

North Shore Steelhead Report

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Our very own Kevin Wilson with a BC steelhead

Early Season Steelhead

By Tom Armstrong



Here in Northwestern Ontario at this time of year, we would typically expect to be burdened by mounds of snow, with visions of snow shovelling, or making that one last trip out on the ice, and enduring the usual weeks and weeks of cold sloppy weather.

As it looks now, we are weeks ahead of schedule, and find ourselves packing away those shovels and the ice fishing gear, and for those anxious steelhead anglers, watching and waiting for that open water to flow.

Typically, anglers are anxiously awaiting the end of March or early April for those first rivers to crack, but this year anglers are getting early opportunities to run their float, or make a drift through open water on their favourite river.

With this early opened water, come different challenges for anglers. Although rivers are open and flowing, this certainly doesn't mean they will have fish running through them already. There will undoubtedly be fish holed up in some sections of some rivers; many being fish that have made their way into river systems in last fall.

There are some rivers that are typically good rivers to fish early in the spring, but these are generally better when water levels in the fall were high which enabled larger numbers of fish move into the river system and overwinter in the river. With water levels like they were this past fall, this is likely not the case, and although there are

undoubtedly fish in these river systems, they are likely not present in any great numbers.

When looking at fishing early in the season, water temperatures play a key role in fish activity, and fishing success. With water temperatures in the mid to high 30's, and low 40's, fish activity is generally slower. Fish will be moving through rivers, but generally will be a lot more lethargic, and be found in slow moving waters, and not in any hurry to make their way upstream. As temperatures rise throughout the spring, or as the sun warms the water, fish activity will increase, and fish will become more aggressive, and more fish will move into, and through these river systems. With water temperatures in these lower reaches, tactics like slowly bottom bouncing a roe bag or yarn fly through runs can be far more productive than a fast drift under a float, or drifting a fly past a fish; Slow drifts give fish more time to see your offering, and gives them a chance to get at it without a great deal of movement or effort, something they are not likely to do until water temperatures and/or levels rise, or floating your offering through a slow moving, deep pool that is likely holding fish, giving these somewhat lethargic fish a chance to take the bait.

Another factor to consider in a year like this is shaping up to be, is looking at fishing during low water conditions. Likely there will be many go to areas where anglers usually find fish that just will not hold fish, due to low water levels.

During low water years, keying in on different shelter and structure can help you find fish; looking for both physical structure like fish holding behind boulders, under overhanging trees, or below undercut banks, and structure within the river like deep pools, deep tailouts, or deeper stretches of turbulent water for fish to seek cover in.

For float fisherman, you become limited on the water you can fish, with water levels far lower than usual, it becomes more difficult to find places to run a float through, and these anglers may need to consider changing tactics, whether bringing along a rig for bottom bouncing, or packing the fly

rod along for those situations when the float rod won't do it.

When water levels drop, and water remains cold and clear, downsizing and using smaller gear, with slower presentations can be key, as fish will be less active. Using fluorocarbon, clear floats, and lighter weights can all help when looking at low, clear water conditions. Of course, when rivers rise due to rain or major melting, adjust accordingly.

Although it may not be as productive to get out during these first stages of the season, it's hard to beat spending a day on the river, and after a long cold winter, there's nothing like that first drift in your "go to" hole on your favourite piece of water. Even if fishing is less productive, early season can be a scouting mission for later in the season, giving you an opportunity to learn runs, holding areas, and figure out where fish will be as more make their way into the system. Remember to keep track of where you catch, hook or see fish, as you are likely to find fish there again throughout the season.

So as we watch the ice and snow disappear, take advantage of this early opportunity to spend some time on a river, and make the most of this early spring. Just this week, the beginning of March, I have already heard reports of anglers catching steelhead in local rivers.

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NORTH SHORE
Steelhead
ASSOCIATION

Gone in a Flash!



The kids grow quickly, get them out early! Jesse Korkola & Rob Nickerson enjoy good times on the North Shore!

35 years may seem a long time, but it can come and go in a flash. I caught my first Steelhead 35 years ago this May, but the memory is as vivid as if it were yesterday.

I was 12 years old, and fascinated with all things fishy, when my father announced that it was time for my brother and I to join him on a trip to an area stream, in pursuit of Rainbow Trout. 'Rainbow,' were near mythical to we young anglers, trophies that occasionally appeared in the refrigerator, following rare springtime absences by Dad and his angling buddies. To a youngster used to launching 8 inch brook trout into the tag alders at the neighbourhood creek, they appeared as giants, and the invitation to spend a weekend in pursuit of such quarry was enough to send me spinning; or, more appropriately for a 12 year old, 'spinning out'.

Little did I know that considerable preparation was required for the venture. A short drive was made to Windsor street, where we spent an evening in the basement of Lorne Allard's home, learning how to tie 'spawn bags' and 'snell' knots, while admiring the photos of giant fish that adorned the walls. Lorne was one of a core group of anglers who were 'in the know' when it came to catching Steelhead, and he was happy to share his knowledge with two fascinated youngsters. We each left with a doggy bag of hooks, sinkers, roe bags and wisdom, plus an elevated level of excitement: we had to get out there and catch one of these legendary beasts.

The next evening was spent packing, as well as getting the truck and camper ready for the

weekend. Having lost some equipment to an unfortunate boating accident the previous summer, each of we boys had been presented with a new rod and reel. These were 7 foot, Garcia fibre-glass rods, matched with Shakespeare spinning reels and Trilene line and, as much as we might smirk at these outfits today, they were like the treasures of Midas to us. To go with the rods, we each received a new Stearns 6 pocket floater vest, into which we quickly stowed our rudimentary gear. (The vests were Dad's stream - safety measure for inexperienced anglers. He didn't want to drown the kids... yet...). Boots, clothing and raingear were loaded in the camper, and when the tailgate closed, we were ready to roll.

Dad was a high school teacher who did not tolerate truancy, so we were surprised when he handed us each a piece of paper. They were 'get out of school early' notes, which we passed to our Friday afternoon teachers as we flew out the school doors. We met Dad in the driveway, and were soon on our way.

There were still some secret spots in those days, but the river we arrived at was not one of those. A couple of cars were parked in the clearing, and a well worn (and muddy) trail led us to a pool at the base of a long rapid, where a fisherman stood on the far bank. The obligatory greeting of 'How's Fishing?' was met by the angler pointing to a remnant snowbank beside him, in which lay a pair of large and beautiful trout, fresh from the froth. A thrilling, near-panic overtook me, as I scrambled to assemble my rod and get fishing. Steelhead, were here!

As with many new endeavours, there were challenges. It was raining and cold; in fact, it was downright miserable. The mud from our boots made the rocks greasy, and the river was high with spring runoff. Dad had positioned us in 'safer' spots, where the river would not sweep us away, but also where the hungry stream ate our gear with regularity. It did not take long until numb fingers could no longer tie on hooks or pinch on split-shot, so Dad's job was to keep us in action, until we could take the cold no more. Frustrated, we stepped back to a smoky fire to get warm and watch, while Dad picked up his long fly rod and stepped in.

In what seemed like the blink of an eye, he was into a fish. The small pool and high water left little room for finesse, and while my Brother scrambled for a net, Dad 'leaned' hard on the fish, and steered him into an eddy, where it was quickly scooped from the water. We took some time to admire the fish together and, as was the custom of the day, laid it in the snow behind us. Excited by this success, I again tried to fish, but came up short on luck and patience.

So went the afternoon, as my brother and I alternated between the river and the fire, all the while watching Dad and the other angler fish. Occasionally, we saw a fish hooked, lost or steered to the bank, which added to both my hope and frustration.

Every angler has such tales to tell, so I'll cut to the chase. As evening approached, I tried again. The hungry river ate a few more rigs, and my hands were again cold and numb. As my line stopped in the place where a dozen hooks had remained on bottom, I pulled hard to release the snag... and a bolt of silver pulled back.

I'd like to tell of an epic battle, a wild run down the river, a huge fish and a picture perfect landing, but such was not really the case. The 3 pound fish was stopped hard (as much as one can 'stop' a fish with a 7 foot fiberglass rod), skidded across the current, and pounced on by my brother with his net. True, it was tougher than launching an 8 inch brookie into the alders, but the proceeding was no work of art or grace. The result, however, was unmistakable:

As much as that fish was hooked and captured, those 35 short years ago... so was I.

Here's to a great spring. If you are a Believer, please put in a good word for some rain.

*Tom Whalley,
President, North Shore Steelhead Association*

McIntyre River Rainbow Trout Population Study after 4 years



Urban streams are the bread and butter to the average steel header. They provide a place to practice one's craft that is both close by and easy to access. In the city of Thunder Bay the crown jewel of urban trout fisheries is the McIntyre River, which runs through the north and central part of the city and features many beautiful pools and runs that have been very popular with both new recruits to steel heading and the grizzled veterans.

If you ask any of the "old boys", the numbers of Steelhead back in the day were very high, but we now know that without any science to support these claims, any guesses at actual numbers were only guesses.

From 1999 through 2004 an electronic type fish counter was installed at the fish way at Lakehead University. Initial estimates of adult steelhead runs ranged from 414 fish in 1999 to 952 fish in 2004, but overall the counter proved unreliable and prone to ice damage, therefore, its use was discontinued after 2004. An alternative method to estimate the total

population of Steelhead, in the McIntyre, was required.

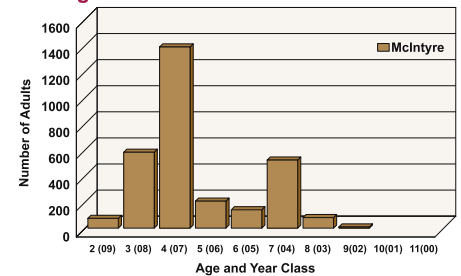
While an accurate estimate of numbers of adults is important, the age structure and repeat spawning rate is also valuable in determining the health of an adult steelhead population. In the past, volunteer NSSA members gathered data in the form of length, sex and scale samples on all rivers in the District as part of the NSSA/MNR Cooperative Angler Program. This had proven to be valuable data, but a more comprehensive study was required for the McIntyre, one that would include an estimate of the total spawning population. In the spring of 2008, the NSSA (under the license of the Ministry of Natural Resources) began a five year study to calculate the McIntyre River's adult steelhead population size and collect information on all life history characteristics.

Each day during the spring spawning migration (April to June), four specially licensed and dedicated anglers were tasked with biologically sampling and fin clipping each steelhead they caught. By applying a different fin clip each year, and then recapturing those fish by angling in following years, an estimate of the population size will be derived (Petersen Mark and Recapture population estimate). By taking a scale sample and identifying the sex of each fish, the life history of each fish (stream years, lake years, age, maturity and number of spawning events) can also be recorded and analyzed.

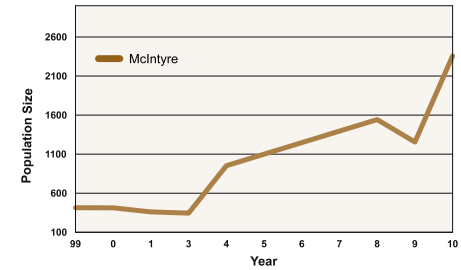
The adult steelhead population in the McIntyre River now exceeds 2000 fish...likely one of the largest runs on the north-west shore of Lake Superior. The present bag and size limit of one fish over 69 cm (enacted in 1999, as an experimental regulation for population recovery in heavily pressured streams)

has allowed this wild steelhead population to dramatically increase from 400 adults in 2003 to over 2000 adults in 2010 (Figure 2). This restrictive harvest has allowed for a higher survival of large multiple repeat spawners which in turn have produced the big production years from 2004 and 2007 (Figure 1) With the continued vigilance and volunteer hours of the NSSA and its members and careful management of the fishery the future looks bright for urban steelhead anglers for generations to come!

Adult Steelhead Populations Age Structure and Year Class 2011



Adult Population Estimates



Note: 1999 to 2004 (Counting Fence), 2008 to 2010 (Petersen est.)

Fisherman's Park A Work in Progress



Hard at work in Fisherman's Park

The past year was a very busy and productive one for Fisherman's Park, with several of the major projects initiated and completed.

Starting in May, volunteers from the Thunder Bay District Stewardship Council cleaned up the garbage and debris from the park and surrounding area. On

June 18th and 19th, volunteers from the NSSA, with the help of Confederation College instructors Todd Henry and Shawn Daniels, spent two full days assembling the two smaller roof structures. On July 6th, with the assistance of Glen Lorentson Crane Service and additional volunteers from Coastal Steel, the roof structures were positioned on the posts affixed to the concrete bases. The City completed the paving of the main trails and parking area on July 13, which gave the Park a much more complete appearance. Over the course of the summer, NSSA members George Clark and Randy Kelly spent many hours cutting grass around the main shelter and trails, in a successful effort to keep the Park neat and attractive. In mid September, a call for volunteers was answered by members of the NSSA and Ducks Unlimited Canada, whose efforts ensured that the brushing of the riverside area and the construction of two flower beds were completed.

Construction activity really picked up in mid October when our community partner, Confederation College,

offered the services of the students currently enrolled in the Construction Techniques Program and the Carpenter's Apprentice Program. Over the course of two days, the 40 students constructed the roof structure for the largest shelter and built the observation deck. On Nov. 2nd, Glen Lorentson once again donated his crane services, and positioned the roof of the larger shelter in place. On November 3rd, the last nail was driven, completing the handicap access ramp.

Special thanks must be given to the Lehto brothers, (Peter and David), owners of Wanson Lumber and their staff. The folks from Wanson's were extremely helpful when we needed materials delivered or returned during this project phase. Without their donation of time and effort, our job would have been all the more difficult.

Work will continue on this project this coming spring. We hope that we can count on your continued support of this waterfront revitalization initiative.

Portage Creek Steelhead

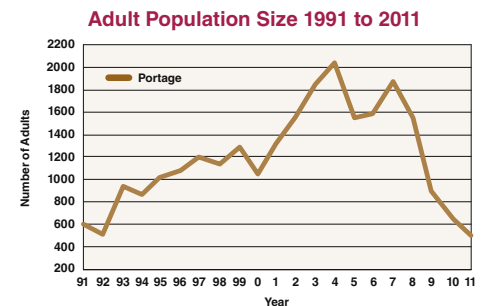
The adult steelhead population in Portage Creek has undergone significant fluctuations since the study began in the early 1990's (Figure 1). The estimated adult population size went from 500 in 1992 to over 2000 in 2004 and back down to 600 in 2010 (Figure 1). The initial increase in the adult population can be attributed to higher production of juveniles (e.g. 2000 year class), and better survival of adults following the reduction of harvest in 1994. The fluctuation in adult steelhead abundance from 2004 to 2010 can be attributed to environmental conditions (water temperature and flow) in Portage Creek, and lake survival of juvenile steelhead in Lake Superior (Black Bay). Poor recruitment of juvenile steelhead in 2002, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008 has left one strong year class (2004) to support the spawning population.

The 2004 year class has been prominent in the spawning population for five years. Now at age seven, numbers have declined through natural

mortality. With limited recruitment from since 2004, the 2010 population size (654 +/- 104) has been reduced to similar adult numbers that were observed in the early 1990's. At three to five years of age, most Portage Creek steelhead have reached maturity and are at the most abundant level in the spawning population. With 30% to 40% natural mortality following each annual spawning event (rigors of migration, nesting, and predation), few adults survive past eight years of age. When strong year classes are produced (i.e. 2000, 2001 and 2004) they can maintain reasonable representation to older ages mainly due to the reduction of harvest. This is observed where the 2004 year class (age seven years) still contributes > 30% to the 2011 spawning migration. Adult steelhead ages eight to eleven years represented 11% of the total adult migration in the spring of 2011. At this age, they are often large, fecund, multiple repeat spawners (three to eight spawning events) with

high potential egg production, and the ability to spawn in the best stream locations.

The Portage Creek steelhead study will continue on an annual basis for at least one more generation (2012). This data will be used to monitor climate change on a cold water fish community, to evaluate of steelhead year class strength, and to utilize Portage Creek as an Index Stream for managing North Shore steelhead populations.



Boulevard Lake Water Management Plan Update

On September 22, 2010 the NSSA submitted an official Request for Amendment for the Boulevard Lake Water Management Plan to Alan Willcocks, Regional Manager, for the Ministry of Natural Resources. Our major concerns were as follows; 1) There is no guaranteed water for the purpose of fish passage in the current WMP, 2) Management of the fish way, to date, has proven to be very inadequate. As a result of (1) and (2), the long term goals for the development of the Current River Rainbow Trout fishery have been compromised.

The NSSA was informed (by Mr. Willcocks) that he has directed members of the District office to compile information regarding our concerns. A decision on the validity of our request for an amendment will then be made, at a later date.

After discussion with various agencies, it was recognized that it would be important to resolve two fundamental questions: 1) what flow rate would provide the optimal volume of water necessary to keep maintain a healthy fish community in the lower river? And 2) is the section of the river between the dam and the outflow of the generating station fish habitat? Thanks to the Thunder Bay District Stewardship Council, monies were found to fund these studies. The habitat assessment of the lower Current River was conducted in September of 2011. Unfortunately, the planned flow rate assessment was cancelled due to low water levels, and is now scheduled to occur this July.

Not much has happened since then, and we are once again faced with the prospects low water

in the Current River. There is the possibility of having to compensate the economic loss incurred by the Hydro producer, if water is low and must be redirected through the fish ladder, from hydro operations. We were fortunate to be able to make this agreement for water supply with the hydro producer in 2010, and hope that this would once again be possible, should the need arise.

The NSSA continues to advocate for the establishment of a minimum water flow on the Current River, and that the water be allowed to flow through the existing fish ladder. This would ensure a migratory corridor for rainbow trout passage up the Current River.



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**The NSSA welcomes your
contributions, opinions and ideas.**

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