



# LAKE ERIE BROWN TROUT PROGRAM IS PROGRESSING

photo-PFBC archives

*by Mike Bleech*

Brown Trout have been causing increasing excitement at Lake Erie and its Pennsylvania tributaries. The number of large Brown Trout in the 12-pound to 15-pound class has been increasing. These fish are providing a welcome variety to the annual steelhead run.

Unlike steelhead, which are primarily spring spawners, Brown Trout are fall spawners. However, some Brown Trout remain in creeks through spring and near creek mouths as long as feeding conditions are right.

The current Lake Erie “Put-Grow-Take” Brown Trout Program began in 2009 when it was decided that Pennsylvania’s Lake Erie salmonid stocking program would

add 100,000 yearling Brown Trout to the 1 million plus Steelhead yearlings stocked annually in the Pennsylvania tributaries and Presque Isle Bay.

That Brown Trout stocking objective of up to 100,000 has yet to be met, with 87,000 stocked in 2009; 81,000 in 2010; 76,000 in 2011; 59,000 in 2012; 70,000 in 2013; and 73,000 in 2014. Egg availability and hatchery biosecurity have been a couple of issues that have kept the stocking levels below target. Still, Brown Trout catches have steadily increased in various annual fisheries assessment programs in the lake as well as the tributaries.

According to Chuck Murray, fisheries biologist with the Lake Erie Research Unit, the initial objectives were to enhance the fall

stream fishery and open lake boat fishery. It seems to be working.

Brown Trout eggs slated for Lake Erie stocking come from the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, which has a disease-free strain that assists in meeting the stocking criteria of the Great Lakes Fish Health Committee.

“That’s why we’ve been getting all our eggs from them. Without them, I don’t think we’d have a program now,” said Murray. “The last time a major Brown Trout stocking effort was made was when a strain of Brown Trout called Seeforellen were stocked here and elsewhere with the hope that they would grow larger than the Brown Trout we already had. That effort was not successful.”

Brown Trout have occupied Lake Erie for many years, perhaps longer than steelhead, which began as domestic Rainbow Trout. Salmon, both Coho Salmon and Chinook Salmon, were stocked in Lake Erie beginning in the mid-1960s to deal with an overabundance of Alewives and invasive species. Although Brown Trout were part of the picture then, more so in New York than in Pennsylvania, salmon overshadowed them.

Now with salmon out of the Lake Erie picture, Brown Trout have taken on greater significance.

“This has been a cooperative venture,” said Murray.

At the beginning of the program, a couple of local Erie area cooperative nurseries (3-C-U Trout Association and the Wesleyville Conservation Club) raised half of the Lake Erie Brown Trout. The Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission (PFBC) raised the other half. When a fin clipping study showed that the cooperative nursery Brown Trout had a better return rate by a 3 to 1 ratio, the cooperative nurseries agreed to stock all of the Brown Trout in 2014 and 2015. The disparity in return rates was primarily because PFBC stocked their Brown Trout in the fall, at 12 months old (due to logistical constraints); while the cooperative nurseries stocked their Brown Trout in the spring, at 18-19 months old. Not only are spring stocked Brown Trout older and larger; they also don’t have to endure the rigors of the Erie tributaries during the winter. Currently, PFBC is raising some Brown Trout for 2016 stockings with the hope of planting them in the spring. Holding trout longer in raceways is an added expense, but the fin clip data clearly showed that the adult returns of spring stocked yearlings are significantly higher.



Photo: Mike Bleach

*Brown Trout are being stocked into Trout Run, Erie County, by hose from a stocking truck.*



Photo: courtesy of Edward A. Prince II

*Edward A. Prince II, Aliquippa, caught and released this 25-inch Brown Trout on Elk Creek, Erie County. He used a minnow as bait.*



photos - Mike Bleech



*These are some of the Brown Trout being stocked in the second year of the current Lake Erie Brown Trout Program.*

*A total of 73,000 Brown Trout were stocked in 2014.*

Results of the Lake Erie Brown Trout Program can be seen in PFBC's Annual Biggest Fish List, which lists the five largest entries for each species from PFBC's Angler Award Program. Four of the top five Brown Trout registered in 2014 were from Lake Erie tributaries. The largest, 11 pounds, 12 ounces, was caught from Twentymile Creek in November.

Others were 11 pounds, 8 ounces, from Elk Creek; 11 pounds, 4 ounces, from Walnut Creek; and 9 pounds, 6 ounces, from Sixteenmile Creek.

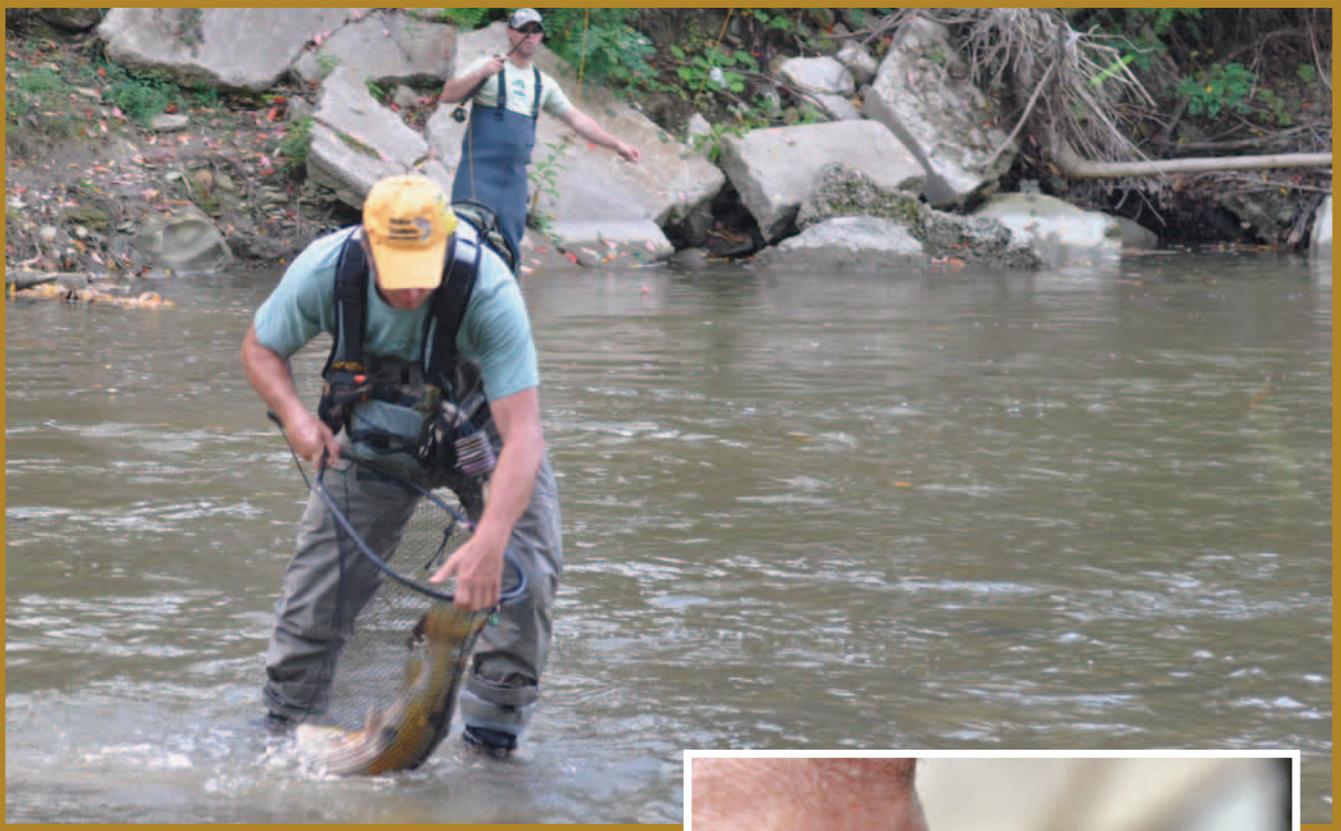
Four of the top five were also Lake Erie Brown Trout the previous year, ranging in size from 13 pounds, 8 ounces, to 16 pounds, 4 ounces.

In 2012, four of the top five Brown Trout were Lake Erie fish, and in 2011, three of the top five.

"Half of the Brown Trout now being registered in PFBC's Angler Award Program are coming from Lake Erie," said Murray.

Pennsylvania's state record Brown Trout, 19 pounds, 10 ounces, was also a Lake Erie fish, but it was caught in 2000, before the current Lake Erie Brown Trout Program. This program could produce a new state record Brown Trout within the next few years.

Of course, what anglers want to know is how to catch lake run Brown Trout. Anglers who are targeting steelhead catch most of these trout. The top five Angler Awards entries show that several of these trout were caught by fly anglers, and anglers using eggs, egg sacks and egg skein. Minnows have also been effective. Obviously, steelhead fishing tactics will catch Brown Trout.



*Steelhead fishing tactics will catch Brown Trout.*

However, some adjustments can be made to specifically target Brown Trout. Nightcrawlers may increase Brown Trout success. When targeting big Brown Trout, nightcrawlers are often an angler's favorite bait in most areas. Just why Lake Erie Brown Trout are attracted to nightcrawlers is a mystery, since the first nightcrawler one of these Brown Trout sees is probably an angler's bait. But take them, they certainly do. Possibly, they like the aroma of nightcrawlers.

Use either smaller nightcrawlers or nightcrawler halves. Currents causing drag on the line can alert Brown Trout that something is wrong, and they may drop the bait. Also, letting a fish take the bait too long may result in a fatal hook set. If the Brown Trout will be kept, this is not a problem. But, most serious trophy Brown Trout anglers understand that when a Brown Trout is killed, it stops growing.

A Brown Trout that is caught and released will keep growing if it survives. Also, a Brown Trout that is caught and released and has not been weighed leaves room for, well, creative retelling.

Drift baits with the current, allowing baits to settle along the edge of the current. Brown Trout are less inclined than steelhead to hold in heavy current. However, they will hold under a heavy current where rocks break the current.

Pay special attention to larger, deeper pools. Most Brown Trout that have been caught from Lake Erie tributaries have been caught from the lower sections of the creeks. Spawning, though, may take Brown Trout into headwater stream sections that are so small they may not cover the fish's backs. ☐



*photos-Mike Bleech*

*Fin clips identify the origin of Brown Trout stocked into Lake Erie.*