

THE OUTDOORS PAGE

STEELHEAD TROUT



THE FISH OF WINTER

By STEVE POLLICK and JEFF BASTING

The steelhead trout is the fish of winter, a sleek, pink-striped, chrome-plated predator that haunts northern Ohio's Lake Erie tributaries from September through April.

It is known among angling enthusiasts — "steelheaders" — for its speed, size, and strength. These are all attributes that cause men and women to bundle up like the Pillsbury Doughboy and wade into icy streams and freeze their fingertips to entice a "silver bullet" onto a hook.

Taxonomically, the steelhead is simply a rainbow trout, *Oncorhynchus mykiss*. But while the rainbow is a fine fish in its own right, it is a stream homebody. It pales in bulk and brawn alongside the steelhead, the heritage of which is rooted in a wanderlust that draws it from stream to big water and bigger prey.

Ohio steelhead average 20 to 25 inches long and average five to six pounds, but the state record was 20.97 pounds and 36.5 inches long. A 30-inch, 10-pounder is a handful on a fishing rod, as any steelheader will attest.

"[The Ohio steelhead] is just like the Pacific strain of rainbows that spends its time in the river and then moves downstream to the Pacific Ocean," explains

Kevin Kayle, supervisor of the state's Fairport Harbor Fish Research Station.

"We have a small amount of natural reproduction in the Lake Erie watershed," he said. "But it is by no means enough to sustain the fishing we have going now." Indeed, angling circles regard Ohio's steelhead fishery as world class.

Other than an estimate of "tens of thousands," it is not known how many fishermen consider themselves dedicated steelheaders. Mr. Kayle said that an intensive survey is under way by Ohio Division of Wildlife creel clerks with the aim of finding that out.

In Ohio the vast majority of steelhead begin life in the Castalia State Fish Hatchery in Erie County, where eggs and milt are stripped from "breeder" stock, then incubated, hatched, and reared to yearling size of five to seven inches. Some 400,000 yearlings annually are planted in five central Lake Erie tributaries — the Vermilion, Rocky, Chagrin, and Grand rivers, and Conneaut Creek. The latter stream also receives stockings by neighboring Pennsylvania.

Several other north-central and northeast Ohio tributaries have fishable runs of steelies, some of which come close but do not quite home in on the water to which they were planted and imprinted.

Thus the Cuyahoga River, Arcola Creek, and Ashtabula River also have sizeable steelhead runs.

Strays may show up anywhere in the Erie watershed, including the Maumee and Sandusky rivers and their tributaries.



MIKE MAINHART PHOTO

Shallow running steelhead.

These southwestern Lake Erie streams are warmer and muddier and not well suited to steelhead-stocking. Besides, biologists did not want to interfere with the renowned walleye runs here.

Today's Ohio steelhead trace their roots to Michigan's Little Manistee River strain, which in turn arose from rainbows stocked from California and Washington

way back in the late 1800s.

"Over time those fish adapted to Great Lakes conditions," explained Mr. Kayle. "Their survival, their fitness, is good for Lake Erie and all the Great Lakes."

In the 1970s and 1980s Ohio developed its own strain of rainbows, the London strain, named after the state hatchery at London, Ohio. But in trials the Little Manistee fish proved superior and now they are reared and stocked exclusively.

Indeed, steelhead are preferred in Lake Erie over chinook [king] or coho salmon because they offer more bang for the buck. While steelhead and the salmon are cousins in the salmonid family, the trout will return to their natal streams to spawn multiple times. With the salmon it is once and done — as in dead done.

Steelhead ply the open colder, deeper waters of Lake Erie by summer, principally feeding on schools of smelt and emerald shiners. Late September brings on the spawning urge and fish stage off the river mouths, gradually making their ways upstream.

If the fish were to stay in the streams into summer, they would die, Mr. Kayle noted, for they generally do not tolerate heat well. Water temperatures lowering into the 50s and below and moderate to heavy stream flows, which are ever

weather-dependent, trigger pulses or runs of fish.

"It gets better all the way to April," Mr. Kayle summed. "We keep getting new runs of fish, too." Fresh-run fish are marked by the bright, silvery color and pink lateral "racing stripe." Fish that have stayed in a stream for a while — known as winter fish — turn darker and the stripe turns redder.

The biologist considers ideal fishing conditions as those of moderate flow with water "clear and green," that is, slightly stained. Low and crystal clear flows, or high and brown are much less fishable.

An excellent primer on steelhead fishing, complete with links to detailed stream fishing maps and tactics, is available online at ohiodnr.com.

But Mr. Kayle said that as steelheaders have grown more experienced and sophisticated, they are trending away from spinning tackle to more challenging fly fishing tackle.

"In the last 10 years fly fishing has really taken off for steelhead." And taking off is just what a silver bullet does when an angler connects.

Contact Steve Pollick at: spollick@theblade.com or 419-724-6068.



MIKE MAINHART PHOTO

Steelhead run the shallows, half out of the water, at the mouth of Trout Run neighboring northwest Pennsylvania's hatchery stream, which is off-limits to fishing. The fish actually wiggle across an exposed sandbar to reach the stream from the lake.



STEVE POLLICK PHOTO



MIKE MAINHART PHOTO



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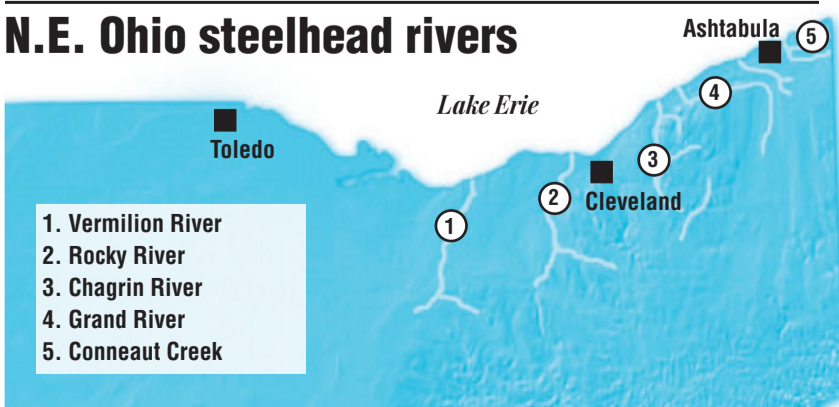
Top left: A steelhead caught on a sack of spawn. Left: A leaping steelhead ascending a Lake Erie tributary. Above: A lineup of steelheaders casting the Lake Erie shoreline as steelhead stage just offshore prior to running the streams in autumn.



STEVE POLLICK PHOTO

A handful of steelhead fishing flies: Left, a brown woolly bugger; center, two egg imitations, and right, a black leech.

N.E. Ohio steelhead rivers



STEVE POLLICK PHOTO

Veteran steelheader Phil Hillman admires a 31-inch male 'winter' steelhead he teased out of Conneaut Creek.