

Fishing: Youghiogheny River is home to some brown trout beauties

Sunday, October 05, 2003

By Deborah Weisberg

There are big browns in the Youghiogheny River, the best local water for trophy-size trout. Most of the 20-plus inch beauties that Yough River regulars pull from the rugged water were probably planted as fingerlings six to 10 years ago as part of the state's annual spring stocking program from Confluence to Connellsville.

A smaller number are the adult trout the state also puts in each year at the special regulations area from the tailrace of the dam to where the Casselman River enters the Youghiogheny, a distance of a mile. Thousands of rainbows and browns are raised at the Chestnut Ridge Trout Unlimited nursery at the outflow of the dam and released as adults.

Yough River rainbows also get to be huge.

"I've heard of them 25 inches and over near the falls at Ohiopyle," Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission biologist Rick Lorson said. "Good numbers, too, given how infertile the habitat is. If the water were more fertile, there'd be even more."

The state began stepping up its stockings as cleanup progressed on the Casselman River, the single-most important tributary feeding the Youghiogheny and, until 15 years ago, one of its most polluted. Conservationists have improved the Casselman and other feeder streams so much in recent years, Lorson said, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers may change the release schedule on the Youghiogheny Dam for the first time since it was built in 1945.

Though a flood control project, it was programmed to address chronic mine drainage from the Casselman, too. The new schedule, expected within a year or two, would shift some focus onto recreation, allowing for improved flow during late summer when water is typically low.

The dam's most important effect on the river is that water can be released from the bottom, allowing for an influx of cooler, better-oxygenated flow even in August and September. The same scenario helps make the Allegheny River below the Kinzua Dam the other trophy brown trout fishery in this part of the state. Cold water releases ensure trout will survive at a time of year when they would otherwise find flow too warm.

Browns, like brook trout, spawn in the fall, and need clean gravel and well-aerated water to reproduce in the wild. They tolerate lower alkalinity and have difficulty spawning when the pH dips below 6.5. While the state hasn't conducted scientific studies, Lorson believes the Yough's habitat makes natural reproduction minimal, although without a tagging system it is



Nice size brown trout, like this one, are being found more often in the Youghiogheny River. (Douglass Oster, Post-Gazette)

hard to know for sure.

Local fishermen such as Mark DeFrank of DeFrank's Fly Shop in Chalk Hill believe there are more wild trout in feeder streams such as Meadow Run than most people realize.

Lorson surmises that 90 percent of the Youghiogheny River's trout population is from planted fingerlings. And that represents a mere 10 percent of the 87,500 brown and 87,500 rainbow stocked fingerlings that manage to survive, said Lorson.

"By the time browns reach seven inches [age two], you've lost most of them. Just half of those seven-inch fish make it to the following year, 25 percent make it to the fourth year and the numbers keep going down after that," he said.

Because of massive fingerling plantings, some anglers swear by 2 to 2 1/2 inch rainbow pattern small crank baits for landing bigger fish. Fly anglers do well with streamers, sculpins and Woolly Buggers in black or white. The main hatches, according to DeFrank, are Little Black Stoneflies followed by olive and tan Caddisflies, then March Brown Mayflies, Slate Drakes and Tricos.

Another 9,700 fish are stocked as adults each year. About 70 percent are rainbows, the more "catchable" of the two species.

Of the three types of trout in Pennsylvania streams -- brook, rainbows and browns -- browns are considered the hardest to catch.

"It has to do with their innate nature," Lorson said. "Browns are more selective. They feed more at night, which gives them the edge at eluding anglers. All trout are drift feeders, but browns are more critical of what's presented to them."

Which makes landing one all the more exciting.

On a Yough River trip he guided for the Western Pennsylvania Field Institute on July 19, Dale Kotowski of Greene County released a 28-inch brown on a Woolly Bugger just a few miles downstream of Ramcat Hollow. He had caught a 22-inch brown in the same spot on a Royal Wulff just two weeks earlier.

"There are browns over 30 inches in some of the big deep holes you can't get to by wading or by boat, though I'm seeing more drift boats than ever on the Yough," he said. "The trophy trout regulations are working."

The trophy trout waters extend for nine miles from Ramcat Run to the Route 381 Bridge, about one-quarter mile above the Ohiopyle falls.

Kotowski and partner Cyndi Zibrida fish the Youghiogheny and its tributaries all year. Three years ago on Meadow Run they celebrated New Year's Day by landing a 16-inch rainbow near the falls. Last week, Kotowski released a 16-inch brown on a lime green Honeybug on Meadow Run.

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