

Trout 'N' About

No luck for trout anglers

BY Ima Troutman

The DNR Enforcement Division recently reminded anglers that their 2007 fishing and shelter licenses are good through April 30, 2008. During the 2007 Session, the Minnesota Legislature adjusted the angling and shelter license period from the last day in February to April 30. It made the change after the 2007 fishing regulations booklet went to print.

The legislative reasoning behind the change is so anglers don't have to buy new licenses during the winter season. The license year for resident fishing, the angling portion of a sporting license, nonresident fishing, resident fish house, resident dark house, and nonresident fish house begins on March 1 and ends on April 30 of the following year. In other words, the license year now lasts 14 months.

This is just great if you like to fish for crappies and yellow perch - primary targets in March and April. Unfortunately, trout anglers don't benefit from the Legislature's magnanimity. The license year extension doesn't apply to trout stamps. So, if in March you

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2008-2009 Minnesota trout stamp

Jason Grangroth

Use of spawn in question

BY Sam Cook

Some North Shore anglers are wondering whether they can continue to use a form of home-packaged bait to fish for Kamloops rainbow trout and steelhead.

Recent comments by Duluth-area Conservation Officer Kipp Duncan on KDAL-AM 610 have raised questions about the legal use of spawn bags. The topic also was discussed in a recent newsletter of the Western

Lake Superior Trolling Association.

Spawn bags are small mesh bags of trout spawn, about the size of a marble. Many anglers tie their own spawn bags, but some anglers buy them from bait shops. A state law makes it technically illegal for anglers to use homemade spawn bags as bait to catch steelhead rainbow trout, which could affect North Shore fishermen.

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Steel run strong

BY Sam Cook

DULUTH, Minn. (AP) — Any day now, North Shore streams will bust loose, sending a winter's worth of ice down to Lake Superior. When they do, steelhead staging offshore will begin to make their spawning runs up the brawling tributaries.

When the run is on, steelhead anglers wade into the rivers trying to intercept these powerful Lake Superior rainbow trout. Anglers may keep none of these wild fish in Minnesota waters. Those days are long gone.

Runs are nothing like they were a few decades ago, but steelheading traditions run deep in the North. Wader-clad anglers wielding fly rods rise early on April mornings, hoping for a hookup with one of these silver torpedoes.

On the South Shore of Lake Superior, steelhead fishing opened in late March on the Brule

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Steelhead making run up river

Anita Foto/Trout

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River. Unlike North Shore tributaries, the Brule still takes a strong run of steelhead, thanks to better spawning conditions and more consistent water flows.

Kevin Bovee, a longtime North Shore steelheader, looked out an office window at Lake Superior.

“The problem,” he said, “is out there.”

That, in a nutshell, describes the decline of steelhead spawning runs over the past 50 years on the North Shore.

The heyday of steelheading was the 1950s and 1960s, when lake trout had been decimated by lampreys and commercial fishing. As lake trout rebounded and salmon were introduced, steelhead numbers declined steadily. Runs on the Knife River, once perhaps several thousand strong, have dwindled. Last year, about 500 rainbows ascended the stream, only about 250 of them wild, naturally produced steelhead.

“Steelhead angling is better now than when we started this rehabilitation process in 1991 or 1992,” said Don Schreiner, Lake Superior area fisheries supervisor for the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. “But we’re not where anglers would like us to be. We’re not where we were in the 1960s, and I don’t think we ever will be.”

Still, anglers keep finding steelhead, not only in the Knife but many other North Shore streams. On-stream angler surveys by the Minnesota DNR estimated the catch of wild steelhead at about 3,500 fish last spring.

The DNR, at the urging of the Lake Superior Steelhead Association and other anglers, has tried nearly everything to bolster steelhead runs over the past 40 years. Waterfalls were dynamited to allow easier fish passage upstream. Young-of-the-year fish were stocked by the hundreds of thousands. Beaver dams were blown out to allow fish to reach more spawning habitat. Hatchery-reared yearling steelhead were stocked.

Starting this year, the annual stocking of 40,000 yearling steelhead will end. Stocking of young of the year will continue on a dozen North Shore streams. Habitat work, including beaver trapping, will continue.

“The good old days were when I was a kid,” says Bovee, 54, of Duluth. “I don’t think we’ll ever see days like that again. Too much has changed.”

Stocking yearling steelhead hasn’t panned out as hoped, but it has helped individual streams, Schreiner said.

“We might stock 40,000 and get 200 back,” he said. “But if an additional 200 come back to the Knife River, that’s a significant increase.”

Duluth’s Craig Wilson, vice president of the Lake Superior Steelhead Association, and others believe it’s time to look at solutions other than stocking.

“Maybe a hands-off approach and looking at habitat becomes a better use of personnel and resources,” Wilson said. “I think the Knife has a chance to recover. But on the shore as whole, I think you’re seeing what you’re going to see for fishing.”

The club, a staunch supporter of the fishery since the 1970s, has turned its

efforts to improving the Knife River watershed. It has contributed \$5,000 to the DNR this year for beaver trapping on Knife River tributaries where steelhead spawn, Bovee said. Beavers are trapped and their dams removed so steelhead can reach more spawning habitat.

North Shore streams, where young steelhead typically spend a year or two before down-migrating to Lake Superior, also are a harsh environment for the fish. Recent summers have been hot and dry, lowering oxygen levels and exposing fish to predators. In low-snow winters, streams sometimes freeze to their beds, wiping out much of a year class of fish.

Anglers are not giving up, Wilson says.

“(Fishing) hasn’t been bad,” he says. “You can still go out and hook fish on pretty much a daily basis.”

“On the North Shore last spring, it was kind of a goofy run,” said Duluth’s Brian Porter. “It happened a little later. But there were a lot of fish.”

Steelheaders have choices beyond Minnesota. The Brule is less than an hour away, and its steelhead population is in excellent shape, biologists say. Last fall, about 6,300 steelhead entered the river and will spawn this spring. Perhaps another thousand will enter the river this spring to spawn.

“We’re in very good shape,” said Dennis Pratt, fisheries biologist for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources in Superior.

Brule anglers have been restricted to one steelhead over 26 inches since the early 1990s to compensate for increased mortality by lake trout in Lake Superior.

“Otherwise, our fishery would have declined rapidly,” Pratt said.

Some steelheaders also drive north to Ontario to fish Lake Superior tributaries there, where steelhead numbers have rebounded after some low years. And some make the long road trip to Ohio or Pennsylvania to “Steelhead Alley,” a number of stocked tributaries of Lake Erie.



Jody Allison with steelhead

Photo courtesy of Anglers Advantage

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like to go after lake trout in the Boundary Waters, fish the no-kill season on Bluff Country creeks, or lob spawn sacks at Lake Superior 'loopers, you'll need a 2008 trout stamp beginning March 1.

Minnesota's license year for fishing, small game, and trapping has ended on the last day in February for a long time. Prior to that, the license year ended Dec. 31. As I recall, the change to the last day in February was made so winter anglers could fish through the end of wall-eye season and hunters could go to the end of rabbit and squirrel season without having to buy a new license. It was a logical, consistent date to end the license year.

Now, if you have a "sporting" license (the gender-neutral name for the combination small game hunting and fishing license once called the "sportsman's" license), the small game portion of the license will expire on the last day in February, but you'll be able to continue fishing (except for trout) until April 30. Of course, you'll have to buy a new license before the general fishing opener - another date that may be subject to legislative change.

Unfortunately, more tinkering is needed. The political adjustments left the licensing structure out of tune. The new April 30 end date is neither con-

sistent with other licenses nor fair to all anglers. At the very least, the Legislature must address the trout stamp issue, but overall consistency among licenses that traditionally have started and ended on the same dates should be reconsidered. Hunting and fishing are not well served by confusing rules.

Another new rule anglers and others who cross into Canada must know is that identification requirements have changed for entering the United States. Now you must have a picture ID, such as a driver's license, and your birth certificate to present to U.S. Customs officials. Of course, a passport is best and eventually will be required.

The Minneapolis Star Tribune recently published a letter sent to the Department of Homeland Security by several U.S. senators, including Coleman and Klobuchar from Minnesota. The senators questioned the effectiveness of using birth certificates for identification, because they are not standardized. They asked Homeland Security to reconsider the birth certificate requirement.

While the birth certificate requirement isn't likely to make much of a difference for your annual Canadian fishing trip, it is clear that we can no longer think of the border as an informal boundary. While the two nations remain friendly,

global changes necessitate better border security. Hopefully, the respective governments will allow their citizens time to adjust to the transition to stricter rules.

Over time, the two countries should continue to encourage cross-border trade and travel. The current identification requirements seem to weigh most heavily on law-abiding citizens, a point made in the senators' letter to Homeland Security. And a greater effort should be made to get the word out regarding the birth certificate requirement prior to the summer travel season. Ultimately, we might be more secure if the U.S. and Canada cooperated on shared security issues.

Spawn from page 1

A state law makes it technically illegal for anglers to use home-made spawn bags as bait to catch steelhead rainbow trout, which could affect North Shore fishermen.

Duluth News Tribune Talk About It Icon Talk: Do you think home-made spawn bags should be allowed as fishing bait?

Duluth News Tribune Web Icon How a spawn sack is made Fish feed naturally on spawn that drifts downstream in rivers, and anglers have used spawn bags for decades to fish for steelhead and Kamloops rainbows.

Ken Soring, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources regional enforcement supervisor at Grand Rapids, clarified the issue in a telephone interview Monday morning.

"We're not going to blindside any of our anglers," he said. "People

don't have the opportunity to be in compliance because they don't realize it's illegal. Our officers are going to use discretion and common sense."

Soring said the enforcement division may pursue changing the law to make an exemption for using spawn bags as bait. But any changes also would have to be considered in light of the threat of VHS, a disease found in other Great Lakes that can cause fish die-offs, he said.

In a telephone interview on Monday, Duncan explained state law makes it technically illegal for anglers to use spawn bags they tie themselves. It is legal to use spawn bags purchased from bait shops, he said.

Here, in simplified form, is why spawn is illegal to use, Duncan said: Minnesota law prevents anglers from using gamefish as bait in fishing. A rainbow trout

is a gamefish. Another law says that any part of a wild animal is considered a wild animal. Still another measure defines a fish as a wild animal.

Therefore, Duncan said, spawn would be defined as part of a gamefish and could not be used legally for bait when prepared by the angler.

The laws prohibiting use of home-tied spawn bags for bait have never been enforced on the North Shore. The pertinent question is whether conservation officers will enforce the laws this spring.

"I've had that question asked of me on the shore, too," Duncan said. "I say, here's the answer. We didn't write these laws. We just have to go enforce them. But we have officer discretion."

The North Shore steelhead and Kamloops rainbow trout spawn-

ing run is in its early stages. Duncan said he has not written any tickets for anglers using home-tied spawn bags this spring. He knows of no other conservation officers who have written tickets for that practice.



Photo by Jack Johnson

Tim Johnson holding steelhead

French River: restoring native fish

BY Stephanie Hemphill

The Department of Natural Resources announced in March it will no longer stock lake trout in much of Lake Superior. Decades of work to control lamprey, improve water quality, and limit harvest have apparently paid off. Lake trout are making a comeback. The restoration success story is welcome news to anglers and environmentalists. Now, some people are turning their attention to another native trout, the coaster brook trout. That species has been struggling to survive in Lake Superior and its tributaries for more than 100 years.

About 15 miles up the shore from Duluth, the French River tumbles into Lake Superior. On each side of the river, anglers are perched on the rocky lakeshore, eyes glued to their lines. Every now and then, a fish takes the bait, and one of the anglers gets busy reeling in a fish and conking it on the head.

They're mostly catching kamloops, a kind of rainbow trout. Kamloops are not native to Lake Superior. The DNR stocks them from the fish hatchery across the road.

Ask a young angler whether he's ever caught a coaster, and chances are you'll get a blank stare. He may never have heard of them, because they've been scarce for so long. An older man says, "There aren't any coaster brook trout. You're dreaming!"

"You very seldom get them, but when you do they're nice. They're so clean, and the colors are so beautiful. And there isn't any better eating," he says, relishing the memory of his last catch, years ago.

Coasters are a kind of brook trout.

They hatch in rivers, and then swim downstream to grow up in the lake. Several years later, they return to spawn in the river in which they were born. Coasters can get much bigger than trout that stay in the streams. The biggest coaster on record was 14-1/2 lbs. That's about three times the size of the typical brook trout.

There used to be lots of coasters around Lake Superior, as well as in parts of Lake Michigan and Lake Huron. They were a popular sport fish. As early as the 1850s, people were coming from all over the country, and even from Europe, to catch them.

Too many people came, and caught too many of them. By the early 1900s, coasters had practically disappeared. Only a few viable populations are left, mostly in the wilds of Canada and Isle Royale.

DNR Area Fisheries Supervisor Don Schreiner says coasters are especially vulnerable to overfishing. They are typically easier to catch than other trout, and that's why they almost disappeared. They were overfished years before the region was settled.

"There were no roads back then," Schreiner says. "People came in by boat, they came in by train. There are accounts of people standing on the shore and on the riverbank and catching hundreds of brook trout."

After the fishermen had virtually wiped out the coasters, lumberjacks arrived on the scene. They cut down the big trees that shaded the streams. They floated timber down the rivers, blasting out logs that lay in the water, slowing its flow. Today, the rivers flowing into Lake Superior are much more susceptible to flood-

ing and sedimentation.

Then the DNR began stocking other fish here, so anglers would have something to catch. They imported salmon from the Pacific Northwest, brown trout from Europe, and rainbow trout from Alaska, including the kamloops and steelhead strains. All these new arrivals compete with the few native brook trout that still survive in Lake Superior streams.

"I think everybody cares about coaster brook trout - as long as it doesn't cost them anything personally," he says. "If I have to give up my favorite species in favor of a coaster brook trout, I might not be willing to do that. That's the sort of thing we see."

Schreiner says it's possible the native trout will bounce back, if people leave them alone. He says lots of work will have to be done to improve the habitat, but that's a long-term challenge. It could be 50 years before there are enough coasters for people to catch in significant numbers.

Some groups are trying to push things along a little faster. Chippewa Indian tribes and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are cooperating on several restocking projects.

Each fall, workers take eggs from the females, fertilize them, and put them in the incubator. Over the winter, the eggs hatch.

"We have fin-clipping parties, where for several days we fin-clip each one of the fish," says Fischer. "And when we're stocking anywhere from 50,000 to 80,000 of these larger fish a year, that's a lot of marking."

Greg Fischer doesn't want to stock

streams forever. He hopes a lot of these fish will find good places to spawn - so the population can grow.

Young fish from the Red Cliff hatchery might someday find a home at Whittlesey Creek. Flowing into Lake Superior near Ashland, Wis., Whittlesey Creek is becoming a refuge for coaster brook trout. U.S. Fish and Wildlife biologist Lee Newman says it's a promising spot for spawning.

"This creek is so cold in the summertime, it hurts your legs to wade in it," Newman says. "And in the winter it never freezes, because of the springs that feed it."

Newman says the ideal spot for a coaster nest, or redd, is a gravelly stream bottom with springs or groundwater seeping beneath the gravel. That provides a constant flow of oxygen through the eggs. The scientific name for brook trout is *Salvelinus fontinalis*. Newman translates it as "little trout of the spring."

He says that shows the coasters are returning precisely to their home locations. The key, Newman thinks, is planting eggs or very small fry. In the first few days or weeks of their lives, the chemistry of the stream is imprinted in their brains. Even after years of wandering, sometimes many miles up and down the Lake Superior shore, they can find their way back to the stream where they were born.

"When you go out and do stream surveys in the fall, and catch some of these three, four, or five-pound brook trout, their size and their colors are just so unbelievable," says Newman. "Something about the brook trout and the fall colors and everything is so 'right' and so appropriate. It's a real privilege to work with these fish."

Moon Phase Calendar and Fish Feeding Times for May

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
				1 8:16A-10:16A 8:46P-10:46P	2 9:03A-11:03A 9:33P-11:33P	3 9:53A-11:53A 10:23P-12:23A
4 10:47A-12:47P 11:17P-1:17A	5 11:46A-1:46P 12:16A-2:16A	6 12:50P-2:50P 1:20A-3:20A	7 1:56P-3:56P 2:26A-4:26A	8 3:02P-5:02P 3:32A-5:32A	9 4:03P-6:03P 4:33A-6:33A	10 5:00P-7:00P 5:30A-7:30A
11 5:50P-7:50P 6:20A-8:20A	12 6:37P-8:37P 7:07A-9:07A	13 7:20P-9:20P 7:50A-9:50A	14 8:02P-10:02P 8:32A-10:32A	15 8:43P-10:43P 9:13A-11:13A	16 9:25P-11:25P 9:55A-11:55A	17 10:08P-12:08A 10:38A-12:38P
18 10:53P-12:53A 11:23A-1:23P	19 11:00P-1:00A 11:30A-1:30P	20 11:41P-1:41A 12:11P-2:11P	21 12:31A-2:31A 1:01P-3:01P	22 1:22A-3:22A 1:52P-3:52P	23 2:13A-4:13A 2:43P-4:43P	24 3:03A-5:03A 3:33P-5:33P
25 3:52A-5:52A 4:22P-6:22P	26 4:39A-6:39A 5:09P-7:09P	27 5:24A-7:24A 5:54P-7:54P	28 6:08A-8:08A 6:38P-8:38P	29 6:54A-8:54A 7:24P-9:24P	30 7:41A-9:41A 8:11P-10:11P	31 8:31A-10:31A 9:01P-11:01P