

# North Shore Steelhead Report

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## Spoons for Staging Steel

by Tom Armstrong



Tom Armstrong with early season spoon caught steelhead.

With this mild weather in the Thunder Bay area lately, all diehard steelhead anglers are likely chomping at the bit, waiting for the first sliver of open water to crack enough to run a float down it, or run a fly through it. The way things are going, it looks like it may be coming soon.

When nature does begin to pry its icy grip from the waters of Northwestern Ontario, the river mouths usually open up first, offering anglers a great opportunity to catch some early season steelhead. Without wasting any time, fishing the mouths of these rivers before, during and after they open up can be a great tactic to catch steelhead.

Before the warmer temperatures of spring thaw the frozen rivers, fish are cruising the shoreline along their river of choice, waiting for the ice to break so they can continue their spawning migration upriver. Even after the ice is out, and the river is flowing, there is still great opportunity to catch fish that are awaiting the right conditions to move upstream.

This type of fishing is great for anglers of all skill levels, as it doesn't take much to cast spoons, and doesn't require some of the fancier gear that float or fly fisherman use in the rivers. A good casting rod, and a tackle box with an assortment of spoons is all you need. In some places you can fish right from shore, while a pair of waders does make it a lot easier, and opens up more areas to fish. I have even fished river mouths in the spring out of a boat,

crusing up and down the shoreline, casting spoons for cruising steel. The earliest I have been out on the big lake in a boat was several winters ago, when my friend Jeremy and I hauled his tin boat out behind a skidoo during first week of February. Despite the freezing temperatures, heavy snow, and gale force winds, we managed to fish for a couple hours, and even hook a couple steelhead!

As far as gear goes, I use a 9'0" medium action rod, with a spinning reel and 8 lb test mono on it; a good setup for throwing spoons way out into the lake, and for wrestling with scrappy steelhead. As far as lures go, there are a wide variety of spoons that will work, my favourite being a Gibbs Croc, but there are many others, like a Little Cleo, 5 of Diamonds, Blue Fox Pixee Spoons, or any other casting spoon. Mixing up your retrieve can help illicit strikes when casting spoons, whether its a steady retrieve, or a few twitches or pauses along the way, try varying it a little bit to see what works. One thing to note,

make sure you bring a few extra spoons along, as the rocky lake bottom is sure to claim a few!

Always remember safety when out fishing like this though, as slippery rocks and icy shorelines can be dangerous, as well as the dangers of wading in Superior in the late winter/early spring weather. Make sure you have good footwear, and think about wearing a mustang floater jacket or inflatable pfd, in case you lose your footing and go for a dip. Also, there is usually nothing warm about this type of fishing, especially when wading out into superior, so make sure you're well dressed and layered up to keep warm.

So instead of waiting for your favourite river to crack, now can be a good chance to get out, go for a drive, and see how close spring really is. It'll give you an opportunity to spend a day out angling, and get you more excited for what's to come.

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## Steelhead Populations How Low Can They Go?

by Tom Whalley, President NSSA



Jesse Korkola hooks up on the Portage.

We've come through some pretty incredible years in the Steelhead fishery this past decade. Thanks to a few highly productive years between 1998 and 2004, anglers were able to participate in some of the best Steelhead fishing in memory. Cool, wet summers had provided a bumper crop of strong year classes which recruited into the fishery from 2000 to 2008. Combined with a low level of harvest and increased popularity of Catch and Release angling, the fishing was nothing short of spectacular. With this came a new crop of Anglers to the sport, with smiles and sore arms all around. We could not have scripted this story any better.

Like any good ride, it had to come to an end. Mid decade, Mother Nature threw a curve, sending us a nearly two year long drought.

Many will remember the now infamous pictures of the Jackpine River, dry and sun-bleached from bank to bank, in the summer of 2006. Across the North Shore, most streams suffered under similar conditions, appearing as mere trickles. Without water, and under stress from high temperatures, young of the year and yearling Steelhead had little hope of survival. 2007 was only marginally better, and it was easy to predict the negative effects of these dry years on productivity.

In 2009, anglers began to report reduced catches, and broadly commented that Steelhead being caught seemed mostly a consistent size. Analysis of angler collected scale samples clearly showed that we have not seen a strong year class of adults recruit into the fishery since those hatched in 2004. These were the 'consistent sized' fish caught in 2008 and 2009, as four and five year olds. As we know the 2006 and 2007 year classes will surely be very small or absent, we will be relying on the 2004 and 2005 (a poor year) year classes to sustain the fishery for the next couple of years. Herein lies a problem.

For those who are unaware, Steelhead spawning populations suffer annual mortality of 40%, due to predation, disease, injury and old age. For Steelhead, old age is 7-8 years, with a 9 year old fish being a very rare commodity. In short, a strong year class starts to succumb to mortality at

age 4 or 5, and will mostly disappear after age 7 or 8. This means that the fish hatched in 2004 and 2005 will decline in numbers quickly, and will have mostly died off by 2011. The absent year classes of 2006/07, decimated by drought, will not be present to replace them. Accordingly, we will likely see low returns in 2010 and 2011, and related slow fishing. The Portage Creek population estimate shows that numbers dropped by 35% between 2008 and 2009, and we anticipate a similar decline in 2010. When the smoke clears this spring, we may have seen as little as 40% of the returns present during the peak years of mid decade. To those of us with vested interest, this is more than a little unnerving.

There is hope on the horizon. It appears that the cool and wet summers of 2008 and 2009 may produce good year classes, and the recovery may be underway. We must wait, however, as these fish will not be seen in the spawning population until 2012 and 2013, as 4 and 5 years old. As we wait for recovery, anglers must appreciate that every fish in the spawning population is valuable in this recovery, and govern themselves accordingly when they consider harvesting a Steelhead in the next few years.

For those of us who share a passion for this fishery, we hope the wait doesn't seem too long.

Tom Whalley, President

## Fisheries Management Zone 9 Council

By Terry Kosolowski



In the spring of 2009 a public advisory council was formed in Thunder Bay in order to advise the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources on fisheries management concerns in Fisheries Management Zone 9 (Lake Superior waters) and the NSSA was invited to sit on this council. The first years meetings were devoted entirely to the Black Sturgeon River Dam issue as Black Bay and Black Sturgeon River native fisheries rehabilitation is a

hot button topic. Information from the early meetings, was added to extensive research compiled by Steve Bobrowicz and the staff at MNR's Upper Great Lakes Management Unit and an Options Evaluation Document was drafted and presented to the council, with seven main options proposed. The job of the council is to determine which of these options will be the most beneficial to rehabilitate native species such as Walleye, Lake Sturgeon and Brook Trout as well as preventing passage into the upper stretches of the river system of invasive species such as Sea Lamprey and Rainbow Smelt.

The positive and negative effects of each scenario were discussed at length and by the beginning of March 2010 five options were taken out of consideration, leaving two remaining:

- 1) Modify the existing dam to include a trap and sort fishway, making it possible for technicians to pass desirable fish species over the dam and exclude undesirable species. This option would ensure the blockage of invasive species, but the success rates of similar structures is questionable and full rehabilitation of walleye and sturgeon populations may not be possible.
- 2) Remove the existing dam and build a low head weir at the outlet of Eskwonoowatin Lake thus allowing fish access to 50km more of the river and an additional 59km of tributary streams, however this option will also allow invasive and introduced species access to the same waters.

**The FMZ9 Council's final decision will be presented to the MNR for their review by March 31, 2010.**

## Current River Ladder Operations



It is generally accepted that the major impediment to developing a self-sustaining migrating population of Rainbow Trout may be the proper operation of the fish ladder during the

time of spring migration. Several meetings have been held with the MNR and the Engineering dept. of the City of Thunder Bay and a new sense of cooperation has been developed.

Beginning in 2010 the NSSA will contract out the supervision of the fish ladder on a daily basis. The individual will observe and record the level of water entering the first cell of the fish ladder, and based on mutually agreed upon guidelines, notify the City so that appropriate action will be taken by City staff. This would mean that the City may adjust the logs within the fish ladder or within the dam, such that the water flow through the fish ladder returns to the acceptable range. How effective these measures prove to be will be evaluated when the City produces the annual flow rate report next January.

## McVicar's Creek Project

In the spring of 2009 it was noticed that the cabling which secured several boulders to the riverbed and each other, had broken and one of the large boulders had been washed approximately 15 meters downstream, causing the pool to lose approximately .6m (20 inches) of its depth. This pool under less than ideal water flow would likely be of insufficient depth to provide enough room for Rainbow Trout to leap the falls. This pool was created numerous years ago (late 1980s or early 1990s) in an effort to improve the movement of migrating Rainbow Trout on their upstream migration.

On September 4th of 2009 the Association initiated replacement of the boulder and restoration of the pool. Terry Kosolowski organized the rental of a boom truck and equipment rental in order to lift, install new anchoring pins, and re-cable the boulder back in its original location.

Special thanks to Monty Plater, Customer Service Supervisor at Hertz Equipment Rentals, for the generous donation of the use of a portable generator and hammer drill.



Terry Kosolowski & Frank Edgson work on McVicar's Creek.

## Lake Superior Binational Award

The Lake Superior Binational Program initiated a basin-wide awards program to honor the outstanding achievements of individuals and groups that are protecting or restoring the natural environment of the Lake Superior basin. The award pays tribute to these individuals and organizations that have demonstrated a commitment to environmental stewardship through leadership in five categories. By sponsoring

the awards, the Lake Superior Binational Program hopes to encourage residents in the basin to implement similar successful actions to improve water quality and natural environments.

The NSSA received the award in the category of Community Group recognizing the NSSA's many years of commitment to conservation efforts, community involvement, and our ongoing Current River Park project.

## Fisherman's Park Update

June 9, 2009

| 01

The Clean up days were held on June 6th and 7th and were well attended by both club members and community volunteers.

The entire property was cleaned up of garbage, debris and used needles. All dead and unwanted scrub trees were removed and placed in piles for chipping or removal by the City. Careful attention was given to ensure that fruit trees and small conifers were not damaged, and that any trees that contained bird nests were not disturbed.

The volunteers from Hydro One forestry services removed "burning" trees (too close to the hydro lines) and using the heavy equipment provided by Hydro One, removed some of the old concrete walls and structure, as well as creating a rough trail next to the river. Large boulders were recovered and moved to provide barriers to vehicular traffic.

September 24, 2009

| 02

The required survey was completed in August by ENL engineering. A copy of the survey was used by Brad Green a local architect, to put our ideas on paper. Our application to add fill and to construct structures on the property was approved by the Lakehead Region Conservation Authority. The adjustment to the grade of the trail, necessary to be compliant with handicap accessibility aspects, and the addition of gravel material for the trail base should be completed this fall.

November 16, 2009

| 03

The work on the Current River Park project has been completed for this year. Menei Brothers contracting spent 6 days in November laying down gravel, compacting, and grading the trail in preparation for paving this coming spring. The area was seeded by George Clark and Barry Tabor with a mix of grass and clover seed. Wildflower seed will be planted in the spring.



## NSSA & Stewardship Council

### Working Together to Enhance and Maintain our Fisheries



McIntyre River bank stabilization below Central Street bridge

The North Shore Steelhead Association (NSSA) and Thunder Bay District Stewardship Council will be working together on a variety of projects

that will provide both immediate and long-term benefits to our fisheries resources and its users. Similar to the NSSA, the Stewardship Council has a major interest in the protection, conservation and enhancement of our fisheries making the partnership a logical fit for both groups.

Some of the primary goals of the Stewardship Council include providing a community forum to foster stewardship, influence responsible land care and seek funding and capacity-building opportunities to support their initiatives. Another major interest of the Stewardship Council is to encourage cooperation among agencies and associations by focusing on

projects that require shared efforts.

NSSA Director, George Clark, is a Volunteer Director with the Stewardship Council and has been a valuable link between the two organizations. The Stewardship Council and NSSA are presently working on a number of partnership projects including a bank stabilization and fisheries enhancement project on the McIntyre River in conjunction with the Lakehead Region Conservation Authority, riparian (shoreline) tree plants on the McIntyre River and McVicar's Creek, and a detailed fisheries and fish habitat study of Whitefish River tributaries.

For more information, please contact Ministry of Natural Resources Stewardship Coordinator, Davis Viehbeck at (807) 475-1481 or email [davis.viehbeck@ontario.ca](mailto:davis.viehbeck@ontario.ca)

## Canadian Tire Supports NSSA

The NSSA has had a long and successful relationship with the local Canadian Tire Stores in Thunder Bay. We are extremely happy to announce that the local stores are once again helping the NSSA continue to advocate the conservation and preservation of the cold water fisheries in the region.

Canadian Tire Corporation's two locations in Thunder Bay, one on Arthur Street, and the other at the Thunder Center, have long provided our members the availability of a variety of fishing products for all species during all the seasons.

This year the local stores have donated a large Centro 4900IR BBQ in support of our 2010 dinner and auction.

The North Shore Steelhead Association is proud of the sponsorship arrangement with Canadian Tire and looks forward to continuing this positive relationship with a community leader in sporting goods that wants to support both fishing in general and local conservation efforts.

*We applaud Canadian Tire for its commitment to the community.*

The NSSA is proud to be able to promote the patronage of this important retail operation in our region and City.



**Open seven days a week to serve you better!**

#### **SOUTH**

1221 Arthur St. W., Thunder Bay, ON  
Phone: (807) 457-4235

#### **THUNDER CENTER**

939 Fort William Rd., Thunder Bay, ON  
Phone: 807-623-1999  
*Gas Bar and Car Wash available.*

*Propane, Camping, Fishing, Hunting,  
Hiking and Sporting goods.*

## NSSA Membership Application

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ Province \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Postal Code \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail Address \_\_\_\_\_

Dues are renewable each January. Dues paid by new members in November are applied to the following year's dues.

1 year - \$10

2 year - \$20

3 year - \$30

Make cheques payable to:

**North Shore Steelhead Association**, P.O. Box 10237, Thunder Bay, ON P7E 6T7

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