decades.

"Instead of just stocking fish and regulations, we look at the whole system," says Joe Larscheid, DNR fisheries bureau chief. "When you fix a whole system, you will have sustained, high-quality fishing."

Here's how it works:

**PHASE ONE:** When a popular fishing lake is no longer productive, the DNR and other partners study the watershed and put together a grass-roots committee to analyze what needs to be done to fix it—a team that should include stakeholders from area towns, the county, watershed landowners and any other interested party. They'll help outline a to-do list to improve the lake.

In an ideal situation, over the course of the next few years, the team enacts that to-do list, working together to improve the watershed, improve habitat and bring up lake water quality—in some cases the reservoir serves as a drinking-water supply for the area as well.

The equation is a little different for each scenario. In Union County, for example, the city of Creston and the Southern Iowa Rural Water Association approached the DNR for help improving the quality for their drinking water supply (the lakes), which would also boost the recreational use of the area and provide a sustainable source of tourism dollars and a better environment.

"People want clean water," says Larscheid. "They want to drink it, they want to swim in it, they want to boat and fish

The mecca of Iowa fishing might just currently reside in Iowa's Union County, where Three Mile, Twelve Mile and Green Valley lakes—all within 10 miles of each other—are offering some of the best fishing in southwest Iowa, if not the state. Cabins at Three Mile and the campground at Green Valley are often full, and Twelve Mile is a premiere fishing tournament destination.



Cabins at Three Mile Lake are run by the county conservation board.



in it. A clean, restored lake is an attraction for everybody.”

**PHASE TWO:** Once the surrounding area has a better land and habitat management plan in place, the DNR moves on to the lake itself, improving access, increasing amenities such as fishing jetties, boat ramps and habitat features, and underwater structures such as trees, rock reefs, spawning beds and other places that attract fish. Those are documented with GPS locations and contour maps posted on the DNR website with pin-point precision.

“It all starts with a dam that’s engineered to the right size for the watershed that flows into it,” says Larson, casting from the Lund on Three Mile Lake, which was engineered back in the mid 1990s when it had become muddy and over-run with invasive fish like common carp. A dam was built on Three Mile Creek, which feeds the lake, with a large pipe that includes a shut-off valve to control water levels. The pipe was closed, diverting the creek’s water, and the lake dried up enough to add fish habitat and make changes to the lakebed before opening the pipe and refilling the lake.

That’s when restocking began.

Larson says they stock bluegill and catfish in the fall, and walleye in the spring. Largemouth bass go in during early summer.

Because the predators come in late, and there’s very little competition for food, fish grow unusually fast. Three or four years after restocking will be the best year those lakes will see—lots of big fish, lots of fun. Eventually, the fish in the lake find a balance.

And guess where Union County sits right now? Right in the middle of the boom time.

That’s great news for traveling anglers and the surrounding community.

“It’s a long-term investment that pays off quickly,” says Larscheid. “The legislature has given us money for lake restoration, and we don’t go out and hire more staff with that. Those moneys remain right on the ground, fixing these systems.

“When everybody in a community comes together, it’s really fun to watch. That’s why we have explosive fishing in Union County.”





Green Valley (shown here) and Twelve Mile lakes are two of the hottest fishing lakes going thanks to recent renovations that added habitat, improved water quality and replaced an out-of-balance fish population. Both are at or near their peak fishing opportunities. Three Mile, still producing good catches of a variety of species, will be on the renovation list soon to keep desirable fish in and invasive species out.



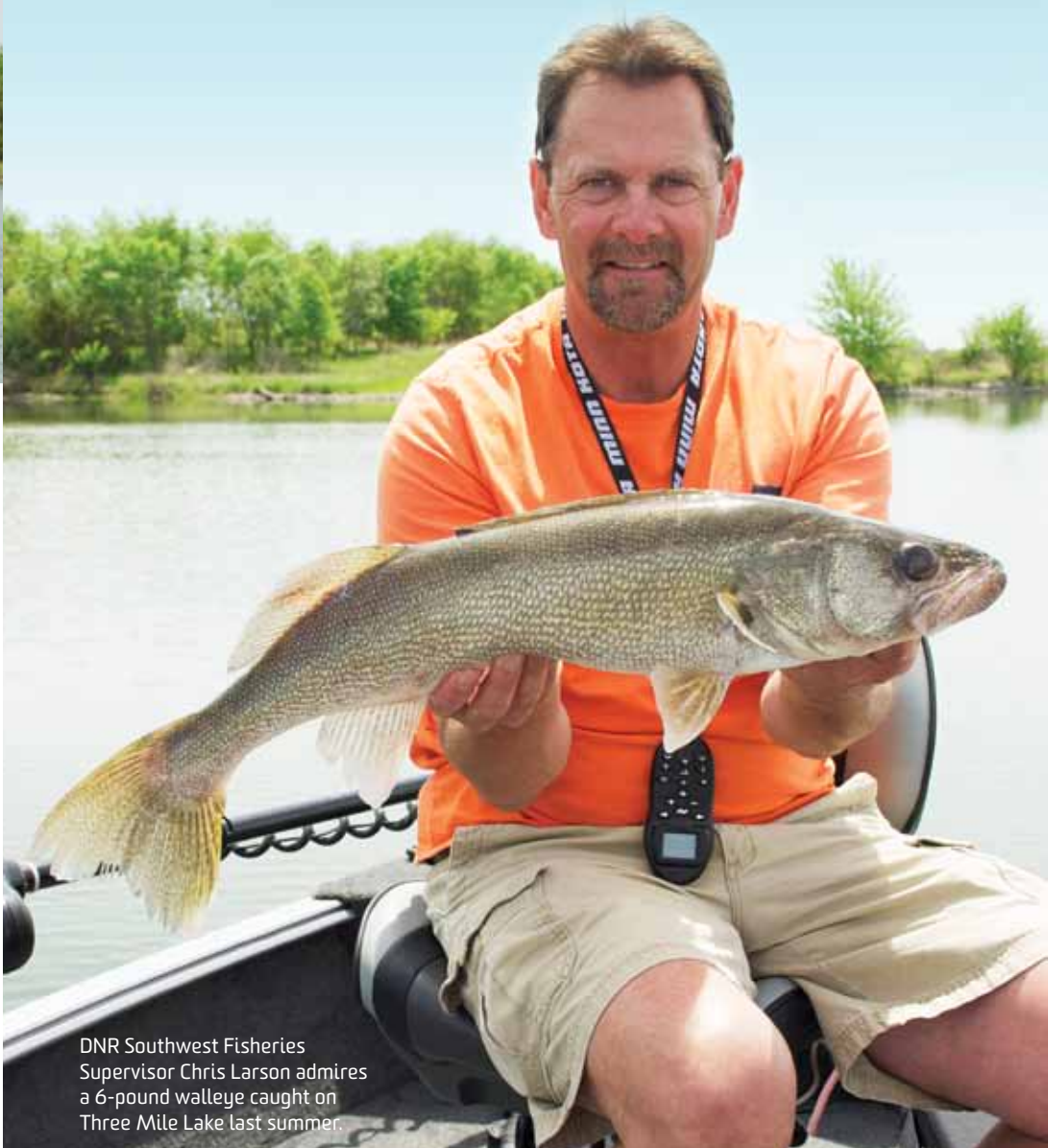
### Nice fish, but can I eat it?

Here's the deal on fish consumption, according to the DNR: In the vast majority of Iowa water, including Union County, you'll catch high-quality fish that you can eat a few times a week. In fact, the Iowa Department of Public Health recommends eating fish several times weekly as part of a healthy diet. Larson says he and his staff regularly conduct random contaminant testing for mercury levels, which comes from airborne emissions of coal burned to produce electricity.

The upshot is that Iowa fish, unless on the watch list on the DNR website, are edible.

Now, if you're a toddler, or you're pregnant, stay on the safe side and don't eat more than one meal per week. But you're safe with panfish such as bluegill, crappie and perch.

It's the predators that eat the little ones—walleye, bass, catfish—that tend to have higher levels of mercury, because they accumulate it over time when they eat other, smaller fish.



DNR Southwest Fisheries Supervisor Chris Larson admires a 6-pound walleye caught on Three Mile Lake last summer.

### Getting Around

Three Mile is the biggest of the three lakes, but it's actually on the wane after a re-stocking boom. Though you'll still reel in some beauties, including walleye, bluegill, crappie, channel catfish, muskie and wipers, you should also try its neighbors, all within a 10-mile vicinity.

Green Valley State Park, 2.5 miles northwest of Creston, might just be the state's perfect fishing park right now. With small cabins and camping right on the water, it's a great base camp for anglers and families.

The 390-acre lake has fishing jetties, boat ramps, a 10-mile lake circle trail and a section of shoreline with 24-hour fishing. A three-mile paved multi-use trail connects the park to Creston, where you can have a nice cup of coffee, peruse a greenhouse, do some shopping and tour a restored train depot with an art museum, model railroad and presidential doll collection.

"We're starting to see some of the wives coming in for the day during fishing tournaments, when they're bored out of their gourds," says Cynthia Wolf, co-owner of the Upper Crust, a lunch spot and pastry shop on the main

drag. She says about 40 percent of her business is fishing-related in summer—often from the many tournaments that out-of-staters love.

"We have Wi-Fi, coffee and cookies," says Wolf. "It's a great place to sit and chit-chat for a while."

Most find their way around the block to the antiques shops, fabric and clothing stores and an old-school hobby shop. One vintage shop re-purposes old things into funky designs that would make great gifts, such as glassware, garden totems and other salvage.

Back at the park, a dad shore fishes with his daughter as she hunts frogs.

"Pretty much every lake in southern Iowa is man-made," says Larson. "Pretty much every one of them is a great addition to their communities."

Ellen Gerharz, executive director of the Creston Chamber of Commerce, says you can see the economic impact just hanging around on a summer weekend.

"All you need to do is drive by the motels in town and look at the boats that are in their parking lots," says Gerharz. "The campgrounds at both Three Mile Lake and

A state report spanning 2005-2010 had Creston and Union County as one of the fastest growing areas in the state. Job growth during that time was estimated at 10.5 percent, the second highest in Iowa. Many community leaders point to the recreational opportunities at Green Valley, Three Mile and Twelve Mile lakes as part of the reason for that growth. A check of local hotels and boat ramps will find them full of boat trailers, and the downtown shops attract spouses of tournament anglers. Shop owners estimate as much as 40 percent of their summer business is fishing related. Spouses stop by downtown shops for a cup of coffee, a bite to eat and a tour of a restored train depot with an art gallery, model railroad display and presidential doll collection.



Green Valley State Park are usually full, especially on the weekends, and the demand on the eight year-around cabins at Three Mile is tremendous.”

### The Death of a Fishery

Four miles east of Creston, Twelve Mile Lake is about the hottest fishing spot around right now.

It wasn't always this way.

During its peak in the 1990s, Twelve Mile held nearly 30 fishing tournaments each year. Over the past decade, an overpopulation of common carp stirred up sediment, turning the formerly clear water a murky brown or algae pea green. In a farming community, there's always some soil loss, including excess nitrogen and phosphorus from farm chemicals that wash into the lake and produce algae blooms. In addition, as lakes naturally age and decrease in depth, game species go down, and common carp and bullheads grow abundant. There's little fish managers can do but start over once carp get a foothold in a lake.

Eventually, Twelve Mile became a played-out amenity that no one was using anymore.

“Lake aging is a natural process, but lots of things accelerate that,” says Larscheid. “Every few years you have to go in and fix that, or every lake becomes a wetland and then, eventually, land.”

The DNR came in, with the help of the surrounding communities, and put into place that local grassroots effort to revitalize the watershed, and the lake's water quality improved. Within a few years, the visitation rate increased more than tenfold. The tournaments are back, too.

The continual grooming process helps keep this sustainable tourism and healthy recreation alive in Union County.

“Anything we can do to improve fish habitat within a budget, we do,” says Larson.

Back on the lake, Larson says Three Mile will need help soon, to keep the desirable fish in, and the invasives out. With habitat in place already, the DNR will simply kill out the fish population, then restock with preferred sport species.

“We've been fairly aggressive in not tolerating poor fishing and poor water quality,” Larson says.

“I've lived down here for 25 years, and the fishing has never been better in southwest Iowa.” 🐟

BOAT TRAILER PHOTO BY BEN CURTIS



# Lost In Iowa

## How the DNR manages fish in a lake

If the fish population is out of balance, the DNR will kill it out and start fresh with restocking.

The DNR uses rotenone, a sub-surface spray applied via boat, manufactured from a South American root that blocks a fish (but no air-breathing lake dwellers such as turtles or frogs) from taking oxygen in through its gills, suffocating it. Though larger companies process the root, adding other ingredients for lake application, it's largely the same thing natives use to capture fish, smashing the root against a rock and swishing it in water to immobilize them, according to Larson.

Depending on water temperatures and sunshine, rotenone naturally dissipates from water anywhere from seven days to two weeks, he says. "It's a very quick-acting chemical that's the least harmful to the environment," says Larson.

## 3 LAKES: A SNAPSHOT

### THREE MILE LAKE

**880 acres**

**Motor restrictions:** No size restriction, except no jet boats on the south part of the lake (marked with buoys). North part of the lake also has no size restriction as long as they operate at no-wake speed.

**Amenities:** Boat access, fishing jetty, accessible pier and facility, picnic area, beach, trails, playground, restrooms, camping, hard surface boat ramp.

The largest of the three Union County lakes, Three Mile is also the newest. Because it came later to the angling game, the DNR had a better idea of what works for area fishing, and it's very nicely planned for the proliferation of fish habitat. Because of its size, it's the only muskie lake in southwest Iowa, carrying specimens up

to 45 inches in size, as well as a sizeable wiper population, another exciting sport fish. Two problem fish have begun to show up, common carp and yellow bass, and their populations are expanding to impact the sport fish species, which will eventually lead to renovation in the next few years.

### TWELVE MILE CREEK LAKE

**635 acres**

**Motor restrictions:** No size restriction, but must operate at no-wake speed.

**Amenities:** Boat access, fishing jetty, accessible facilities, restrooms, hard surface boat ramp.

The fishing in this lake is really dynamic after its 2006 renovation. Anglers are catching bluegill, crappie, largemouth, walleye and catfish—and plenty of them.

The water quality is excellent.

### GREEN VALLEY LAKE

**338 acres**

**Motor restrictions:** No size restriction at no wake speed except for ski area.

**Amenities:** Boat access, fishing jetty, accessible pier and facilities, picnic area, beach, trails, playground, restrooms, camping, hard surface boat ramp.

This is the area's most recent renovation, and the big makeover included lots of local buy-in to create good conservation practices. It's the most clear-looking lake of the three, and smallest, with a diverse population that's peaking right now.

To find out more about the area, visit: [unioncountyiowatourism.com](http://unioncountyiowatourism.com)

### To Make a Lake: What Citizens Can Do

Of the 131 public lakes in Iowa, only 35 received top-priority billing from the DNR's restoration study in the early 1990s. (If the DNR restored every one of those top 35 lakes, it would cost somewhere in the neighborhood of \$250 million, according to fisheries chief Joe Larscheid.)

The legislative support of \$5 to \$10 million each year helps toward restoration efforts, but because the DNR works with limited funding, the bureau prioritizes lakes that give the state the most bang for its buck. Measures include: What's the surrounding landscape like? How much room is there for improvement? How popular is it? Is it big enough to support a visiting population?

Unfortunately, most lakes must rely solely on local efforts to remain vital and well cared for.

If you have an underused lake in your area, contact your regional fisheries biologist and ask: What can be done to make it better?

Your regional fisheries biologist should have ideas for what you can do locally.

One thing we all can do is purchase an Iowa fishing license, which provides the sole source of money for lake habitat work at some state-owned lakes, such as boating amenities, bathrooms, docks, trails and jetties. (Hunting license dollars pay for land management.)

