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TROUT FISHING PROSPECTS FOR 1944

by

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Trout fishing should be good in 1944!

There are sound biological reasons for such a prediction. The fishing pressure on trout streams was less last year than for many years and there should have been an unusually good carry-over of large trout. Just how much less the fishing was on all waters no one can be exactly sure. The drop in license sales was ~~only~~ approximately 17 per cent over 1942--somewhat lower than had been expected--but this does not tell the whole story. The number of times the average angler was able to fish was certainly much less than in normal years. The turnout for the opening weekend was better than anticipated, but during the rest of the season a scarcity of anglers on all streams was noted. An indication of the drop in fishing pressure on trout waters comes from the recent tabulation by Louis Krumholz of creel census records of trout fishing submitted by conservation officers. Some 37 per cent fewer trout rep rts came in than during 1942. Incidentally, these showed that trout fishing was not quite as good for the state as a whole as in the previous year but that it was still above the average for the past six years. At the Hunt Creek Fisheries Experiment Station, where complete data on fishing have been kept since 1939, the fishing pressure in 1943 was down 54 per cent over 1942 according to a recent report by

David Shetter and Pat Galvin. However, the catch per fisherman-hour was the best so far recorded. All this means that if our trout streams were being over-fished prior to the war, they are getting a breathing spell now and the stock of larger trout should be building up.

The past two years have been unusually suitable for trout growth and survival. Cool, wet summers are not so pleasant or productive for fishermen but they do favor the trout. Stream temperatures were tolerable for much of the summer even far down our larger rivers and in other waters which are usually considered seasonal trout streams. Trout were not forced to concentrate in the spring holes as they must during prolonged periods of hot weather such as we experienced in the summer of 1936. High stream levels mean more water area and consequently more food production. Higher food production and a greater depth of water in pools together with cooler weather probably limit the fishing but are certainly favorable for the trout.

Likewise the last two winters, especially the one just past, have been comparatively mild in the north country. Prolonged sub-zero weather, which freezes the bays of the Great Lakes and the lower ends of the rivers, forces fish ducks wintering there up to the headwater trout streams. Studies by J. Clark Salyer and Karl Lagler have shown that when this happens the toll of trout may be considerable. They estimated conservatively that each fish duck will eat on the average five trout per day. If they took small trout the harm would be less but the average size of the fish in the stomachs of these predators was 5.8 inches and a considerable number were of legal size and larger. During severe winters, such as in 1935-1936, it is not unusual to count as many as a hundred fish ducks on a mile of stream. A little figuring will show that several weeks of such weather might reduce the trout stock considerably.

Mild winters are favorable to trout production also in that stream temperatures do not remain so low that trout cease to feed. Their growth and survival should therefore be better than during a severe winter.

Another reason for good trout catches in 1944 should be the Department's stocking program. Some radical changes have been made in recent years to conform with the findings of research. Fall plantings of fingerling and of legal-sized trout in streams have been discontinued and more fish are being carried over the winter for distribution just prior to and during the trout season. Lakes known to be suitable for trout were stocked last fall since over-winter losses in such waters have been found to be light. One of the objections to the legal-size program on streams and smaller lakes is that it produces undesirable concentrations of anglers. It seems logical that frequent, small plantings of trout in the small lakes and a wider distribution of fish on the streams would reduce these concentrations and spread the fishing over a longer period. Several planting boats are now being constructed and their use on the larger streams this season should make for more satisfactory stocking.

The number of legal-sized trout which can be reared and planted properly is limited by funds, available food and suitable holding ponds. Man-power and transportation are also at a premium these days but it is safe to predict that this season will see a larger and better distribution of legal-sized trout than has been possible heretofore. Such a program can be expanded almost indefinitely after the war if funds are made available, but the Department is not convinced that this may be the final answer to better trout fishing. When technical help is again to be had, demonstration areas will be set up on a number of representative trout streams to test the relative value and cost of heavy stocking and restrictions on the kill.

Very little stream and lake improvement was possible during the past year because of the prevailing labor shortage. The extent to which trout fishing may be improved on Michigan streams through the creation of additional pools is indicated by the results of the first controlled "before and after" test of such work. This experiment at the Hunt Creek Station, while incomplete, has so far shown an increase in the catch per hour of 54 per cent and a yield of legal trout more than double that secured before the new pools were created. Such work is limited by the funds available for construction and maintenance and also by the amount of water susceptible to improvement. Probably much of our trout water cannot be improved by any method which has yet been developed but every fisherman can recall stretches of "flat" water on almost every stream he has fished where pools and cover for trout were scarce. Plans are being formulated for an expansion in trout stream improvement when men and materials are again available. Even then no wholesale program of work will be undertaken. Careful inventories will precede construction and environmental improvement will be based upon a thorough knowledge of the factors which are limiting trout production.

It would be of little public benefit if trout fishing were maintained and improved unless access were assured and to many a trip north is not perfect unless they can camp along the stream. The State Supreme Court decision in the Taggart case is reassuring in that recognition of the public character of our trout streams has been upheld <u>once legal access is gained</u>. But to assure this access at reasonable intervals and to provide camping places, frontage must be secured by some public agency. Trout fishermen will find 19.5 miles of new access on northern streams this season and that added to the 13.8 miles acquired earlier in the program will furnish places where they know they will be welcome to enter the stream or to set up their camps.

No matter how favorable the preceding winter and regardless of man's best efforts to aid nature in producing a trout crop, there are other factors which affect the fishing. Every observant angler knows that a stream may be full of trout but if conditions are not right they will not strike. Even in fishing wilderness waters there are times when nothing will interest a fish. This is even more true for the heavily fished streams and it is fortunate that this is the case, otherwise they would soon be depleted. The Hunt Creek report for 1943 previously mentioned illustrates this point. The weekly average catch per hour of anglers using this stream varied from 0.46 to 1.19 legal trout during the season. The very best fishing came in the first two weeks in August! No trout have been stocked in this stream for several years so that the catch was not influenced by plantings. The fish were there earlier but did not feed most actively until water and weather conditions were favorable. Of course good catches were made earlier and later but the most consistently good fishing came in late summer. The same kind of results were noted in creel census studies made in other years on many of our best trout streams. Not that fishing is always best on most streams in August; the last half of June and the first half of July are generally the most favorable times for good trout fishing, but all of these records show that there are factors which make for good or poor fishing regardless of what may be done to improve it.

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