

Steelhead: Lake Erie's Best Kept Secret

by
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When anglers think of Lake Erie thoughts of walleye smallmouth bass and yellow perch come to mind. Yet after boats are stored for the winter, one species continues to provide plenty of action for anglers—steelhead trout. In fact, steelhead offer year round opportunity for anglers, and the action gets better every year

What are steelhead trout and why are they now in Lake Erie? Steelhead trout are supply rainbow trout with different genetic characteristics. Unlike rainbow trout, which live their entire life in landlocked streams or rivers, steelhead migrate from streams as juveniles to a large lake or ocean environment. These food rich environments permit steelheads to attain sizes far larger than their stream-run cousins. Within the United States, the Pacific Northwest and Great Lakes regions are the most popular areas for these giant

rainbows. In Ohio, as in other Great Lakes states, steelhead have been introduced to provide diversity to the fishery, and to add



Charter Captains are more and more offering exciting steelhead fishing to their customers , primarily in July and August.

more angling opportunity.

In order to provide for an adequate sport fishery, steel-head are hatchery raised. This is true

for not only Ohio but for other Great Lakes states. Although some Great Lakes streams may provide adequate spawning habitat and stream temperatures, the numbers of naturally spawned steelhead would not provide a viable sport fishery for the species. Ohio streams are, for the most part, too warm and silty, with limited streambed spawning substrate (riffle areas with a gravel bottom). However, some natural reproduction may occur in northeastern Ohio and western Pennsylvania tributary streams.

Juvenile steelhead from six to nine inches long, called smolts, are released into select tributary streams, where they migrate to the open lake. As steelhead prefer cooler deeper waters in which to live and grow, Ohio

raised steelhead are stocked in tributaries from Cleveland to Conneaut, with 400,000 stocked every spring. Because of the success of the stocking program,



Stream steelhead fishing continues to just get better and better. Leslie Riser poses with her first catch-and-release steelie. Leslie was fishing the Black River.

Ohio is considering more streams for stocking. Due to abundant food resources in Lake Erie, these juveniles achieve rapid growth, reaching an average length of 18 inches and weighing two to three pounds in their first year. Three year old steelhead can average 30 inches, weighing eight to ten pounds. The current state record, caught October 2, 1996, weighed 20.97 pounds and measured 36 inches!

Steelhead return to tributary streams during the fall and winter months for spawning, similar to the fall spawning activities of coho and king salmon. However, unlike salmon which die after spawning, steelhead return to their lake

environment and grow larger, returning year after year to spawn.

Why are steelhead important to Lake Erie? Certainly they add to the Lake Erie fishery, making it more diverse. More importantly, steelhead provide year round angling opportunities. During the summer months, offshore boat anglers from Lorain to Conneaut experience excellent catches of steelhead, referred to as “silver bullets,” during June through August. Prior to 1998, steelhead were caught occasionally by anglers trolling deeper central basin waters for walleye, and were a welcomed bonus trophy fish. In the past four years,

however, steelhead numbers have increased to the point where deep water trollers are actually seeking Steelhead with some charter boats advertising steelhead fishing charters. Yet this two to three month summer fishery is limited to larger boats willing to venture many miles out into Lake Erie.

The best opportunity for steelhead, not to mention the longest in months of availability, occurs when steelhead move shoreward and into tributary streams for spawning. In recent years, Ohio’s ever growing steelhead fishery has rivaled legendary steelhead fisheries in Michigan, New York, and Wisconsin. In fact, many license plates from Michigan, Indiana, and Pennsylvania have been observed at parking sites for popular Ohio steelhead tributary streams and rivers. This not only indicates excellent angling, but more importantly increased eco-tourism and economic impact.

Lake Erie steelhead begin moving into tributary streams during late September, with numbers increasing as fall continues and winter approaches. Some steelhead may spawn in the fall, yet most move into streams during the fall and winter months in preparation for spring spawning. For seven months, from October through April, anglers can experience excellent steelhead angling in Lake Erie tributaries. More importantly, successful fall, winter, and spring steelhead fishing is accomplished from the shoreline or by wading streams. With a boat unnecessary, anyone can experience catching trophy sized Lake Erie steelhead.

Not only does this fall through

spring fishery provide unlimited angling opportunity, it also coincides with the lowest tourism impact period of the year for lake bordering counties. And unlike the open lake, stream and river steelhead anglers are not concerned about high wind and waves. This rapidly developing fishery has the potential to attract both in and out of state anglers for multiple day fishing trips, boosting local tourism economic impacts.

Where can you catch steelhead? Begin first by obtaining Ohio stream fishing maps, county road maps, and topography maps of lake-bordering counties in Ohio. Although steelhead are occasionally caught in tributaries west of Huron, best angling success is experienced from Vermilion (Erie County) to Conneaut (Ashtabula County). Steelhead are currently stocked in the Rocky River (Cuyahoga County), Grand River (Lake County), Chagrin River (Lake County), and Conneaut Creek (Ashtabula County).

However, not all steelhead return to the tributary in which they were stocked. The Vermilion River in Lorain and Erie Counties experiences excellent steelhead returns, so steelhead have not been stocked in the Vermilion River. In addition, virtually any central to eastern Ohio Lake Erie tributary stream or creek, regardless of size, will attract and hold steelhead. Very small creeks, some which may only flow into the lake during heavy fall or spring rains, experience excellent spawning returns of steelhead. Steelhead have actually been observed in drainage ditches which connect to a Lake Erie tributary stream or creek. Much of Ohio's stream,

river, and creek property is privately owned, and anglers must secure written landowner permission prior to fishing from or walking across private property. Shoreline power plant intakes and discharges are also popular sites for steelhead anglers. Again, check with local authorities and the power plant for access rules and regulations and necessary permission.

The ODNR, Division of Wildlife publication #276, Lake Erie Fishing Guide, offers a detailed map of popular steelhead tributaries and indicates public access sites. Publication #34 and Trout Fishing in Lake Erie, provides steelhead fishing methods and techniques for all four seasons. For more information about steelhead angling, contact local fishing tackle shops in lake bordering counties, the ODNR, Division of Wildlife (1.800.Wildlife), or a Sea Grant Extension Specialist.

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Ohio Steelhead Fishing Locations: Bold Face indicates areas of Stocking.

1. Cranberry Creek
2. Chapel Creek
3. Sugar Creek
4. Darby Creek
5. Sherod Creek
- 6. Vermilion River**
7. Brownhelm Creek
8. Beaver Creek
9. Black River
10. French Creek

11. Porter Creek
12. Cahoon Creek
- 13. Rocky River**
14. Nine Mile Creek
15. Euclid Creek
- 16. Chagrin River**
- 17. Grand River**
18. McKinley Creek
19. Arcola Creek
20. Wheeler Creek
21. Cowles Creek
22. Indian Creek
23. Red Brook
24. Ashtabula River
- 25. Conneaut Creek**
26. Turkey Creek

Stream Fishing Tips for Steelhead Anglers

Now that you're interested in catching a Lake Erie steelhead, how do you go about doing it? First, find out what streams concentrate steelhead during the fall, winter, and spring months. Contact the visitor's bureau in the county you want to fish and request a road map. An Ohio topographical map is also a good idea, as it will show all the small tributaries. Check with lake bordering bait and tackle shops. Make sure you are fishing on public accessible property or that you have the landowner's permission if you want to fish on private property.

Dress for the weather! Gloves, a warm cap, insulated underwear, and insulated waders (if you plan to wade and fish) are essential. Although not a necessity, waders allow the angler freedom to travel in and along the stream, and can place you closer to fish holding

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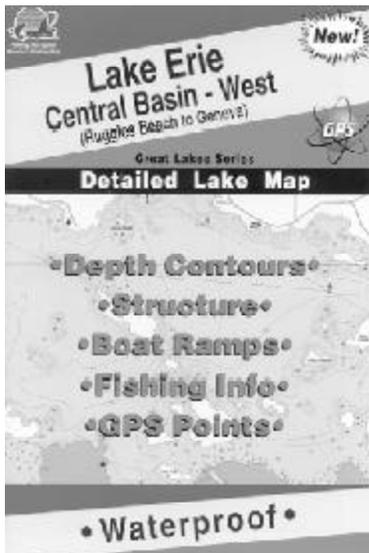
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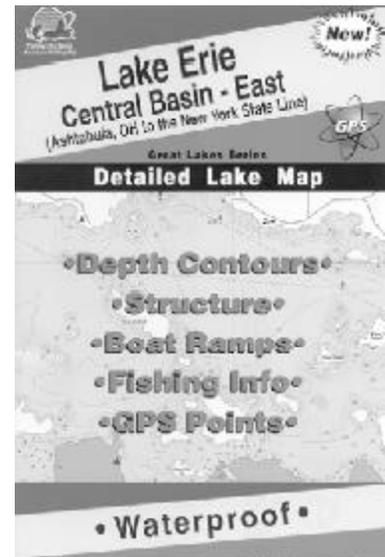
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