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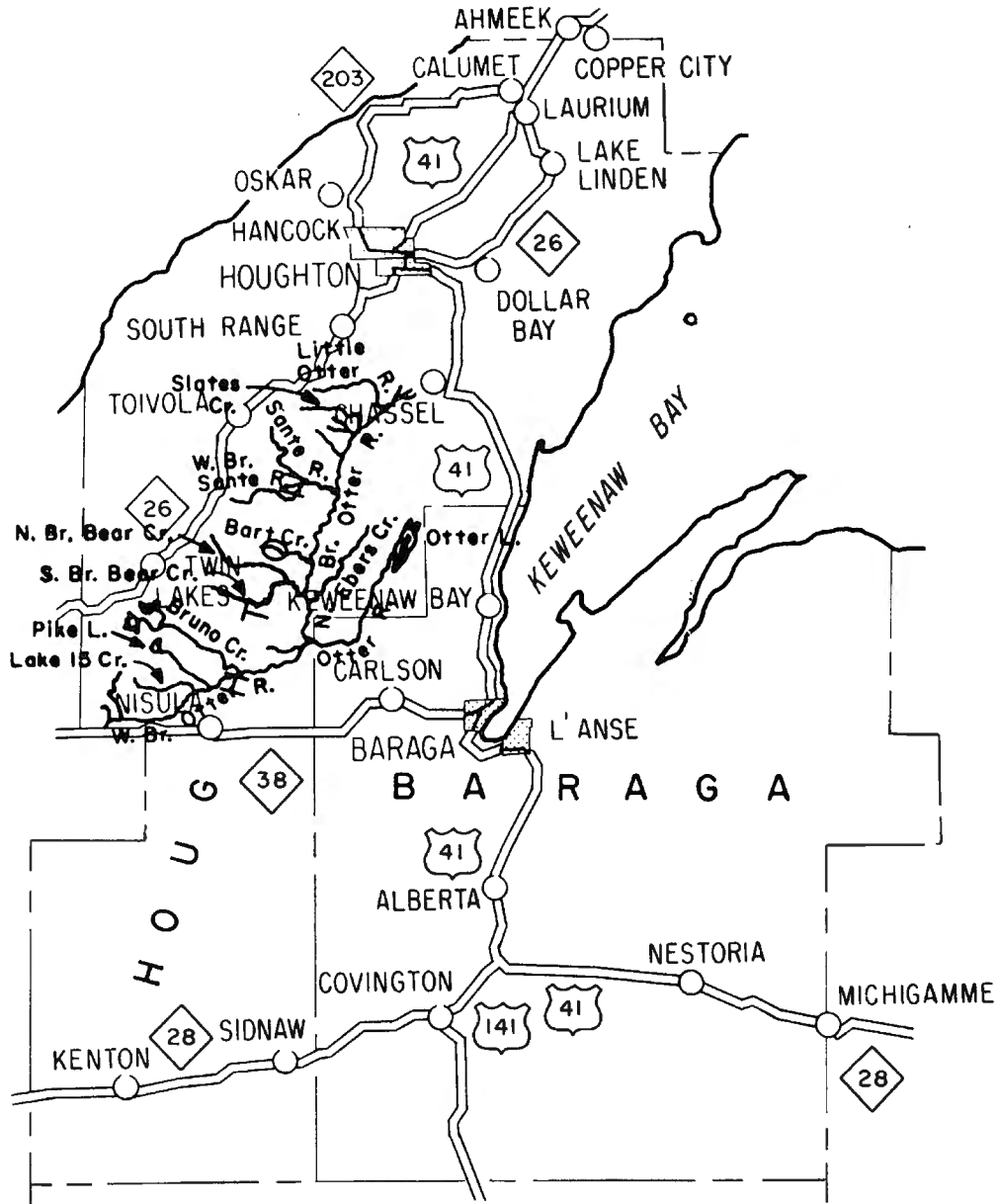
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SERIES: THE TROUT STREAMS OF MICHIGAN

NO. 8 THE OTTER RIVER

Raymond P. Juetten, Fisheries Biologist

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Main Branch Otter River

The Main Branch Otter River begins at the confluence of the North and West Branches (it's major tributaries) near the Houghton-Baraga county line northwest of Pelkie.

The stream is 40-60 feet wide and it flows northeasterly across a glacial flood plain (used for forestry and farming) to Otter Lake. The banks although quite eroded in some areas are lined with grasses, coniferous and deciduous trees. The bottom is hard sand, and there are many deep pools with limited cover.

There are very few resident trout in the Main Branch. The stream's popularity stems from it's fine spring and fall steelhead runs. This is the only area of the Otter River system open to the special extended trout and salmon season. Anglers use spawn bags as bait in the spring and minnows, nightcrawlers and artificial lures produce the best results in the fall. The average size of the steelhead running the Otter is 3-5 pounds, however local residents claim a few steelhead in the 10-12 pound class are taken here annually. These fish spawn in the North and West Branches. During the months of December and January, burbot or lawyers ascend the Otter on their spawning run. Many local residents set hoop nets in the river to catch these fish. The stream is open for this type of fishing from the Pelkie-Tapiola Road to Otter Lake. The fish are used to make chowder and the eggs are used for caviar. About 2,000 pounds are harvested annually.

The primary factor limiting trout production is the severe spring floodings, which causes stream bank erosion and channel degradation.

Many people canoe this stream during the summer months. It has a moderate flow and is ideal for beginners. The maple, aspen and balsam forests and farm fields along stream are picturesque and many people picnic along the river.

North Branch Otter River

The North Branch rises from swamp seepage in southeast Houghton County. This gentle clear water stream flows southerly across a glacial flood plain until it joins the Main Branch 2½ miles northwest of Pelkie. Forestry is the primary land use on this flood plain, but there are some farms southwest of Tapiola.

The stream receives a fine steelhead run each spring and steelhead anglers concentrate their efforts downstream from the bridge on the Donken-Tapiola Road. There are few brook trout downstream from this

bridge. The river has a sand bottom in this area and is 30-40 feet wide. Pools are abundant, and the banks are lined with tag alder and grasses.

Upstream from the Donken-Tapiola Road bridge hardwoods and conifers border the Otter. It is 15-30 feet wide and it has extensive areas of gravel riffles and numerous deep, fast pools.

Brook trout and small rainbows abound in this area. There is a small population of browns here too.

Most of the brook trout are recruited from the cold water tributaries, namely the Little Otter River, Slates Creek, Sante River, Bart Creek, and Ebers Creek. These streams are 5-10 feet wide and have extensive spawning riffles. They receive little fishing pressure although some limit catches of brook trout are taken on the Sante River.

Many county roads cross the North Branch, making it easily accessible and although most land bordering the stream is privately owned it is not posted, and most land owners allow fishermen to cross their lands.

The North Branch from the mouth of Slates Creek downstream is open enough for fly fishing and it can be waded. Fair hatches occur, however area anglers are predominately bait fishermen. Limit catches of 8-12 inch brook trout are quite common, and occasionally a 16 inch brookie is caught.

West Branch Otter River

The West Branch rises from several small unnamed ponds and swamp seepage in southwest Houghton County, west of Nisula. The headwaters above Otter Siding Road are lined with tag alder and the stream flows across an undulating plateau of mixed hardwood and coniferous forests interspersed with swamps. The remainder of the stream flows through hilly forestland. Most of the stream border is in state ownership.

Vehicular access is quite limited, but the upper section can be reached via the Otter Siding Road off of Highway M-38 two miles west of Nisula.

The Pike Lake Road crosses the stream two miles north of Nisula, and the Limestone Mountain Road crosses the stream about 2½ miles northwest of Pelkie.

This picturesque stream which flows through a semi wilderness area has a moderate velocity, very clear water and is 15-40 feet wide. The upper limits are characterized by an abundance of pools and cover; the lower stream has little cover, numerous pools and extensive riffle areas, many of which are suitable trout spawning areas. The banks downstream from the Pike Lake road are 200-300 feet high in places. Because the soils are a clay-sand variety, the stream becomes quite clouded after periods of rainfall.

The West Branch supports a fair brook trout fishery and steelhead also ascend it, probably in smaller numbers than on the North Branch. The best brook trout fishing is found downstream from the Pike Lake Road. There are caddis hatches on this stream, however most of it is not open enough for pleasant fly fishing. Local anglers are predominately bait fishermen and because of the clarity of the water they are most successful during and after periods of rainfall and high water. Brook trout up to 10 inches are common, however few brookies over 14 inches are caught.

Bruno Creek, Lake Fifteen Creek and the outlet of Pike Lake are the main tributaries to the West Branch; they have extensive areas of spawning riffles and abundant cover for young trout. Some legal sized brook trout also inhabit these streams but due to limited access and overabundant cover, they receive little fishing pressure.

The Michigan Grayling Of The Otter River

The only known Upper Peninsula stream inhabited by the Michigan grayling was the Otter River in Houghton County, and this was the last stream in the state to contain grayling.

Fred Kroll, a fur buyer, discovered grayling in the Otter in 1884, and local Indians told him these fish were river herring. In later years they were called bastard whitefish by lumberjacks.

Grayling were most abundant in the North Branch below Bart Creek and in the last 2 miles of the West Branch; their numbers were low in other areas and they were seldom found in the tributaries, (Taylor 1954), (Walter Erickson, personal communication).

In the early 1900's settlers began clearing land for farms in the Otter Valley and the lumbering era began. Spring log drives were conducted by the Worcester Lumber Company of Chassell from about 1900 to the early 1920's. In talking to long time residents of the Otter Valley, many recall the river's pools began to fill with sand and the curves of the river were straightened during this era. Also at this time, many grayling were harvested with dynamite. A combination of these factors can be attributed to the grayling's demise. Early studies of the grayling in the Otter by J. N. Lowe of Northern State Teachers College point out that in 1925 grayling were fairly abundant but in Lowe's notes of 1929 they were nowhere abundant. By 1935 they had disappeared from the Otter.

In 1914 the Michigan Fish Commission stocked 25,000 grayling fry in the Otter, (Taylor 1954) and in 1925, 130 grayling were seined from the Otter for artificial propagation at the Grayling Fish Hatchery, and some of these fish were released in the Cedar River in Gladwin County (Westerman, 1961). The results of the 1914 plant could not be determined, and the attempt at artificial propagation failed. This was the last attempt at artificial propagation of the Michigan grayling.

The grayling was truly a sporting fish, quite willing to take a fly and a respectable challenge once hooked. Two favorite flies used on the Otter were the McGinty and a gray hackle-red fore and aft.

Mr. Walter Erickson, a lifelong resident of the Otter River Valley, mentioned, "they sort of floated up to a fly, delicately dimpled the water in taking the fly and when hooked they raced nearly on the surface, downstream". The largest grayling he took was 19 inches but most averaged 10 to 12 inches. In 1934 he took his last grayling from the North Branch. The fish was 11" and he caught it several times that summer before finally keeping it.

Literature Cited

Centennial report:

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Taylor, William R. 1954. Records of fishes in the John N. Lowe collection from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Miscellaneous Publications, Museum of Zoology, University of Michigan No. 87, p. 32-35.