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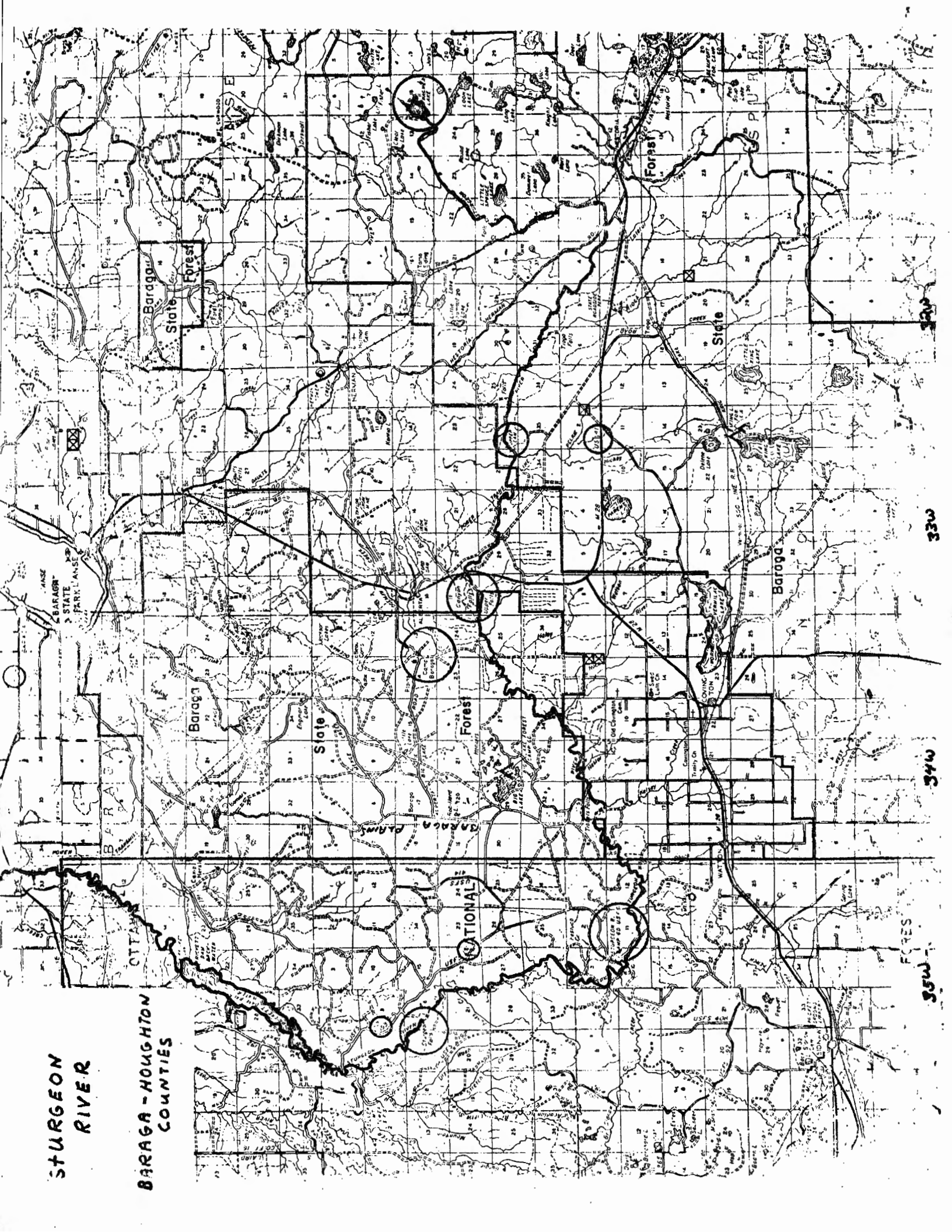
SERIES: THE TROUT STREAMS OF MICHIGAN

NO. 32 STURGEON RIVER

Raymond P. Juetten, Fisheries Biologist

STURGEON RIVER

BARAGA - HOUGHTON COUNTIES



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The Sturgeon River begins at Wagner Lake (T49N, R32W, Sec. 14) in central Baraga County. It flows southerly to the village of Nestoria, then westerly to Prickett Backwaters in Houghton County, then north to Portage Lake. Its watershed is 705 square miles and it flows mostly through forest land either in public or corporate ownership. It is classified as a warmwater stream from Highway M-38 north, where it flows through agricultural land. The remainder of the stream and all tributaries except for the top-quality Otter River are classified as second quality trout water because of limited spawning areas and warm temperatures. The Sturgeon crosses several county roads and state highways but access between these roads is difficult because of the wild nature of the surrounding country. Some stretches of the stream are canoeable and wildlife along the river is abundant making a canoe trip a pleasurable experience. As a general rule, trout fishing over most of the stream above M-38 is good early in the season. After that, fish and fishermen tend to concentrate in the spring areas. Fishing in the tributaries with the exception of the Otter River (which is covered in a separate report) is rated as poor.

Wagner Lake - Baraga Plains Road

Several miles below Wagner Lake the Sturgeon joins Tama Creek and it flows south to Nestoria and then west toward the Baraga Plains. This lowland river valley is between 100 yards to one-half mile in width. Vegetation is primarily tag alder, marsh grass and black spruce. The stream is 20-40 feet wide and wadable from the headwaters to about a mile below the Herman-Nestoria road. The water color is nearly black. There are many deep pools and boulders, and riffles are numerous. Creek chubs are abundant and some large brook trout are taken for about two weeks after the season opens. French spinners and small daredevils work best. Aquatic insects are nearly nonexistent.

Below the Herman-Nestoria road downstream to Upper Dam (an old log sluice dam) the river increases to about 100+ feet in width and 10-15 foot depths. It is not wadable and bank fishing is difficult because of the marshy conditions. Oxbows are numerous in this deep, slow moving stretch. There is a logging trail in Section 35, T49N, R33W which goes north toward this area. The road ends about 100 yards from the stream. By portaging a small boat or canoe with a motor to the river and then motoring for about one hour upstream past the mouth of the Tioga Creek, access can be gained to some good brook trout fishing. The entire trip takes about 12 hours and its for the angler who doesn't mind some hard work and who wants to be alone. Twelve-inch brookies are common and nightcrawlers or minnows fished on bottom work best. In all probability, trout move into this stretch when the stream above and below warms up. Spring seeps and the depth account for the favorable temperatures.

Below Upper Dam the river is about 50 feet wide and it flows through hardwood forest. It is wadable to US-41. Rock riffles and pools are numerous. Boulders provide good cover. The bottom is slippery and felt-soled waders are recommended.

Canyon and Upper Falls downstream from US-41 are very scenic. A hiking trail leads to these falls, but there are very few fish in this vicinity. Fishing is better downstream from the mouth of Plumbago Creek which is several miles below the falls.

There is a four wheel drive trail to the mouth of this creek. The road goes in a southerly direction from Camp Baraga, a DNR correctional facility.

The river from the mouth of Plumbago Creek to the Baraga Plains road is a pleasant 5 hour canoe trip. Beaver and otter are numerous as are other forms of wildlife. There are brooks, browns and rainbow here, however, there are also some hammer handle northern pike. Many of the large, deep pools have spring seeps running into them and fishing is best near these during the summer. This is also a good area to float for ducks in the fall.

#### Baraga Plains Road - Prickett Dam

Below the Baraga Plains road upland relief is quite steep and the stream gradient increases. The bottom goes from sand to rock rubble and rainbows are the most abundant trout available. They are rarely over 12 inches in length. The stream is wadable and because of its 50-75 foot width fly fishing is easily done. An Adams, number 10-12 is a good choice. The stream is not canoeable from the Baraga Plains Road to the USFS Campground on USFS Road 191.

Below the USFS Campground there are numerous riffles up to 50 yards in length followed by long deep pools. These pools can be fished from the bank. A few large brook trout are taken but small rainbows and some browns make up most of the catches. The stream flows parallel to USFS Road 191 down to Prickett Backwaters. It is about a 1- 1 1/2 mile walk into the stream. Because of the steep terrain and swampy conditions, this is a "long" mile to walk. About 3 miles below the campground the bottom changes from rock and gravel to sand. Trout are nearly nonexistent from here to Prickett Backwaters. Some rainbows are caught in a few deep pools along the way but generally fishing is not good.

Near the junction of USFS roads 191 and 193 the stream flows through a sandstone outcrop which forms the Sturgeon Falls and Gorge. It is a 1 1/2 mile walk to these falls from USFS 193, and the trail is marked. The gorge is about 50 feet deep and the falls are about 20 feet in height. Immediately below the falls the bottom is sandy downstream to Prickett Backwaters and the stream is too warm for trout.

The stream can be canoed from the USFS Campground on USFS Road 191 downstream to Prickett Dam in about 14 hours during the spring only. The portage around the gorge area is very difficult and the gorge area is not signed along the stream so caution must be exercised if any canoeing is done, as once you enter the gorge there is no way out.

#### Prickett Dam - Highway M-38

The last stretch of trout water on the Sturgeon is below Prickett Dam to M-38. The river is about 75 feet wide and riffles and deep pools are common.

This area receives a good steelhead run each spring and a run of anadromous browns each fall. The steelhead run begins in early April and the brown run usually in early September. These fish are caught mostly on spawn bags.

During the summer months brown fishing is very good here. There are few brook trout as temperatures are marginal. The stream and its tributaries provide little trout reproduction so in 1974 a brown stocking program was resumed. The stream had been stocked previously in the 1950's and early 1960's. By the fall of 1976 the 1974 planted fish were 19-22 inches and those planted in 1975 were in the 15 inch class. This fishery is well accepted but local anglers are quite secretive about their success.

Here the river flows through hardwood forest and the bottom is 60% sand and the remainder is gravel and rock rubble. It is about an 8 hour canoe trip from Prickett Dam to M-38. There is one rapids about 4 miles below Prickett Dam. At the lower end of the rapids there is a 3-4 foot falls. The stream is subject to daily flow fluctuations because of the operation of Prickett Dam, a hydroelectric generating facility. When the gates are closed the stream is generally about 2 feet lower than when they are open.

Canoeists should check at the dam before going downstream because when the dam is closed the stream is too shallow for a pleasant trip.