

TR 73-22

153. 7R-73-22

LIBRARY
INSTITUTE FOR FISHERIES RESEARCH
University Museums Annex
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104

MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

Fisheries Division

Technical Report: 73-22

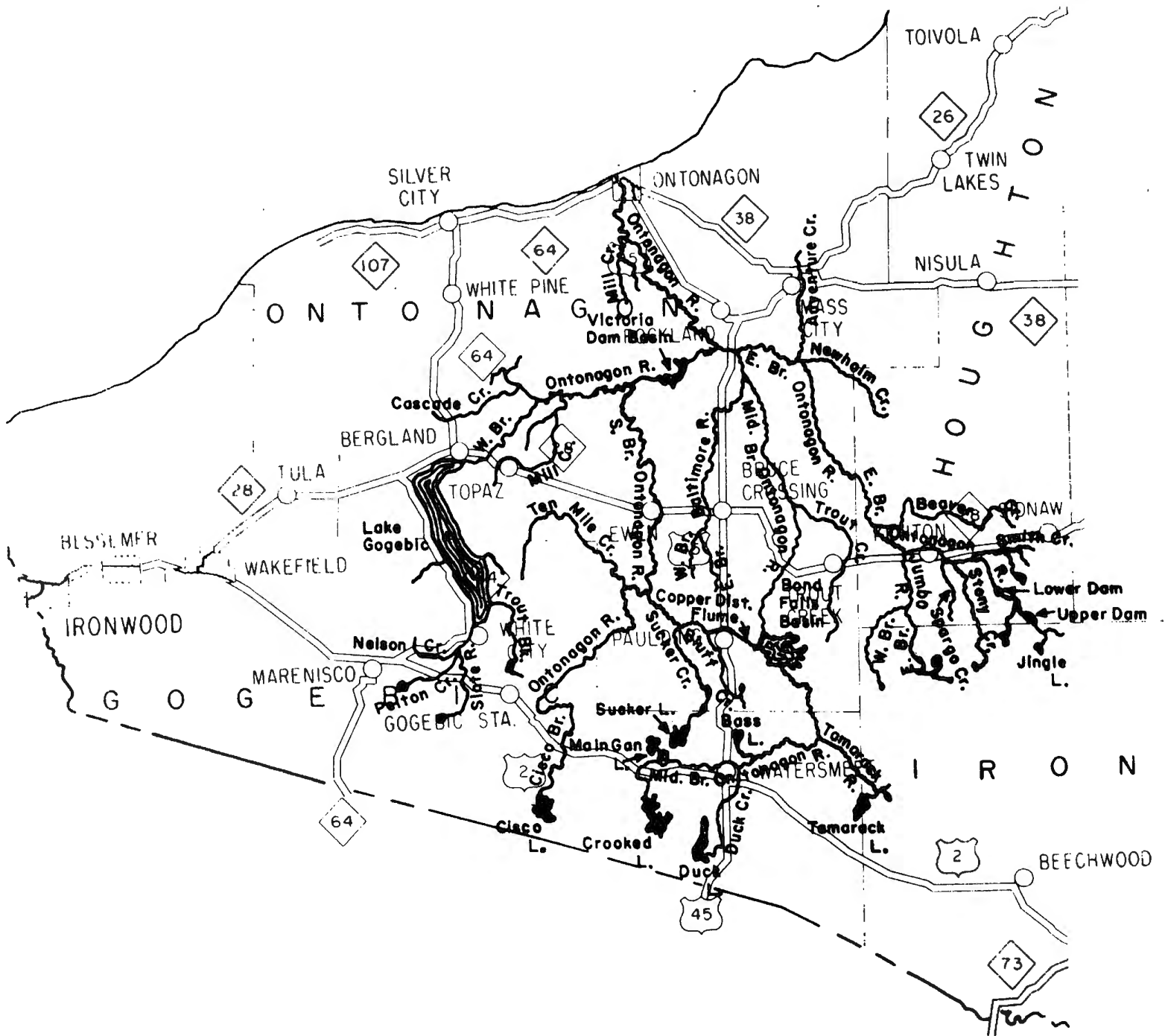
October, 1973

SERIES: THE TROUT STREAMS OF MICHIGAN

NO. 10 THE ONTONAGON RIVER

Raymond P. Juetten, Fisheries Biologist

THE TROUT STREAMS OF MICHIGAN
 "THE ONTONAGON RIVER"



SERIES: THE TROUT STREAMS OF MICHIGAN
NO. 10 THE ONTONAGON RIVER

Raymond P. Juetten, Fisheries Biologist

Ontonagon River - Mainstream

The Mainstream of the Ontonagon River begins near the village of Greenland in northeast Ontonagon County, and flows northeasterly for approximately 15 miles before reaching Lake Superior. It is fed by three major tributaries, the East Branch, the Middle Branch, and the West Branch.

The width of the mainstream varies considerably; in the upper reaches near the Military Hills it is 60-125 feet wide, the mid section near Grand Rapids is 125-150 feet wide, and the lower area near Ontonagon is 400-500 feet wide.

The current from Greenland downstream to Grand Rapids is swift and from Grand Rapids downstream to Ontonagon it is sluggish. The bottom has some gravel near Grand Rapids; over the remainder of the stream it is clay or a clay-sand mixture.

The stream flows through steeply rolling hills southeast of Grand Rapids and through a glacial lake plain northwest of Grand Rapids. The soil is a tight red clay and drainage is very poor. Forestry is the primary land usage although some dairy farming is practiced near the village of Ontonagon.

The stream banks slope gently away from the river and they vary in height usually averaging 15-30 feet. Some banks southeast of Grand Rapids are nearly vertical and range in height from 15-100 feet.

The old saying, "too thick to drink, too thin to plow", is a very fitting description for this stream. The water has a red clay color and the bottom is not visible even at a depth of a few inches. The stream is shallow enough for wading in most places southeast of Grand Rapids, however, because of this extreme turbidity deep pools cannot be easily distinguished and therefore, bank fishing is recommended.

Downstream from Grand Rapids most anglers use boats as the stream averages over 6 feet deep.

The Ontonagon supports an excellent warmwater and anadromous fishery and fishing pressure can be rated as high (for this region) throughout all of the open season.

In the spring anglers concentrate their efforts on steelhead. A variety of methods and lures are used, but spawn bag fishing is the most popular. Most steelhead fishing is done near the Military Hill area where Highway US-45 crosses the stream downstream to the Rockland-Victoria Road. Fishermen usually still-fish the deep pools. Steelhead up to 10 pounds have been reported, but the average size is 3-6 pounds. The run usually begins in mid-April and extends through mid-May.

In late May and extending through mid-September, anglers begin fishing walleyes, northern pike and suckers. They use boats to fish walleyes and northerns in the lower river upstream from Ontonagon. Walleyes and suckers are fished from the Military Hills downstream and beyond the Rockland-Victoria Road. In this area anglers fish from the banks.

The walleyes are quite large and abundant. A member of the Porcupine Mountains Sportsman's Club of White Pine landed a 15 pounder near Ontonagon in the summer of 1972. He claimed as did other club members, that larger walleyes have been hooked but couldn't be landed. Night-crawlers are the primary bait, and they are still-fished in deep pools.

Northerns are quite numerous although they don't approach trophy size as do the walleyes.

The suckers run the stream in late spring and they are present throughout most of the summer, and when the walleyes or northerns are not biting, many anglers fish suckers which are in demand for smoking, canning and are used as lake trout bait.

During the fall the brown trout migrate upstream from Lake Superior and anglers turn out in large numbers to catch these prized gamefish. The area around the US-45 Highway bridge is the most popular fishing spot. The run extends from late August through October. Still-fishing from the bank with spawn bags is the most popular angling method. The browns average 2-5 pounds, and occasionally one in the 8-10 pound class is caught. Although success is usually good, many anglers comment that they enjoy just sitting along the river, looking at the colored leaves and soaking up the last warm sun rays before winter.

East Branch Ontonagon River

Headwaters to Lower Dam Lake:

The East Branch Ontonagon River rises from Spring (Jingle) Lake located in northwest Iron County. The stream in this headwater area is generally less than 30 feet wide, it is quite shallow and the water color is brown. It flows through areas of extensive tag alder-spruce swamps which are interspersed by many beaver meadows.

The stream is joined by Preston Creek which rises from several small unnamed ponds and flows through swamp land. Suckers and creek chubs are its primary fish species.

Downstream from the mouth of Preston Creek, the remains of an old logging dam partially block the East Branch and this maintains an impoundment of about one mile in length and 1/4 mile wide. This impoundment, called Upper Dam Lake, is about two feet deep and it has a silt bottom. Residents say that 20-30 years ago this impoundment was much deeper and many large brook trout were caught here.

Below Upper Dam Lake the stream flows through steep rolling hills of mixed hardwood and coniferous forest. The gradient is moderate, the bottom is sand, and the banks are lined by tag alder.

Glitter Creek which rises from Glitter and Glare Lakes empties into the East Branch three miles downstream from Upper Dam Lake. This stream flows through marsh land and it is blocked by many old beaver dams. It flows through ten ponds before entering the East Branch. This tributary and Glitter Lake have an abundance of small northern pike, creek chubs, and suckers.

Approximately one mile downstream from the mouth of Glitter Creek, the U.S. Forest Service and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources maintain Lower Dam Lake and campground. This dam forms an impoundment of 17 acres on the East Branch. The dam was constructed in 1965 and the impoundment was planted annually with brook trout. Fishing was very good for three years after construction, however, rough fish and northern pike became abundant in 1968-1969 and trout plantings have been temporarily discontinued until the pond can be drawn down and chemically reclaimed -- a process that will have to be repeated every 4-5 years.

The East Branch from Spring Lake to Lower Dam Impoundment was once prime brook trout water, however, heavy siltation caused by the many old beaver dams and Upper Dam Impoundment make it presently unsuitable for trout production. These blockages probably warmed the waters making them more suitable to warmwater species than trout; the silt covered many trout spawning areas and thus the brook trout disappeared. To return this section of stream to trout water would require chemical reclamation and channel clearing. As this system is almost completely inaccessible with the exception of Upper Dam Impoundment and Lower Dam Impoundment, the costs are currently judged prohibitive.

Lower Dam Lake to Sparrow Rapids:

The East Branch below Lower Dam Lake flows through hilly hardwood forests on sandy loam soils. Tag alder and grasses line the stream banks.

The stream runs 30 feet wide and the current is rapid. Its water is light brown in color and the stream bottom is gravel and rock rubble. Except for several miles of stream east of Haystack Mountain cover is adequate consisting of logs, rocks, and some undercut banks. There are many riffles and deep fast pools suitable for trout spawning. The bottom type east of Haystack Mountain is rock rubble and boulders and several stream improvement devices (rock deflectors) installed in this area in the 1950's are still serving their intended purpose.

This part of the East Branch is prime brook and brown trout water, and steelhead migrate upstream as far as Lower Dam. It is open enough for pleasant fly fishing and there are caddis and mayfly hatches.

Brook and brown trout up to 15 inches are not unusual although the average brookie taken by anglers is 7-10 inches and the browns average 10-11 inches. Occasionally during the summer a brown in the 3-4 pound class is taken.

The stream is open to the extended trout and salmon season from the M-28 bridge at Kenton downstream. The spring steelhead run attracts anglers from long distances. Success in the vicinity of Kenton is good. As many as 30 anglers have been seen fishing the large pool under the M-28 bridge at Kenton during the peak of the run which usually occurs near the end of April. The fall brown trout run does not attract as many fishermen here as on the Mainstream, however, success is usually good for the few anglers who participate.

The Jumbo River is the largest tributary entering the East Branch in this section. Its average width is 25 feet; the flow is rapid and cover is plentiful consisting of logs and undercut banks; it has a sand and gravel bottom. The Jumbo receives a good steelhead run each spring and these fish usually spawn between M-28 and Jumbo River Falls two miles upstream. There is a good resident population of browns in the lower reaches of the Jumbo and a very few brooks. The East and West Branches of the Jumbo both contain good populations of brooks and some brown trout. Caddis hatches occur on this stream and there are mayfly and caddis hatches on the West Branch. The stream generally is not open enough for pleasant fly fishing, but a proficient fly fisherman would not have too much trouble.

Smith Creek, Spargo Creek, and Stony Creek enter the East Branch upstream from the mouth of the Jumbo. These three streams flow rapidly over a sand and gravel bottom and are 10-15 feet wide. In the lower reaches of Smith Creek the bottom is clay and this causes the stream to have a murky color and it clouds the East Branch for several hundred yards downstream from its mouth. These three tributaries contain brooks and browns, with Smith Creek having the largest population.

Sparrow Rapids to Mainstream:

Downstream from Sparrow Rapids the East Branch flows across a glacial till plain, the soils of which are silt loam and red clay. The water now begins to pick up the red clay color characteristic of much of the Ontonagon system. The stream has a sand and gravel bottom with some clay.

There are brook and brown trout near Sparrow Rapids, but the trout population thins downstream until it finally gives way to warmwater species near the mouth of Newholm Creek. Here the stream becomes sluggish.

Access between Sparrow Rapids and the mouth of the East Branch is limited and this may explain the light fishing pressure the stream gets. Most angling occurs near the mouth during the steelhead and brown trout runs where access is gained from US Highway 45.

Beaver Creek is the primary tributary below Sparrow Rapids and its color is quite murky as the bottom is primarily clay. There is a fair brook trout population present in the lower reaches, and there are few trout in the upper reaches. This stream is 5-10 feet wide and is seldom fished.

Middle Branch Ontonagon River

Crooked Lake to Bond Falls Basin:

The Middle Branch of the Ontonagon River begins at 565 acre Crooked Lake in eastern Gogebic County.

Between Crooked Lake and US Highway 2, it is 15-20 feet wide, and quite warm and shallow making it marginal for trout. It has a bottom of gravel, rock rubble, and sand and it flows rapidly through a mixed hardwood-coniferous forest of maple, yellow birch, aspen, and hemlock.

Near US-2 the stream enters a lowland area and the banks become lined with tag alder. Its average width is 20 feet. The bottom changes slightly in that there is little rock rubble. Current velocity slows and the numerous deep pools have silted bottoms. The water temperature at this point decreases and brook, brown, and rainbow trout are quite numerous; brooks being the most plentiful. There are caddis hatches here, however, because of overhanging tag alder, casting would be difficult.

The stream is not wadable from US-2 downstream to the mouth of Wolf (Ma-In-Gan) Lake Creek. Most anglers use canoes or rubber rafts to fish this stretch (canoes can be rented at a livery located on US-2 about one mile west of Watersmeet). Wolf Lake Creek is a warmwater stream and suckers, perch, and largemouth bass are quite abundant in the Middle Branch near the mouth of this creek.

Below the mouth of Wolf Lake Creek to USFS Road 171, the stream widens to about 4 feet and is wadable although deep pools are common. The bottom is a mixture of sand and gravel. The banks are lined with tag alder, but these do not extend too far out over the stream and it can be easily fly fished. Cover consists mostly of logs and undercut banks. Mayfly and caddis hatches occur here and this is a very popular fishing area. Brook trout are the most abundant species and they average 7-9 inches although some are taken in the 12-14 inch class.

Browns up to 4 pounds are taken occasionally, but they usually run 10-12 inches as do the rainbows.

Duck Creek joins the Middle Branch at Watersmeet. This is a small cold water stream which rises from Duck Lake and flows roughly 7 miles of lowland choked with tag alder. It has an excellent population of large brook trout and some large browns. (A Watersmeet angler caught a 9 pounder from the Duck in 1971.)

Boniface Creek also enters the Middle Branch near Watersmeet. This creek drains Bass Lake which is a muskellunge brood stock lake. The lake contains an abundant population of northern pike, perch, crappies and largemouth bass. Occasionally when spring water levels are excessively high, these fish are able to escape over the outlet weir at Bass Lake and they migrate down to the Middle Branch, and from there they move on to Bond Falls Basin. These fish are sometimes caught by trout fishermen on the Middle Branch, and after a long battle and visions of a trophy brown trout, some anglers are quite "disappointed" when a northern pike or muskellunge is finally landed.

From USFS Road 171 downstream to the mouth of the Tamarack River, the current velocity slows down considerably. The stream flows through many old beaver meadows and it is nearly 200 feet wide in places. This is called the "spreads" and there are very few trout here, with the primary species being suckers and perch, and the occasional northern and muskellunge. The stream bottom consists of sand and silt, and commonly reaches depths to 15 feet.

The Tamarack River enters the Middle Branch at the lower end of the spreads. This gentle brown colored stream becomes too warm for trout in June and it receives little fishing pressure after that time. Brook trout migrate upstream, sometimes as far as Tamarack Lake where ice fishermen catch them in good numbers. Fish up to two pounds have been reported.

Below the mouth of the Tamarack River the gradient of the Middle Branch steepens. From this point to Bond Falls the river averages 40 feet wide and has a sand-gravel bottom with some rock rubble and boulders. Cover in the form of logs and undercut banks is abundant, and the stream is wadable although frequently they must leave the stream to get around deep pools. The upland is covered with hardwoods, and tag alders line the banks.

There is a USFS campground at Burned Dam located near Mex-i-min-e Falls. This scenic spot is the starting point for float fishing trips downstream 5-6 miles to USFS Road 172 (also called Interior Road after the now abandoned town of Interior). The stream is wadable but floating is the only means of access between these two points.

Mayfly and caddis hatches occur and this is an area easily fly fished, although bait fishing is preferred by local anglers. This is beautiful trout water and it has a good population of brooks and browns, and a small population of rainbows. Brook trout in this region are probably of a larger size than found through most other areas of the Middle Branch, this may be a reflection of the remoteness of this section.

The quality of trout fishing from the Interior Road bridge decreases as you move downstream toward Bond Falls Basin, a 2,200 acre reservoir used as a holding basin for water diversion to Victoria Dam. (This reservoir is connected to Bluff Creek by means of a man-made channel, and Bluff Creek flows into Sucker Creek which in turn enters the Cisco Branch of the Ontonagon). The reservoir has a large population of northern pike, smallmouth and largemouth bass, walleye, and a variety of panfishes, and muskellunge which escaped Bass Lake are also occasionally taken by anglers. The largest northern reported from Bond Falls Basin in 1971 was 31 pounds and a 33 pounder was caught there in 1972 by a Crystal Falls angler.

The dam at Bond Falls has a bottom release and river temperatures below the dam are up to 10⁰F cooler than temperatures upstream on the Middle Branch near the Interior Road bridge.

Bond Falls to Agate Falls:

The Middle Branch from Bond Falls to Agate Falls is considered by many anglers as being the finest trout water in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Avid fly fishermen from many states make annual fishing trips to this stream. One Illinois angler wrote he had fished here annually for the past 50 years; a Wisconsin angler wrote he had been coming here for 30 years; a New York angler said he fished the river since 1954. This section is famous for its brook and brown trout fishing. It has good hatches, and this scenic stream is easily fished and is wadable. The flow is rapid and cover consisting of boulders and logs is plentiful. There is a good mixture of deep fast pools and riffles. The banks are lined with cedar, balsam, pine, maple and some tag alder. The relief of the surrounding country is quite steep with many hills and deep depressions. This six mile (lineally) stretch is quite inaccessible, with most fishing done upstream from M-28. It can be reached elsewhere via logging trails.

Agate Falls to East Branch-Ontonagon River:

Agate Falls located about one quarter mile downstream from highway M-28 is a barrier to upstream migrations of steelhead. This beautiful falls attracts many visitors each summer, and is a popular steelhead fishing spot.

For one half mile below Agate Falls the stream has light brown colored water, about 35 feet wide, and flows over a bottom of rock rubble and gravel. There is an abundance of deep fast pools, and good steelhead spawning riffles. The velocity is rapid and the stream flows through an area of steep relief. The stream is wadable and it has the appearance of a beautiful trout stream, however, there are few trout other than steelhead taken here.

Brooks and browns become quite numerous about a mile downstream where the velocity moderates. The topography here is more gentle and the soils are red clay. The stream color now changes from light brown to the red color typical of much of the Ontonagon system. The stream has good cover and the bottom is gravel.

As the stream flows northerly it is fed by numerous small cold feeder tributaries. These streams are used by brooks and browns for spawning. The Baltimore River and Trout Creek are the major tributaries and they have good populations of brook trout. The lower reaches of these streams are clay colored.

There are only logging roads or trails for access between Agate Falls and East Branch, and therefore, fishing pressure is low.

Trout populations give way to warmwater species near South Military Hill, and from this point on, suckers are the primary species of fish present.

West Branch Ontonagaon River

This stream begins at Lake Gogebic in western Ontonagon County and it flows easterly through mixed hardwood forests of maple and aspen for approximately 20 miles (lineally) until it joins the Ontonagon River near Victoria. This area is characterized by high ridges and deep valleys; slopes are steep and rock outcrops are abundant; soils are sandy loams.

Approximately three miles upstream from the mouth of the West Branch, the Upper Peninsula Power Company maintains Victoria Dam. The dam forms a reservoir of about 2 miles in length and 1/4 to 1/2 mile wide. The reservoir was drawn down in 1971 so repairs could be made on the dam; when the reservoir was recharged the Fisheries Division planted the impoundment with walleye fry. Prior to draw-down it contained panfish, walleye and northern pike.

Upstream from the impoundment the stream flow is rapid and the river is 30-60 feet wide. The water is turbid although not nearly as clouded as the Main Ontonagon.

The stream is said to be canoeable from Norwich Road down to Victoria Dam, however, during periods of low water, protruding rocks

and boulders make canoeing difficult. One local canoe enthusiast commented that the most enjoyable part of his trip was taking his canoe out at Victoria Dam. Canoeing from Lake Gogebic downstream to Norwich Road is not recommended.

There is a fair population of smallmouth bass, walleyes and northern pike in the West Branch, however, there is very little fishing pressure on this stream. Most fishing pressure occurs downstream from Victoria Dam where anglers fish steelhead and walleyes in the spring.

A possible reason for the low fishing effort is the limited access. The stream is accessible at three points along its entire length, namely at M-28 near Bergland, at the Norwich Road bridge and at Victoria Dam.

Cascade Creek enters the West Branch upstream from the Norwich Road, and this is the only coldwater tributary entering the stream from the north. It is a small swift trout stream, 6-20 feet wide. Its banks are lined with tag alder and it has excellent rock and log cover. Some beaver dams are present and contain brookies up to 10 inches. There is very little spawning gravel in Cascade Creek, but Bush Creek, its major tributary, has extensive gravel spawning riffles. Cascade Creek is accessible via U.S. Forest Service Road 222. It is not open enough for fly fishing.

The South Branch Ontonagon River enters the West Branch in the vicinity of Sandstone Rapids. This stream rises from Cisco Lake in Gogebic County and it is called the Cisco Branch-Ontonagon River from Cisco Lake downstream to Eighteen Mile Rapids. From that point to its confluence with the West Branch it is called the South Branch.

The Cisco Branch from Cisco Lake downstream to Kakabika Falls is classified as a top quality warmwater mainstream. The stream flows through many beaver meadows and swamp land and is lined with tag alder. The bottom is gravel, boulders and sand. Due to shallow water, boulders, and rapid current canoeing is not recommended. The stream contains smallmouth bass and some walleyes but receives little fishing pressure.

The Cisco Branch between Kakabika Falls and Eighteen Mile Rapids is classified as top quality trout water. The stream flows through highlands, characterized by strong local relief, and sandy loam soils. Several small cold water tributaries enter and this combined with ground water seepage and lower water temperatures to favor brook and brown trout. Fishing pressure is light, as the only access from Kakabika Falls to Eighteen Mile Rapids is via US Forest Service Road 178. It is open enough for fly fishing.

Sucker Creek is the largest and most significant cold water tributary entering the Cisco Branch. This rapidly flowing stream is 15-30 feet wide, it has an abundance of spawning gravels and cover, and it contains an excellent brook trout population and a few browns. Forest Service Road 527 crosses it approximately 1 1/2 miles west of Paulding and fishing pressure is quite heavy in this vicinity. The stream is not open enough for fly fishing.

The South Branch Ontonagon River from Eighteen Mile Rapids downstream to the West Branch is classified as a top quality warmwater mainstream. All the tributaries entering the South Branch below Eighteen Mile Rapids are warmwater streams and this is the reason for the sudden change in classification. The most notable warmwater tributary is Ten Mile Creek.

Heavy summer rains are capable of raising this stream level 3-4 feet in a very short time, and spring floods usually raise the water level 10-12 feet.

Just below Ewen the river slows but the remainder of the stream is swift otherwise. Approximately a mile below Ewen, rapids begin and this characterizes the stream for the remainder of its course.

The South Branch supports fair smallmouth and walleye near Ewen, but it is not heavily fished.

The water color throughout the Cisco-South Branch is brown and the stream becomes quite turbid below Ewen. The stream runs 30-60 feet wide throughout its length.