

Fishing and Outdoors in WNY

Sometimes, we are responsible to help Mother Nature balance

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As I alluded to in the last column, we have a problem here in Western New York when it comes to cormorants – a native species of bird that is out of control. We have created an unbalanced situation in nature by keeping these diving birds on the protected species list. Normally, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) would implement a plan such as a hunting season to control numbers of these birds but, with the birds being protected by the Migratory Bird Act, the state's hands are tied.

The management of the birds falls into the laps of federal government agency known as U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). With no control mechanism on these birds, their numbers have exploded in recent years.

Several recent stockings of trout and salmon have fallen prey to flocks of thousands of migrating cormorants. The newly stocked fish stand no chance, as they are unable to escape the water birds with the ability to dive to 150 feet in pursuit of prey. The average bird consumes one pound of fish per day and has been known to take fish up to 14 inches in length.

Knowing these facts, it is easy to fathom a whole stocking of fish being wiped out. The Chinook salmon that were raised in Youngstown went from 100 fish per pound when they were received from the hatchery to 50 per pound when released. Doing simple math, it would take a flock of less than 2,000 cormorants to wipe out the complete stocking.

After almost a month of caring for the salmon, it is hard to think all that effort could be negated in a few hours. It is not only the effort to raise these young salmon and losing them that is disturbing, but also the cost of the fish to raise them to releasable size. Conservatively, it costs tens of thousands of dollars per stocking site to supply salmon fingerlings, with the Salmon River Fish Hatchery doing most of the work taking the fish from the egg stage of life to the few-inches-long fish that are delivered each spring.

To back up the claims of stockings being decimated, there are several videos taken on Lake Ontario over the past month or so. One of those videos documented an entire stocking of brown trout



Cormorant populations have become a problem on Western New York area waterways. (Submitted photo)

that was wiped out in Wilson in late April. NYSDEC has attempted to “guard” the stocking to the best of its ability by hazing the birds around the stocking dates and different sites. Hazing is an attempt to spook the cormorants with the use of pyrotechnics or chasing them with a boat. The effort was semi-successful as some stockings were “protected” while others seemingly fell victim to the cormorant flash mobs showing up after the hazing teams left. Obviously, we can't expect the hazing to occur around the clock for days as the fish gain their bearings and vacate the shallow water harbors.

Not only are the cormorants enemy No. 1 of fishermen that produce an enormous economic impact pursuing trout and salmon when they reach legal size, but they are also detrimental to landowners where the birds nest and roost. The droppings of these birds are so toxic that they

kill the trees and foliage they live in and near. They overwhelm the area with a smell that is not tolerable, thus making the immediate surrounding area uninhabitable.

Their presence is easy to see with a boat ride and taking a look at the shoreline to view trees that are void of leaves. Not only are the cormorants ruining the shoreline areas, but they are also displacing other nesting birds, as their numbers are enough to make the other birds move and often choose less than ideal nesting sites. This was the case on Strawberry Island in the upper Niagara River last year as a nesting pair of bald eagles were forced to abandon their nest after cormorants were seen in the nest with the eagles.

So what can be done? First the federal agencies must acknowledge the fact that there are way too many cormorants. We have unbalanced Mother Nature by protecting these birds for far too

long. It is a well-accepted idea that these birds have very few natural predators and, therefore, we must step in to get their populations under control. I am not sure if we need an open season or if that would even be effective as a method of control. It is time to visit all methods to rebalance cormorant populations.

Reel It In

On the fishing end of the outdoors, a good number of the prize-winning fish were caught out of Niagara County waters during the Spring Lake Ontario Counties Derby, held May 5-14. As a matter of fact, over 90% of the winning Chinook salmon takes were boated here. The overall grand-prizewinner of \$15,000 was a 24.10-pound beast reeled in by Mark Scott of Beckley, West Virginia, while fishing with Capt. Matt Yablonsky of Wet Net Charters out of Wilson.

The next fishing event upcoming will be the Niagara County



Mark Scott with his grand-prize salmon, weighing in at more than 24 pounds. (Submitted photo)

Pro-Am Tournament out of the ports of Wilson and Olcott from June 2-3. Unlike a derby, the tournament combines the weight of your first 12 tournament-legal fish each day for the pros, and six biggest fish each day for the amateurs, along with a 10-point addition for each fish, to assign an aggregate score for the team. The team with the most points after two days of fishing wins the event.

Niagara County receives a significant economic impact from tournaments and derbies like the above-mentioned contests, and it is a big boost to the shoreline communities. The last economic impact study pegged the sport fishery's worth at \$30.5 million to Niagara County. An updated economic impact study is in the works and, hopefully, we can pass along that information next month.

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 by simply calling 716-282-8992, ext. 4, to hear what's up in the world of fishing. It is updated every Wednesday.

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