



# Beyond Steelhead:

## The *Other* Lake Erie Tributary Runs

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“Whaddaya have on there?” someone on the bank at the Elk Creek access, just upstream from Lake Erie, called to me.

“It’s a river monster!” I cried. “Or, maybe a lake monster. It’s heading back toward the lake and taking all my line with it.”

I was fishing a lead-headed jig with a soft plastic twisty-tailed body, standing as far along the bank below the parking area as I could and casting downstream. The flow was slow and the water deep, well over my head. From my position, Elk Creek makes a bend to the right and then comes back to the left to meet the Great Lake.

I had hooked something else big, briefly, that started a purposeful, can’t-be-stopped swim toward Lake Erie, from

which I supposed it had come. Nothing that large lives in Elk Creek fulltime. With my medium-action spinning rod and 6-pound-test line, I felt woefully underequipped, like I was trying to haul in a truck, and it got off.

Now, I’d hooked it again, or maybe its twin. This time, I was better prepared, not in equipment but in the way I was playing the fish. Just enough pressure, then letting it run. Little by little, it tired. I hoped to at least get a look at it before it broke the line.

An onlooker jumped off the bank with a long-handled net and scooped the fish up when its final slog took it close to shore. It was heavy, big, wide and whiskered. It was a channel catfish. My fishing buddy lofted it with his digital scale, and

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the catfish registered almost 18 pounds. I posed for photos, and we gingerly unhooked it and eased it back into the creek.

For years, steelhead have received all the glory when it comes to fishing the Lake Erie tributary streams. But, these creeks experience additional fish runs that many anglers may not know exist. Some of the fishable species and some of the oddities that are just worth seeing come to the tributary streams for spawning. Other runs are forage fish, and they draw lake predators into the creeks.

When the tributary waters warm in the spring and seasonal rains sufficiently raise water levels, a succession or concurrent runs of fish enter them. Some seem to stay in the slower, deeper sections near the stream mouths, especially at Elk and Walnut creeks, while others travel a surprising distance, perhaps several miles, upstream in both the west and eastside tributaries.

"You never know what you will catch. Spawning time is cued to water temperature. Many fish utilize the tributaries' shallow delta areas, out in the lake, for feeding and spawning. And, if they venture into the stream mouth, they may find that the tributaries offer a variety of habitats, from fast running water to slack water," said Chuck Murray, Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission fisheries biologist for Lake Erie research.

Almost any of Lake Erie's diverse fish species may be caught or at least seen in its feeder streams. Smallmouth bass by the hundreds run from the lake into Erie County tributaries to spawn when conditions are right. Late spring and early summer offer an



*This channel catfish was caught on Elk Creek, Erie County.*



*A freshwater drum may even be found while fishing these tributary waters.*

Then, the creek clears and drops noticeably, the water temperature rapidly rises and all is done. The carp and suckers that have been on a spawning frenzy turn fishtail and leave for the lake. The smallmouth bass and rock bass move out. The baitfish and odd fish leave, too. Suddenly, the tributaries are nearly empty, especially in the upstream, flowing-water sections.

*Elk Creek, Erie County, is the largest of the Erie County tributary streams.*

exceptional opportunity for anglers to hook up with lots of big smallmouth bass fresh from the lake. The window of opportunity opens quickly, is short and slams shut.

For the smallmouth bass to come in and the run to fish well, the weather must be warm and getting hotter. The creek must rise and begin to fall. The stream mouth must be flushed free of the gravel that often blocks it, piled there by Lake Erie wave action. It's hit-or-miss, but if anglers hit it right, they will have smallmouth bass fishing they will never forget.

Before the bass, big white suckers and redhorses arrive. With them come herds of hefty carp, chunky rock bass and maybe more. You may see some of Lake Erie's unusual species such as spotted gar, quillback and an occasional freshwater drum. The creek may become thick full of fish, especially when the emerald shiners swim in. This baitfish can number in the thousands.

When the runs are in, sport can be spectacular. While smallmouth bass will hit spinners, plugs, jigs and streamer flies, especially when the water level is up, they will devour all the lively minnows you throw to them, even when the creek drops. One year, I caught and released more than 40 bass in two days, fishing live minnows.

Ply the deep holes and the deeper runs with a minnow under a bobber or bounced along the bottom and a small splitshot. When the water is low and clear, go to lighter line and no weight at all. Spot the bass and cast to them. The chubby rock bass will eat all the minnows that the smallmouth bass doesn't get first. If there is a channel catfish in the bottom of the hole and your minnow wanders near it, you may be in for a real fight.

If you aren't interested in bass action, take several cans of corn, some small red worms and walk until you find fish. Carp will entertain you as you sit streamside, fishing these

offerings on small hooks on the bottom. Several kernels of canned corn cover a size 6 hook nicely for carp. A single, BB-sized splitshot is sufficient to hold the bait in place. Carp that ascend the tributaries can be big. A friend caught one that weighed nearly 20 pounds.

For white suckers, fish worms on size 10 or 12 hooks. Fly anglers after spring steelhead often catch them on streamers and egg patterns, and they may also hook drum. Spotted gar have no open season and must be released if inadvertently caught.

Before going, check the Lake Erie and tributaries regulations in your *Pennsylvania Fishing Summary* or online for seasons and creel limits. A Lake Erie permit or Combination Trout/Salmon/Lake Erie permit is required for fishing the tributary streams.

Beyond steelhead, the other Lake Erie tributary fisheries would attract more anglers if they were predictable, but the variables are many. They don't always happen and seldom occur on the same date each year. But, if you watch the weather forecast and catch things right, you'll likely tie into many big fish of various species in a day, including tackle-testing "monsters." ☐



*Lake Erie tributary carp can be big. Use corn or red worms on small hooks.*