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SERIES: THE TROUT STREAMS OF MICHIGAN

NO. 21 THE RIFLE RIVER

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The Rifle River originates in the northeastern part of Ogemaw County at the outlet of Devoe Lake. Several tributaries join it in this area which is rich in artesian wells.

Precipitation is not readily absorbed in the headwaters area due to an extensive clay pan. The resulting rapid runoff makes the Rifle one of lower Michigan's least stable trout rivers.

The upper ten miles of the Rifle flows through public lands (the Rifle River Recreation Area and the Ogemaw State Forest). The remainder of the river, as it flows southward, is bordered by private lands except for one State-owned forty containing a public access site (about five miles south of Highway M-55).

North of Selkirk, the upper Rifle, unlike its tributaries, tends to be slow moving. Its gradient steepens near the Village and most of the river below is characterized by fast shallow riffles with few deep holes. A notable exception is a three-mile stretch of placid water just north of the Ogemaw-Arenac County line.

The land bordering most of this stream system is gently rolling upland forest typified by aspen in the northern portion and aspen, jackpine and oak south of M-55. Lowlands are forested with elm, basswood, black ash, and soft maple with cedar, spruce and balsam occurring in the swamps. Prickly ash borders parts of this stream to the regret of some anglers.

The stream's bottom consists of about half gravel and half sand. The underlying clay pan is often noticeable in riffle areas.

Fish cover is sparse throughout the Rifle River and consists mostly of bordering tag alders and a few fallen trees. Occasionally one can still see remnants of an old stream improvement structure built during the thirties by the Civilian Conservation Corps.

Erosion problems occur on several of the tributary streams, partly as the result of poor livestock management practices. On the Rifle River itself, some high, exposed sand banks occur beginning in the lower half of Ogemaw County and these appear in increasing numbers in Arenac County.

The main stem of the Rifle River is readily canoeable in the spring, until the end of June and again in the fall.

During the summer low-water period, some of the shallow riffle areas become difficult to negotiate. All of the mainstream in Arenac County is considered boatable.

The Rifle provides fair to good brown trout fishing during the spring until about the last week of June, and again from about Labor Day until the end of the trout season. At these times, spin casting with hardware and streamer fly fishing are productive methods. The slack fishing period which occurs during the summer appears to be the result of high water temperatures coupled with low stream flow.

The Rifle has good hatches of mayflies and caddis and nearly all of the mainstream is suitable for fly casting. During May, there are hatches of Blue Winged Olives and Hendricksons. These are followed by small, light colored mayflies, matched by patterns such as Light Cahill, Pale Evening Dun, or Sulfur Dun. A few giant mayflies of the genus Hexagenia do hatch on the Rifle River, but not enough to stimulate general feeding activity. In August, a substantial evening hatch of mayflies known locally as white millers takes place in the upper reaches of the river.

The Rifle River system, however, is mostly bait fishing water with anglers taking advantage of the fishing that occurs during the rainy seasons. This is especially true of the tributary streams since most are small and brushy.

Except for Skunk Creek and Ammond Creek, all the tributaries north of Selkirk can be described as good to excellent trout streams. Of these, Klacking, Houghton, Gamble, and Wilkins creeks are the best. Klacking Creek has an excellent population of brown trout with many fish larger than 14 inches and with some going over 20. Fishing is unusually a challenge on this stream due to its extreme clarity.

Gamble Creek is a fine coldwater brown trout tributary of the Rifle which enters it via a diversion ditch around the northwest end of Devoe Lake. The stream was diverted by the Conservation Department in the 1950's to lower temperatures in the Rifle. Now, instead of receiving warm surface flow from Devoe Lake in the summer, the upper Rifle received the cool waters of Gamble Creek.

Houghton Creek is an excellent trout feeder stream to the Rifle River and is large enough, after it is joined by Wilkins Creek, to support fly fishing. Incidentally, a previous State record brown trout of 36-5/8 inches, weighing 17 pounds, 5 ounces, was taken from this stream in 1952 by Harold Crawford of Cass City.

Although brown trout typically predominate in the tributaries of the Rifle, some fine brook trout are also present.

Of the tributaries which enter below Selkirk in Ogemaw County, only Eddy Creek can be considered a good trout stream. The West Branch of the Rifle, a sizable tributary, supports fair to good trout populations above Flowage Lake. From Flowage Lake to its confluence with the mainstream, the West Branch is considered non-trout. At this point, the West Branch represents about a third of the Rifle's drainage area.

In Arenac County the Rifle is joined by some fair brook and brown trout tributaries; namely, Curten, Hettinger, Burch, Richter, Bear, Big and Cedar Creeks. The mainstream down to the Old M-70 Bridge north of Sterling offers only fair fishing for brown trout. Below that warmwater species take over.

Each spring, the Rifle supports a tremendous sucker run from Saginaw Bay and Lake Huron. While most of the excitement and activity relative to this sucker run takes place in the lower Rifle near Omer, the run extends

to nearly all the waters in the system. For example, both Klacking and Prior creeks receive heavy runs.

The carp is another fish which is found in considerable numbers as a resident of parts of the stream and also spring run fish from the big lake. Concentrations of carp are usually found in the Rifle River Recreation Area in the vicinity of Grousehaven and Devoe lakes. Both of these lakes are connected to the Rifle River and also warrant special mention since they are capable of growing large brown trout (especially Grousehaven). Some of the large five to ten pound browns caught in the Rifle River in past years have probably been escapees from these lakes. Both lakes have resident populations of alewives, a rather unusual situation considering their distance from Lake Huron. Alewives, of course, are a good prey species and are an important food fish for growing big trout.

Unfortunately, adult sea lamprey have been taken from both Grousehaven and Devoe lakes too. The Rifle River system is known to be one of Lake Huron's largest producers and contributors of this noxious parasite. Chemical treatments to control lamprey began in 1969 and are continued on a regular schedule.

The Rifle River has considerable potential for supporting runs of steelhead, lake run brown trout, and coho and chinook salmon. Recent increases in steelhead runs have been especially encouraging. It is hoped that a good fishery for migrating trout and salmon can be developed over much of the mainstream.