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THE MICHIGAN GRAYLING

by

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Is the famed Michigan grayling extinct? Has this fish, once so abundant that spawners were shoveled from streams with potato forks and hauled away by the wagon load, followed the passenger pigeon and the heath hen into Limbo? On numerous occasions during the past twenty years fisheries authorities have regretfully prepared the Michigan grayling's obituary. But always, just as last rites were being administered, a rumor that a specimen had been captured would be received; and even fishery scientists, trained to reach all conclusions by cold analysis unmoved by personal emotion, couldn't wholly suppress a wistful hope that somewhere, in some remote, unspoiled corner of the state the fabulous Michigan grayling still existed. None of these scattered records has been verified. Some may have been based on Menominee whitefish, or on unusually silvery rainbow trout. But so long as reports come in, hope for the grayling will persist.

Why has the grayling vanished? Before the state was settled, it was the only salmonoid fish in many streams south of the Straits—Muskegon,

Manistee, Boardman, Jordan, Au Sable, Rifle, Au Gres—here, before the white man's coming, the grayling reigned supreme. By some chance brook trout did not occur naturally in many Lower Peninsula streams. But grayling, once known as "trout of the pines," abounded in numbers that seem incredible today. One early writer, describing a boat trip down the Au Sable made in 1874, just 75 years ago, stated:[1] "On our second day we killed and salted down—heads and tails off—a hundred and twenty pounds of fish (grayling), besides eating all we wanted." Again, on the same trip: "I took at five casts fifteen fish (grayling), averaging three-quarters of a pound each." Less than 50 years later the species was known to exist only in the Otter River, at the base of the Keweenaw Peninsula!

Many possible explanations for the grayling's disappearance have been suggested—that its spring spawning activities were disrupted and its nests destroyed by the annual log-drives of the lumbermen; that when the brook trout was introduced (early in the '80's) the grayling was unable to meet the added competition; that ecological changes in its habitat, induced by deforestation and increased cultivation, proved fatal; or that the grayling was so unwary and so avid for any sort of bait that it was brought to the danger point through overfishing.

Fish cultural efforts to bolster the dwindling grayling population by artificial propagation were not spared. For some unexplained reason attempts to produce the Michigan grayling in hatcheries were unsuccessful. But the Montana grayling, which leading fish taxonomists now believe is not really distinct from the Michigan species, is not hard to raise in

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[1] Norris, Thaddeus, 1883. The Michigan grayling. In: Sport with Gun and Rod. Century Co., New York, pp. 493-506, illus.

hatcheries, and as long ago as 1900 plantings of the Montana grayling were being made here. Betweem 1926 and 1936 nearly two million fry and about half a million yearling grayling, hatched from eggs obtained from Montana, were stocked in various Michigan streams and lakes. No evidence has appeared to indicate that any of these plantings were successful.

In 1936, some 5,000 Montana grayling reared at the Wolf Lake Hatchery were stocked in a small lake in the Pigeon River State Forest, after the lake's existing fish population, made up almost wholly of stunted yellow perch, had been removed by chemical treatment. For about two years the grayling made excellent growth; but in 1937 the lake received an unauthorized planting of bluegills which soon overran it and apparently crowded out the grayling by food competition. This unfortunate experience marked the termination of departmental efforts to maintain grayling by artificial propagation.

Perhaps the disappearance of the grayling should not be mourned too deeply. Anglers who have taken the species in Montana consider it inferior to trout in fighting qualities. In the writer's own limited experience, it takes the fly more readily than do brook, brown, or rainbow trout. Once hooked, the initial flurry of activity is quite spectacular, but of very short duration. In the pan, the flesh seemed somewhat more delicate, in texture and flavor, than trout of comparable size. Testimony of old-timers familiar with the Michigan grayling corroborate these observations. Our native grayling appears to have been a gullible fish which struck uncritically at almost any bait cast within its reach. A closely-related species of grayling occurring in Europe is held in such low

esteem as to be considered a "weed fish," and subjected to drastic control measures on privately managed trout waters. Perhaps we should feel relief that grayling no longer compete with trout for food and lebensraum in Michigan streams.

But our grayling was a handsome fish—with slender, racy lines, a silvery body, and a showy, sail-like dorsal fin marked with green-ringed red spots—and pioneers were sufficiently impressed by it to perpetuate its memory in the name of a town and a township. Sentimental regret at the passing of an attractive denizen of our streams makes it easier to keep alive the faint hope that somewhere in Michigan a fragment of the native stock may still exist.

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