

HOW'S THE

STEELHEAD

FISHING GOING TO BE THIS YEAR?

by Chuck Murray

The Fish & Boat Commission expects another good year for steelhead. The reason we have confidence in that statement is because of the Commission's steelhead stocking program. The average annual Commission stocking rate over the last decade has been 1.1 million steelhead smolts per year. Local sportsmen's cooperative nurseries have added another 120,000 steelhead smolts annually. The 1.1 million steelhead stocked in Pennsylvania waters accounts for more than half of the 2 million steelhead stocked in Lake Erie by all agencies combined.

The process begins when Commission hatchery staff collects steelhead brood fish from Trout Run or Godfrey Run. These nursery streams provide adult spawning steelhead for the perpetuation of Pennsylvania's steelhead program. The Commission is the only Lake Erie agency that collects brood stock from Lake Erie. We classify the progeny as a naturalized Lake Erie strain of steelhead, but they are actually a composite of many rainbow trout strains that were historically, and are presently stocked, in the Great Lakes.

After the Commission collects adult steelhead from the nursery streams, the fish are spawned at the Fairview State Fish Hatchery. The fertilized eggs are disinfected and then shipped to the Tionesta State Fish Hatchery, where they are incubated. After hatching, the majority of the fry (600,000) are retained and raised at the Tionesta hatchery. Tionesta also distributes steelhead fingerlings to the Fairview hatchery (300,000), the Linesville hatchery (100,000), and the local sportsmen's cooperative nurser-



Photo-Curt Hiemsel

ies (120,000). These fish are raised in the hatcheries for about 15 months. They reach an average size of 7 inches. Each March, the Commission stocks the Lake Erie tributaries with these seeds of a trophy trout fishery.

The yearling steelhead smolts emigrate into Lake Erie in late spring as the stream water warms. After two summers in the lake, these fish return to the streams as adults and provide trophy trout angling opportunities through this unique put-grow-take fishery. Because stocking rates remain fairly constant from year to year, variability of year-class abundance is minimized, and the fishery demonstrates less pronounced variations in annual catch rate.

However, we do see fluctuations in angler catch rates. Biological and physical factors influence annual variations in catch rates. The abundance of adult walleyes and avian predators can have a measurable effect on smolt mortality, thus affecting the intensity of future spawning runs.

The weather also contributes to variations in annual catch rates. As

steelhead stage for their annual spawning run, a cool, wet fall followed by a warm, wet winter is the best scenario for a good steelhead season. Good base flows and enough intermittent precipitation to keep the water slightly tinted usually result in good steelhead fishing. Fish will continue to enter the streams and migrate upstream if the stream flows are ample. If there is little rain and stream flows are notably reduced, steelhead often drop back to the lower, deeper reaches of the streams, or they may move back into the lake altogether.

One final factor contributing to the sustained quality of Pennsylvania's steelhead fishery is the catch-and-release ethic of many tributary anglers. Creel surveys conducted in 1993 estimated that tributary anglers released about half of the steelhead they caught. A follow-up stream survey conducted a decade later shows that the release rate increased to 79 percent.

The Commission remains committed to providing a quality steelhead fishery on Lake Erie. In addition to providing this unique fishery, the Commission is also securing public access to the resource. With the inception of the Lake Erie stamp, the Commission is actively acquiring additional access to the most popular steelhead streams through easements and purchases with money secured through this earmarked funding source. Areas are set aside that will provide access to quality steelhead fishing in perpetuity.

I'll say it again: We expect the steelhead fishing to be good this year and for years to come. ☐

Chuck Murray is a fisheries biologist in the Commission's Lake Erie Research Unit.