Buckeye Steel

Ohio Steelhead Program Booms

by
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In the waters of Lake Erie and its Ohio tributary rivers and streams mainly east of Cleveland, there is a fishing phenomenon occurring the likes of which Buckeye anglers have never before experienced. Steelhead trout-many weighing more than 10 pounds and measuring in excess of 30 inches-are being caught by the thousands, and the fishing looks to only get better.

Richard Popp from Mentor, Ohio, knows this fishery first- hand. A steelhead fisherman for the past decade, he has landed and released thousands of fish. But not quite all of his steelhead have made it back into the water; a 14-pounder hangs on his office wall.

"I catch them in the lake in the summer and in the rivers in the winter," Popp said. "I like to troll when I'm on Lake Erie. The fishing is so good that we've had multiple steelhead on the lines at the same time." Popp went on to say that steelhead hooked in the warmer waters of summer tend to either jump or fight ferociously across the surface, earning them the nickname "silver bullets."

Steelhead are simply sea-run rainbow trout that have been transplanted to the Great Lakes from their native Pacific Northwest. Stocked into tributary streams as smolts (six to nine

Steelhead are getting more numerous each year in Ohio Streams and in Central Lake Erie.

inches long), the young fish make their way downstream to Lake Erie where they grow to maturity and take on the steely-gray color

that gives them their name. In the fall, they return to the tributary river or stream where they were stocked to spawn. The fish find their individual stream by smell and can detect homing scent clues up to 30 miles away. Steelhead may stay in a stream all winter until the water begins to warm in the spring and they return to the lake.

"Each spring we stock a total of nearly 400,000 Manistee- strain steelhead in the Rocky River, Chagrin River, Grand River, and Conneaut Creek," said Kevin Kayle, fisheries biologist for the ODNR Division of Wildlife. "They grow rapidly, feeding primarily on emerald shiners, smelt, alewives, and gizzard shad. These fish may live up to seven years and, unlike salmon, don't die after spawning. They just keep eating and getting bigger."

Kayle went on to say that steelhead average 2 to 3 pounds and 18 inches after just one summer in Lake Erie, 6 to 7 pounds and 25 inches after two years, and 8 to 10 pounds and 29 inches after three summers in the lake. "The fishing that Ohio steelheaders are now experiencing is a combination of good fishery

science and years of just plain hard work," said Gary Isbell, executive administrator for fish management with the Division of Wildlife. "With the recent success of this program, we are looking at the possibility of stocking even more Lake Erie tributary streams with steelhead in the future.

Are you hooked yet? If you're a serious Ohio angler and you've never fought a Buckeye steelhead, you owe it to yourself to give it a try.

State Record Steelhead

Ohio's state record steelhead trout was caught in Lake Erie on October 2, 1996, by Mike Shane of New Middletown, OH. It weighed 20.97 pounds and measured 36.5 inches long!

Stream Etiquette

To ensure a quality fishing experience for everyone, fishing etiquette should be kept in mind when fishing rivers or streams. For instance, if someone is already fishing a particular stretch of river that you want to fish, it is common courtesy to ask if they mind before you join them. Another unwritten rule of the river is that once a fish is hooked all other anglers fishing in that stretch should reel in their lines, giving the lucky angler room to fight and land the steelhead. Anglers are reminded that it is illegal to fish or trespass on private property without permission of the landowner. Littering, including leaving items as small as spawn- bag material and cigarette butts, is also illegal.

Steelhead Fishing Regulations

Anglers fishing the Ohio waters of Lake Erie and its tributaries are reminded that steelhead must be at least 12 inches in length before they are of legal size. The bag limit for steelhead and salmon is five, either singly or in the aggregate, from May I through August 31. From September I through April 30 no more than two steelhead or rainbow trout may be taken per angler per day.

Free Fishing Publlications

Many public fishing areas are open to anglers on northeast Ohio rivers and streams. For a list of these areas and more steelhead information, contact a wildlife district office and ask for any or all of the following free Division of Wildlife publications:

• Fishing Prospects - Northeast Ohio
• Trout Fishing in Lake Erie (Publication 34)
• Lake Erie Fishing Guide (Publication 276)
• Ohio Fish Identification Guide (Publication 334)

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Many 5 pound "jumpers" were caught. There's lots of food for these sport fish so they remain "fat and sassy".

The perch fishing was super last year and should be as great in 2003. There's many good sized perch available because the Division of Wildlife limited the net and catch limits. These limits really worked with positive results.

Plan ahead to come to this vacation area. There's lots of charters, ramps for your own good sized boat and motels to stay in. These areas get booked up months in advance. Don't wait till March or April unless you can come up during the week which is a little slower but not much. Weekends seem to be a zoo with the population doubling or even tripling. Traffic is congested and it seems everyone's in a hurry to get out in the lake.

You might try calling 1 800 BUCKEYE and ask for information on Ohio's northern shore from Toledo thru Huron this summer. Port Clinton seems the central area for anglers to flock to. If you want to talk fishing you can e mail me at capt.phil@cadez-charters.com. GOOD FISHIN!