

Straight TALK

by John A. Arway

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Steelhead Alley

photo-Andrew L. Strick



Over the years, I have traveled with friends to Michigan to fish for salmon in the fall. These are Pacific Ocean fish imported from the west coast and have created a fantastic sport fishery that continues to grow in extent and popularity. They now reproduce naturally in many tributary streams, and the state continues to stock additional young fish to supplement and sustain the magnificent runs of trophy king salmon (Chinook Salmon) and silver salmon (Coho Salmon) along with steelhead (lake-run Rainbow Trout). Young fish become imprinted to the water quality of the streams where they are born or stocked and return year after year to fulfill the dreams of anglers, young and old alike.

We have fished the Manistee, Pere Marquette and Muskegon rivers that drain into the eastern side of Lake Michigan and have never been disappointed. Michigan's great experiment in 1964 converted a commercial fishery in decline into a thriving sport fishery that has created new businesses for local towns and villages all around the Great Lake. While entering or exiting rivers, there have been many occasions when other anglers have noticed our Pennsylvania license plates and asked us why we would leave a great fishery at home and travel all the way to Michigan to fish. They have all read about Pennsylvania's famous "Steelhead Alley" in fishing magazines and have more questions for us than we have for them.

The salmon days are also etched in Pennsylvania's fishing history as well. Many of us witnessed the carnival-like conditions created by gigantic fish in our small tributary streams and were shocked and disappointed by the bad behavior and actions of our fellow anglers. It was simply amazing to observe what some people did when they saw a giant trophy fish in a small stream. Countless stories were created by the antics of our licensed and unlicensed anglers. Many actions resulted in hefty fines and penalties for capturing fish by illegal methods including noodling, snagging with large, weighted treble hooks that resembled grappling hooks, and even using explosive devices, while fighting for fish or position along a stream. Illegal parking and trespassing, fishing the nursery waters of Trout and Godfrey runs, and even using the cover of darkness to take as many fish as possible before getting caught. We routinely asked "Waterways Patrolmen" to assist with salmon duty, and officers traveled from all over Pennsylvania to conduct undercover patrols in an attempt to control the feeding frenzy. Former Executive Director Ralph Abele called it "Erie's Nightmare" in his December 1979 "Straight Talk" column.

Fortunately, we have learned from past experiences and transitioned from the salmon program to the steelhead program. Pennsylvania stocked our last Chinook Salmon in Lake Erie in 1995 and our last Coho Salmon in 2003. Pennsylvania's steelhead program began in 1961 when 15,000 fingerlings hatched from eggs obtained from the west coast and were stocked in Lake Erie tributary waters. Fishing for steelhead in Lake Erie and its tributaries continues to be one of our best fall fishing experiences through the winter and into the early spring season. Our fisheries staff, directed by Great Lakes' biologist Chuck Murray, are leaders in monitoring and managing Pennsylvania's Lake Erie fisheries. Thanks to our excellent fish culturists at Fairview, Tionesta and Linesville state fish hatcheries, we have met our annual stocking goals of 1 million smolts (fingerling steelhead) for the last 13 years. Pennsylvania annually stocks more than 50 percent of all steelhead smolts into Lake Erie. In 2015, the average size of our smolts were 185 millimeters (7.3 inches), the largest steelhead smolts that have been stocked in the past 15 years. Research has shown that smolts show greater survival to adults if stocked when they are over 185 millimeters in length. We began supplementing the steelhead fishery in 2009 when we started stocking put-grow-take Brown Trout for nearshore boat anglers and created trophy fall Brown Trout run in the tributaries. Many thanks to our Cooperative Nursery partners at 3-CU Trout Club, Wesleyville Conservation Club and the Albion Sportsmen's Club for stocking 77,793 Brown Trout (9 to 11 inches) in May of 2015. These are in addition to the 25,000 Brown Trout stocked by Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission (PFBC) in Lake Erie tributaries for our catchable trout program.

Although we do not have the resources to measure annual tributary catch rates, we continue to share data among states to track return and harvest rates. Pennsylvania angler catch rates increased dramatically from 0.16 steelhead/angler hour in 1981 to 0.29 in 1993 to 0.63 in 2003. In 2014, we implemented a voluntary angler log program that demonstrated catch rates of 0.35 steelhead/angler hour over the last 3 years, which is very similar to the catch rates reported by New York State Department of Environmental Conservation's steelhead surveys. These catch rates are some of the highest reported catch rates for steelhead anywhere, even in western native streams,



photo-PFBC archives

This Brown Trout was captured during the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission's 2016 Lake Trout gill net assessment on August 23, 2016. It measured 29.8 inches and weighed 14.4 pounds.

continued vigilance and cooperation with the Great Lakes Fishery Commission's Great Lakes Fish Health Committee (GLFHC), all eight Great Lake States and the Canadian province of Ontario to "prevent the release of clinically diseased fish." PFBC hatchery staff have adopted a formal biosecurity plan at all of our hatcheries and conduct an annual screening of steelhead with results reported to GLFHC. We continue to work with U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to restore and enhance Lake Trout populations and bring Sea Lamprey populations under control, which peaked in 2009. PFBC staff will contribute to the continued work of GLFHC to address important questions about the scope and extent of natural reproduction of steelhead, homing ability, interjurisdictional straying of spawning fish, and optimal time and size to stock to maximize return.

As a way to showcase this exceptional fishery, we plan to offer 50 percent off 2016 resident, non-resident and senior resident discounted fishing licenses sold from October 1 through December 31, 2016. Licenses sold are valid from October 1 through December 31, 2016. Discount applies only to these licenses. See page 60 for more details. We hope that anglers will take advantage of the opportunity to fish one of the premier steelhead fisheries in the world right here in Pennsylvania. Trout/salmon and Lake Erie permits will still be required, but consider it an investment in this world-class fishery for today and future generations. We invite you to visit Erie, Pennsylvania's Fishing Capital, and hunt for steelhead in our Lake Erie tributary streams along our 63 miles of Lake Erie shoreline. Discover the thrill of fishing Pennsylvania's Steelhead Alley.

and show that our Pennsylvania Lake Erie tributary streams truly deserve their recognition as Steelhead Alley.

In 2003, angler access was identified as a critical element to the future success of the Lake Erie steelhead fishery program. Thanks to the Pennsylvania General Assembly and Governor Edward G. Rendell, the Lake Erie permit was reauthorized and funding was restricted to be used for public access and habitat projects. We enlisted the support of Pennsylvania Sea Grant to help identify willing landowners on tributary waters who would agree to sell their riparian lands for angler access or enter into perpetual conservation easements. PFBC staff, directed by Scott Bollinger, Statewide Public Access Program Manager, recommended and the PFBC Board approved the purchase of 14 properties and 38 public fishing and conservation easements on over 21 miles of stream frontage that are now permanently open to public fishing for future generations of anglers. More information on each access area can be found at

www.fishandboat.com.

Lake Erie permit funds were used to leverage over \$4.5 million in outside funding to assist with these purchases. Two fish ladders were installed on Fourmile Creek to allow for upstream steelhead migration and a variety of public access projects were constructed on the shores of Presque Isle Bay and Lake Erie to improve angler access.

The future of Pennsylvania's steelhead fishery is bright but not without challenges. One of the greatest threats is disease, which requires

Your Director,
><(John{(^)



Map of Lake Erie and Tributary Stream Access Points

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