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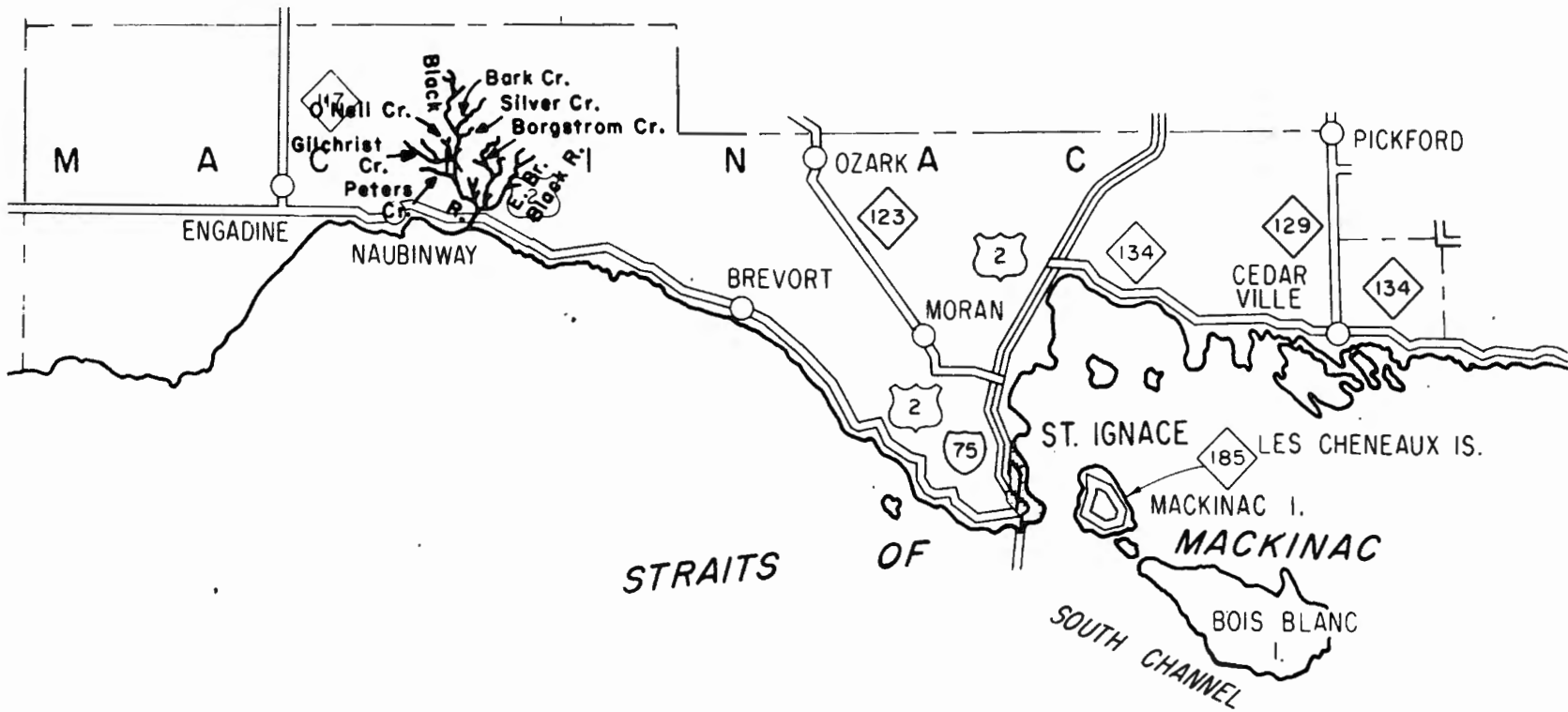
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SERIES: THE TROUT STREAMS OF MICHIGAN

NO. 5 THE BLACK RIVER

William J. Gruhn, Fisheries Biologist

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The Black River, flowing south through western Mackinac County to Lake Michigan, once supported a shingle mill, annual log drives, and good rainbow runs. It still flows much as it did when the original surveys were made in 1849. The Black River got its name because its water is darkly stained (black in appearance) from drainage of the surrounding bogs. It drains approximately 42 square miles and water temperatures rarely exceed 68⁰F, even in the lower end.

It is bridged by the Hiawatha Trail, the Peter's Creek Truck Trail at the Black River Forest Campground, the Black River Truck Trail, the Flowing Well Truck Trail, the Borgstrom Truck Trail, the Strickler Truck Trail and U.S. Highway 2. The surrounding lands are largely under the jurisdiction of the Mackinac State Forest with only scattered blocks under private ownership.

The river system is formed by the main branch and two major tributaries: the East Branch of Black River and Borgstrom Creek. There are several smaller tributaries: Peter's Creek, Silver Creek, Bark Creek, Gilchrist Creek (named by writer), O'Neil Creek, Brennan Lake outlet and four unnamed tributaries which add lesser amounts of water.

Borgstrom Creek

One of the major tributaries, Borgstrom Creek, flows through a low, swampy bog containing numerous small knobs and ridges covered by swamp hardwoods and hemlock, black spruce and balsam fir. It originates from two unnamed lakes southwest of Garnet and one unnamed creek. This creek is clear and spring fed with moderate flow. The soils in the watershed consist of loose sands of the Saugatuck, Brimley, Roscommon, and Wallace types and Greenwood peat.

The bottom is characterized by sand and limited spawning quality gravel (below the Flowing Well Truck Trail) plus mud and debris in the deeper holes. There are several active beaver dams and a couple abandoned dams creating pools along its course.

Brook trout, rainbow trout, muddlers and several species of small minnows are found in this stream. Most of the trout present are sublegal and don't offer much to the angler. However, this stream is important to the rest of the system as a reproduction and nursery area.

East Branch

The East Branch, the other major tributary, also originates just southeast of Garnet. It flows south and then west to join Borgstrom Creek near its mouth. The East Branch flows through a swampy bog

dotted with small knobs and ridges covered by swamp hardwoods, hemlock, black spruce and balsam fir. The soils are the same loose sand and peat found around Borgstrom Creek.

The clear, spring fed waters of the East Branch run rapid in its headwaters but become sluggish in the lower stretches. The river bed is characterized by stretches of spawning quality gravel and sand with mud and debris in pools and eddies. There are a few beaver dams along its course.

The East Branch has brook trout and the associated species found in Borgstrom Creek, but it also enjoys yearly runs of smelt, white and longnose suckers and steelhead. The upper end of this stream is principally a nursery area, with few fish of legal size. There is, however, an abundance of food available, namely stoneflies, caddis and mayflies which put excellent growth on young fish.

Mainstream

The mainstream of the Black originates in a blueberry marsh in Section 24 of T43N, R9W and flows south, picking up a small unnamed brook before it is joined by Bark Creek. Bark Creek--flowing from an open blueberry marsh--is a small, shallow, brown stained creek with a sand, rock and mud bottom. Its fish population includes brook trout, rainbow trout, muddlers and small minnows. The Black is small and dark in this area and its bottom is soft sand and mud plus some gravel, rock rubble and an occasional limestone out-cropping. The stream is dotted with abandoned beaver dams and log jams. It holds brook trout, muddlers, and small minnows, with few trout reaching legal size.

The mainstream down from the mouth of Bark Creek varies from 10 to 30 feet in width, and flows fairly rapidly. It flows through an area of low swamp bog, loose sands, and peat with swamp hardwood, hemlock, black spruce and balsam fir cover.

From below the Hiawatha Trail to its confluence with the East Branch it is rimmed by high, steep banks. Found here are brook, brown and rainbow trout, and muddlers. While only brook trout reach legal size, lake run rainbows begin adding to the creel in this stretch around old U.S. 2 (Hiawatha Trail).

Below the confluence with Bark Creek, the mainstream picks up three small, clear, spring fed feeder streams: Silver, Gilchrist and O'Neil Creeks. They provide spawning habitat for brook trout but very little fishing (except when impounded by beaver).

The Black River from Gilchrist Creek to the Black River Forest Campground is 30 to 40 feet wide and up to 5 feet deep. Its flow is rapid and its bottom is hard sand, gravel with silt and debris in the deeper holes. Its course is dotted with limestone out-cropping, log jams and old beaver dams.

The river here flows entirely through state-owned land and consequently access is good. The two campgrounds and Black River Truck Trail which follows the river closely make it a popular fishing and camping area. There are two old dam sites here that further enhance its scenic value.

The Upper Dam, used for water storage during the logging days, was located about 200 feet above the section line in the southeast 1/4 of the southeast 1/4 of Section 12. Logs were cut and skidded to the river below the dam and floated downstream on high spring waters. The reservoir was used to maintain adequate water levels (not too high) until the logs reached Lake Michigan. The substrate in this area is made up of bedrock covered by a thin layer of soil. This condition does not facilitate the water from thaws or rainstorms soaking into the soil, but rather causes flash floods. The logs were then rafted and floated to the mill in Naubinway. The logging operations in this area around 1890 which closely coincides with the burning of the mill in Naubinway terminated. All that remains of this dam are the old logs that tied it into the banks. One of the two campgrounds, a small one, is located just above this dam along the east bank.

The other dam, called the Shingle Mill Dam was located just below the Peter's Creek Truck Trail in Section 13. The old stone abutments and pine pilings are all that remain, causing a constriction and rapids in the stream bed. The larger of the two campgrounds (The Black River Forest Campground) is located just above this dam. The Shingle Mill discontinued operations about 1890, probably due to a poor location for a hydro-powered mill. The stream in this area is confined by steep banks.

The fish present here are rainbow trout, brown trout, young coho salmon, muddlers and white suckers. There are also runs of rainbow and brown trout, coho salmon, smelt and white and longnose suckers. This stream gets light to moderate pressure by fishermen from the Upper Dam at the campground to its mouth.

Peter's Creek flows into the mainstream of the Black River just north of Peter's Creek Truck Trail. It is a small, clear water stream dotted by occasional beaver dams containing brook and rainbow trout (including steelhead), sculpins and small minnows. The trout are largely small fish but this stream has a reputation for good fishing behind its beaver dams. It contains good spawning habitat for trout.

The Black from the forest campground downstream to its confluence with the East Branch flows through rapids and pools for the first half mile, then slows down to alternating pools and slicks. The bottom is hard sand and gravel with silt and debris in the holes. It is an inviting place to fish. The terrain here is loose sandy soils covered by lowland hardwoods and some aspen.

The rainbow and brown trout, white suckers and muddlers that inhabit this stretch are seasonally joined by white and longnose suckers, smelt, rainbow, brown trout, and coho salmon.

The Black River between the East Branch and Lake Michigan is fairly sluggish, flowing over a sandy bottom. Its principal fish are nine-spined stickleback, white suckers, juvenile rainbow, and small minnows, but it receives runs of rainbow and brown trout, coho salmon, smelt, and white and longnose suckers. It gets moderate to heavy pressure from steelhead, smelt and sucker fishermen.

Aerial photographs of this area show the terracing caused by the receding lakeshore; and when looking at this area, you will see alternating low boggy strips covered with black spruce and cedar separated by rubicon sand ridges covered with jack, white and red pine.

There is one commercial fisherman still operating out of the Black River and selling his wares (smoked whitefish and menominee) in a Fish House on Highway U.S. 2 just east of the river.

The Black River has long supported fine runs of steelhead. Many of the old timers in the area can recall dipping these lake run rainbows by the bushel basket full, just below the old Shingle Mill, in the early 1900's. Since the destructive sea lamprey has been brought under control in Lake Michigan the local fishermen will admit, reluctantly, that some very nice runs of rainbow trout (both spring and fall runs) are beginning to return plus some large lake run browns and coho salmon. These large rainbows begin entering the stream in mid-September and have retreated back to Lake Michigan by the following June.

As was generally the case, the good rainbow spawning streams were also used heavily by the dreaded sea lamprey. However, with the discovery and use of T.M.F. Lampricide, lamprey numbers have been drastically reduced.