

Original: Fish Division
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INSTITUTE FOR FISHERIES RESEARCH
DIVISION OF FISHERIES
MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION
COOPERATING WITH THE
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

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REPORT NO. 473

A RECONNAISSANCE OF

THE EAST BRANCH OF THE BLACK RIVER

A letter from F. A. Westerman, in charge of the Fish Division, instructed us to report on the above stream from the east and west quarter line of Section 22, T. 32 N., R. 1 E. to Section 23, T. 31 N., R 1 E as to:

- (1) The value of the stream from a public fishing standpoint.
- (2) The possibility of utilizing a portion of it as a possible test

stream

C. J. D. Brown and I examined this stream on May 7 and 8, starting at the bridge in Section 22 and driving upstream toward the headwaters. As the road parallels the river rather closely except along swampy sections, it was possible to determine the general character of most of the stream and the extent of its use by fishermen. The lower end of Rattlesnake Creek and of the next tributary of the East Branch upstream from it, as well as the river in Section 27 of 31 N. and 1 E., were reached on foot.

Conclusions

From observations made by us and from study of data in our files (including creel census records which have been summarized for this stream from 1929 to 1935), it appears that the East Branch of the Black River has very considerable value for public fishing. The beauty of the valley, ready accessibility of the stream and numerous fine, natural camp sites

add to its recreational value aside from fishing. Although it is expected that the Game Division will report in detail as to the value of the area as to extent of winter deer yards and as a public hunting ground, from casual observation it seemed to us that it should also have high value for these uses.

Concerning the suitability of a portion of the East Branch of the Black River for experimental purposes, we believe that it may be highly desirable for such work after methods have been developed on a smaller stream. Since this river has a great variety of bottom and cover types and several fine tributary streams, it should be well adapted to experiment. The acquisition of the area with the idea of such development in the future is considered desirable.

Observations

Section 22

At the bridge crossing the East Branch of the Black River just east of the Gaylord Club the stream flows through a narrow, swampy valley. Average width was about 40 feet; depth up to 5 feet; numerous snags and deadheads; bottom of sand with some gravel; current rapid to sluggish. In the south end of this section a sand trail road leads to the stream and several natural camp sites showed evidence of heavy use.

Section 27

At the north end of the section, the stream flows through a tag alder meadow. Snags are still numerous in the river and the bottom is dominantly of sand. A camp site at this point had apparently been used recently by fishermen.

Section 26

This part of the stream seemed to be very popular with fishermen. Four cars were observed parked here on Sunday and at least a dozen fishermen were seen. Those who had fished the stream before reported it as being an excellent producer, although all were complaining that day of the abundance of small trout and scarcity of "keepers." Brown and I fished this stream from 4 to 5:20 p.m. Sunday. He took 7 undersized brook trout. My score was 19, only one of which was a possible candidate for the basket. Numerous fry, presumably natural young of brook trout were observed in all likely "pockets" along the edges. Small fish were rising freely to a dry fly.

The stream averages about 35 feet in width in this section; the bottom is dominantly of gravel; the current is rapid and pools are relatively shallow. It is apparently a "nursery" section which may not have a permanent population of legal trout, but doubtless contributes greatly to maintaining fishing in other parts of the river. Only brook trout were taken; all of them being highly colored fish with no evidence of gill lice or black spots.

Five beautiful natural camp grounds were noted in this section, all of which were evidently popular with fishermen. The east bank is high and has a scattering of large Norway pine and other smaller shade trees. The river is close to this bank throughout most of the section.

Section 35.

In the north end of this section the stream flows through what appears to be an extensive spruce-cedar swamp and is not as available by road. However, in the southern half the road again follows the stream closely. The bottom is dominantly of sand; the current is less rapid and the banks are swampy with a thick growth of tag alder and osier. Several old camp sites were seen.

Section 2

The current is more rapid in this section, banks are higher and considerable elm and aspen is found along the stream. The bottom is of gravel with sandy stretches. Fry were very abundant. Three much-used camp sites were observed.

Section 11

The river flows through spruce, tamarack and cedar swamp in this section. The current is rather sluggish and there are many snags in the stream. The bottom is dominantly of sand. In spite of the swampy character of the stream, there was evidence of heavy use both by fishermen and deer hunters. Numerous old camp sites were seen at each of the sand-trail approaches to the river.

Section 14

Swamp becomes dominant along this part of the river and no camp sites were observed except at Big Spring which is apparently a popular place. The river is deep and somewhat sluggish with a bottom of sand and peat. It appeared to be difficult or impossible to wade, but there was evidence of considerable fishing from the banks. Good catches of large trout are reported from this part of the stream.

Section 23

Spruce-cedar-tamarack swamp broadens out to include the East Branch and Rattlesnake Creek and appears to extend upstream into sections 22, 27 and 28. The abandoned railroad grade along the east side of the river can be navigated by car for about 1/2 mile. Old camps, presumably of deer hunters, were numerous along this "road." The lower end of Rattlesnake Creek also flows through this swamp. A fair sized beaver dam has flooded out the alder swamp located about 1/4 mile from its mouth. This dam has been cut through and has not been re-built. The accumulated muck is washing

out and many small trout were observed in the stream. At this point the creek averages about 15 feet wide. It has an estimated flow of 5 c.f.s. The bottom is dominantly of sand and peat with gravel showing up in spots. Below the dam the stream is partly overhung with alders, the current is faster and gravel is dominant. Removal of the dam probably has partially restored this feeder stream. It should be possible to establish a counting weir on Rattlesnake Creek.

The tributary in section 22 was examined about 1/2 mile from its junction with the river. The average width was about 4 feet, depth up to two feet, bottom of sand, flow estimated at 3 c.f.s. Two sizes of brook trout and dace were seen. This stream could also be studied as a feeder by means of a double fish trap.

The East Branch was noted at Whiting Spur along the west margin of Section 28. In both directions from the bridge, the stream appeared to flow through cedar swamp, the current being somewhat sluggish and the bottom mainly of sand. We took the road east from this point to where it ends in section 27 and walked to the river just above the old railroad (B. C. G. & A.) crossing in this section. The river is about 60 feet wide at the point examined and varies greatly in depth. The channel is obstructed by fallen trees, most of which are at or below water level, so that excellent shelter is afforded. Gravel is exposed in many places by these natural underpass deflectors and this together with shelter afforded spawners and numerous "pockets" for fry along the banks probably account for the tremendous numbers of naturally produced brook trout fry seen in every suitable place in this section of the river. We counted as many as 50 little fish in a single "pocket" less than six square feet in area.

The abundance of fallen trees in this part of the East Branch of the Black seems to indicate that this part of the river has never been driven in logging operations. While difficult to fish, it must be extremely important in naturally stocking the river below.

Creel Census Data

Conservation Officer Eagle took a number of creel census records on the East Branch of the Black River during 1929 (the year in which the largest number of records were taken). The summary shows that anglers interviewed fished a total of 181 hours, took 287 legal trout and 200 under-size at the rate of 1.5 legal fish per hour. The fish (all brook trout except 7 which were rainbows) had an average size of 9 inches. The catch for 1930 was much the same, but the catch per hour was somewhat lower (1.1 fish). Relatively few records were taken in succeeding years including 1935 (the last year for which reports have been summarized), but these few also indicate that trout fishing in the East Branch of the Black is better than average both as to number of fish taken and average size.

INSTITUTE FOR FISHERIES RESEARCH

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