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INVESTIGATION OF BLIND SUCKER RIVER, LUCE COUNTY, MICHIGAN

by

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Introduction

In 1934 the Grand Marais Conservation Club petitioned the Conservation Department to restore the old logging dam near the junction of the Blind Sucker and Dead Sucker Rivers in Luce County. The dam would flood over a thousand acres and presumably would favor ducks, muskrats and northern pike. The project was set aside until recently when interest was aroused by the increase in Pittman-Robertson funds. When it became known that construction of the dam was being reconsidered, reports of excellent brook trout fishing in the Blind Sucker River were received. Preliminary observations by A. S. Hazzard and O. H. Clark in the fall of 1947 indicated that the river did not appear to be well suited for brook trout. However, they recommended that an investigation of the trout population be made in the river and associated lakes before coming to a final decision on the dam. In accordance with this recommendation, Leland R. Anderson and the writer visited the area on May 26 and 27, 1948. Two local sportsmen from Newberry, Charles Honkinon and Harry Surrell, kindly acted as guides. The success of the fish collecting and the investigation was largely due to their knowledge of the area.

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General Observations of the Portion of Stream Visited

The stream was cruised with a boat from the eastern edge of Sec. 15, T49N, R12W downstream to the junction of the Blind Sucker and Dead Sucker Rivers. Since no fishing was reported on the Dead Sucker River by our guides, this stream was not investigated. The portion of the stream observed was predominantly 60 to 100 feet wide and sluggish. Pools deeper than 3 feet were infrequent; bank cover and submerged logs were numerous. The bottom was mostly sand, covered with a layer of silt varying in thickness from a few inches to several feet. Beds of various kinds of aquatic flowering plants were beginning to appear. Many small springs were observed in the stream bottom and spring tributaries were common along the shore. One of these tributaries flowing about 300 gallons per minute recorded a temperature of 44 degrees F. (Air temperature 65° F., stream temperature 66° F.; time 5:30 p.m.). Air temperatures for the two days were in the seventies, water temperatures were in the high sixties. These few data indicate that the main portion of the stream probably exceeds the tolerable limit in temperature for brook trout in summer. However the general frequency of the trout throughout the watershed suggests that they are able to find cooler water in the deeper holes and near spring tributaries.

In a few places the river narrows to 25 to 30 feet in width and here the faster current has exposed a bottom consisting of gravel and some clay. A few trout fry were seen in these areas, and many small trout were observed and caught near these fast water areas. Whether these areas are used for spawning is not known, although conditions seem suitable.

Fish Collections

Due to local opposition to the use of nets in trout streams, fish collecting was limited to hook and line using worms and artificial flies for bait. Most of the fishing was done from the boat, although it was possible to wade in a few places.

Fishing was very good. Two fishermen met on the stream had 26 brook trout from 7 to 14-1/2 inches long. They had been fishing about six hours and had released many undersized fish. Our party fished a total of about 20 hours catching 27 legal trout and about 50 undersized ones. The majority of these fish came from the river or a large beaver pond; a few were taken from Lower Wheeler Lake. The lake is about ten acres in extent with only a very narrow strip along one shore deeper than two feet. Upper Wheeler Lake, connected to Lower Wheeler Lake, was not investigated, but is reported to be 10 feet or more in depth and considerably smaller than the lower lake. The lower lake is connected to the river by a wide, shallow channel. Many small springs were observed both in the lake and channel. The fish were in excellent condition, deep-bodied and very red-fleshed. Gross stomach analyses revealed predominantly insects with mayflies forming the chief source of food at this time.

Reports of Fishing

Fishing has been reported as excellent throughout the stream system until July or August when the fish apparently congregate in spring pools in the river, lakes and beaver ponds. At this time they are very easily caught. The quality of fishing this year with a sudden increase of fishermen has been as good or better than last year. One person has been

reported to have taken over 80 trout in one week this year. Fewer large fish have been caught this year.

Growth Rate

The rate of growth of the trout was studied by means of scales from 88 individuals taken during the investigation. Of these, 59 were in their second summer of life, 26 were in their third summer of life and three were in their fourth summer of life (Table 1).

The growth of the trout in this stream system is considerably faster than the tentative average for the state and compares very favorably with the growth rate in the better trout lakes. Incomplete data on state averages for this species indicates that the average brook trout reaches the legal size of seven inches sometime during its third summer. In the Blind Sucker River most of the trout are legal-sized during their second summer.

No significant differences in the rate of growth between the sexes could be demonstrated. The differences noted in the third summer fish are probably due to inadequate sampling rather than actual differences in rate of growth.

Discussion

From the available information it appears that the stream supports a fairly large native brook trout population at present. The sudden increase in the fishing intensity brought about by its recent notoriety will very probably reduce this population to a low level in a short time.

The construction of the dam would undoubtedly destroy a considerable amount of fine brook trout fishing at the present time. Over six miles

Table 1.--Age and size of brook trout from Blind Sucker River, Luce
County, Michigan, May 26-27, 1948.

	Summer of Life					
	Second		Third		Fourth	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Average total length (inches)	6.7	6.7	9.8	9.2
Number of individuals	35	24	7	19
	<u>Sexes Combined</u>		<u>Sexes Combined</u>		<u>Sexes Combined</u>	
Average total length (inches)	6.7		9.4		14.9	
Number of individuals	56		26		3	
Range in length (inches)	5.2 - 8.8		7.5 - 12.4		14.3 - 15.8	

of the Blind Sucker River would be effected by the dam. All of the portion of the stream investigated (the lower five miles) was found to contain trout at the time of the survey. Just how much of this remains inhabitable by trout throughout the summer is unknown. Past history of the area indicates that the water impounded by the old logging dam produced very good northern pike fishing. It is common knowledge that brook trout and northern pike do not do well together. Conditions brought about by impounding the water would favor the production of pike to the detriment of the brook trout.

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