

Fishing and Outdoors in WNY: Spring means stocking local waterways

BY CAPT. FRANK CAMPBELL

Although Old Man Winter won't loosen his grip this year, spring is certainly in the air. Recent snow and cold temperatures are being contradicted by what's going on with Mother Nature. The migration of birds, spawning runs of different species of fish, and tulips starting to show are reassuring us that longer, warmer days will soon be upon us.

Another sure sign of spring is the stocking of trout and salmon into local waterways.

Stocking of fish is performed annually to offer opportunities for anglers to enjoy the flight of some of the most sought-after species in the sportfishing world. Some areas of Western New York receive their first stockings prior to the inland trout opener for inland bodies of water on April 1. It's the same scene that's played out over and over for decades: The New York Department of Environmental Conservation truck pulls streamside and attaches a hose to one of the tanks on the truck and proceeds to open a valve and out pours hundreds of trout.

The most common types of trout stocked are brown trout and rainbow trout. Most of these waterways are in the Southern Tier portion of the state and are long-standing family tradition trips for people from all over New York. Anglers are often streamside shortly after the stroke of midnight, which marks the opening of the catch-and-keep season on April 1 for these inland trout streams.

In contrast to the rural setting of the Southern Tier, the urban planting of trout offers individuals from the city areas like Niagara Falls an opportunity to target trout without traveling far from home. The stocking of over 1,900 browns into Hyde Park Lake in Niagara Falls took place this week. Oppenheim Park in Wheatfield was set to receive more than 300 brown trout for the fishing enthusiasts to pursue during the same timeframe. Both of these waterways are viewed as



put-and-take fisheries for the trout, as the fish will not survive in these waterways due to temperatures that are considered lethal to trout during the summer months.

Two important notes: Due to changes in the inland trout season, you can now fish year-round for trout in the inland streams, but only catch and release. The second point of clarification is that Great Lakes tributaries are open all year for trout fishing.

Direct stocking of trout into smaller waterways seems like a fine practice but, years ago, the way in which trout and salmon were planted into the Great Lakes was reviewed – and it was concluded that there needed to be a better option. Through collection of data in creel studies and angler/biologist observations, it was deemed that direct stocking was not as advantageous. It seemed as if the numbers of fish were in Lake Ontario, as well as the tributaries that they were earmarked to return, were down. External factors such as predation by birds (cormorants and gulls), in addition to numerous larger fish, were taking its toll on the trout and salmon abundance. A solution to the problem of predation, in addition to fish straying to the Salmon River, was brewing.

Through the efforts of the Niagara River Anglers Association, it was brought to reality. The answer was to pen-rear the fish through

their imprinting process, while at the same time giving the fry an opportunity to grow and acclimate to their surroundings. Salmon and trout both imprint to the waters they were born in – which brings them back to those same waters to spawn when they are adults. The penning of these young fish in the Niagara River spawned other projects here in Niagara County at both Wilson and Olcott.

Today, the pen projects are overseen by different sportsmen's organizations: the Lake Ontario Salmon and Trout Association in Wilson and Olcott, in addition to the Niagara River Anglers Association in Youngstown. Keeping the pen projects operating is vital to the world-class sportfishing op-

portunities here in Niagara County, which is estimated to be worth more than \$30 million annually to the local economy.

DEC findings suggest that pen-reared trout and salmon have a 2-to-1 survival rate over direct stocked fish. Those numbers reinforce the importance of penning as many fish as possible, especially considering recent stocking cuts from 2016-21.

The best news is that the past two years (2022-23), salmon stockings have started to increase in Lake Ontario. This year, there was a 10% increase, bringing New York's numbers up to 985,000 fish. Every single salmon (except for the 300,000 reared at the Salmon River Fish Hatchery) will be held

in pens along the lake, giving them their best chance for survival.

If you enjoy fishing for trout and salmon on Lake Ontario, or any of its tributaries, as much as I do, we owe a BIG thank you to the organizations and its members that take on the challenge of overseeing these pen projects in cooperation with the local municipalities that host these projects. So, THANK YOU!!!

I hope to see you enjoying the local outdoors. Every week, I produce a fishing report (Niagara County Fishing Hotline), and you can access it online at www.niagarafallsusa.com; or simply call 716-282-8992, Ext. 4, to hear what's up in the world of fishing. It is updated every Wednesday.

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Trout stocking is now underway in Niagara County. (Submitted photos)

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