

Summer Steelhead on Lake Erie

by
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Not for the first time, the National Weather Service missed the marine forecast. Instead of the called-for 2- to 4-foot waves - themselves ratcheting upward from the previous evening's call of just 1- to 2-foot waves - the rocking and rolling of the boat stemmed from seas that boiled at 3 to 5 feet.

At least the prediction made by charter captains Marv DeGreen and Ron Johnson was neatly tucked away within the truth. They said they would find Lake Erie steelhead for a troupe of Ohio Division of Wildlife officials.

By golly, they were right on the money, too. During the course of a wind- and wave-tossed morning one or more wildlife division official would catapult to the stern of Johnson's boat, Thumper. There, he (or she) would wrestle with a steelhead

whose mood matched the lake's surly waters.

And though some of the steelhead won their match, 19 of them

stayed behind to rest within the confines of Johnson's well-used iced-down cooler. All to the amazement of the assembled wildlife division fisheries biologists and public information specialists.

The Central Basin, these officials noted, is Lake Erie's unexplored country. "If only we could get the people back in Columbus to quit talking only about the Western Basin. We never, ever, anticipated a steelhead fisheries like this on Lake Erie. This is nice. Real nice," said Mike Costello, the wildlife division's chief Lake Erie fisheries biologist. Costello was joined by fellow wildlife division fisheries biologist John Navarro, who is the agency's fish hatchery point man.

This oversight responsibility includes keeping an administrative eye on the state's Castalia Cold Water Fish Hatchery. It is this hatchery from



Thumper charter first mate, Meaghan Johnson and Ohio Division of Wildlife fisheries biologist Mike Costello pose with a Lake Erie Steelhead. A species more and more Central Basin fishermen are catching during the summer.

which nearly all of the state's steelhead first see the light of a concrete raceway.

Along with Costello and Navarro was Melissa Hathaway, the agency's Lake Erie public relations specialist and its new Wild Ohio! magazine editor. Skip Trask, video cameraman for the agency's Wild Ohio! television program rounded out the agency's squad.

Making sure that each wildlife division official had the opportunity to play tag with a steelhead were Johnson and DeGreen, who served as Johnson's port deck hand. At Johnson's starboard side was his daughter, Meaghan. The younger Johnson recently graduated from Bowling Green State University with a degree in Marine Biology.

The trio of fishing experts reaped the wild seas laying a course that carried Johnson's vessel across a swath of steelhead-rich waters. This location was situated about 19 nautical miles northwest of the Grand Rivers mouth in water 74 to 76 feet deep.

"This is deeper than where we would go if we were after wall-eye, but we don't run in nearly as many sheepshead or white perch out here," Johnson said. "We've been doing so well our clients are more than pleased. The thing is, there are very few other fishermen out here looking for steelhead."

The pleasure has been all the charter captains as they've watched their customers reel in boat limits of steelhead trout along with a few walleye. An occa-

sional king salmon dresses up the place with a couple of coho salmon usually added to the totals as well, DeGreen said.

Meaghan Johnson and DeGreen readied the tackle, loaded braided fishing lines with small directional divers for use on planer boards, or else cabled large Dipsy Divers to outfits specially made for such equipment.

The planer board lines were then sent 100 feet back from the planer's tether lines while the smaller directional divers were mechanically adjusted to run 40 feet deep.

A pair of downriggers also were hitched up and added to their respective anchoring weights. To each line went a Stinger spoon. All



First Mate, Meaghan Johnson, and Captain Ron Johnson of Thumper Charters display two typical steelhead taken while trolling Lake Erie's Central Basin. Fisheries biologists anticipate another good season this summer for steelhead.

of these spoons were hammered from copper, but each was finished in a different color pattern. “ ‘Confusion’ has been an especially hot color,” Johnson said.

Hardly had Meaghan set out a pair of lines before the first steelhead was giving a fishing rod a case of the fits. When one steelhead would trip an outfit, another trout would soon follow on another rig.

The wildlife division officials took turns, rotating among themselves the opportunity to reel in a fish. Some of the trout were lost before they were netted, the trout using the bounce from the heavy seas as leverage to pull free from the lure’s set of treble hooks. A trout that made an exit did not raise an alarm with either DeGreen or Johnson. Another steelhead was cruising nearby, lying in wait. “Steelhead have saved many a charter trip,” DeGreen said.

It was tough fishing conditions, however, and a few of the officials were taking on the greenish color of the wind-whipped Lake Erie. Yet no one was complaining and all of the anglers returned home with plastic sacks of fresh steelhead fillets.

Along with a new-found awe for the might of the Central Basin’s unheralded deep-water steelhead fisheries. “Even when I talk of Lake Erie fishing, all I mention are walleye, smallmouth bass and yellow perch. What Ron and Marv have shown us is that there is this other kid on the block,” Hathaway said. For information about fishing with Johnson,

contact him at (440) 487-0002 and for DeGreen, contact him at (216) 970-1246.

Water Temperature Keys Central Basin Fishing Success

Stand along a lakefront bluff from Cleveland to Ashtabula during April or May and all you’ll see is water. No boats. No anglers. No personal watercraft to disturb the tranquility. Then again, you won’t find the best of fishing either.

“Part of that is related to water temperature. The lake’s Western Basin warms up much quicker then it does over here in the Central Basin. Obviously the fish are more active when the water temperature is in the low to mid 50s then when they are in the 40s,” said Kevin Kayle, manager of the Ohio Division of Wildlife’s Fairport Harbor Fisheries Research Station.

Agreeing that water temperature is the focal point for the Central Basin’s fisheries is Ron Johnson, a Painesville charter captain who operates his Thumper Charter service from the Grand River. “We need 53 to 55 degree water before the fish show up. When that happens the walleye start to move in, the shad and other baitfish have left the rivers for the lake where they’ll be eaten by the walleye and steelhead,” Johnson said.

Once May hits full stride the fishing greatly improves and begins overtaking the Western

Basin’s fisheries in June, both Kayle and Johnson said.

“Generally the first walleye to show up are in 55 to 60 feet of water. But if the shad are in tight to shore, so are the walleye,” Johnson said.

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