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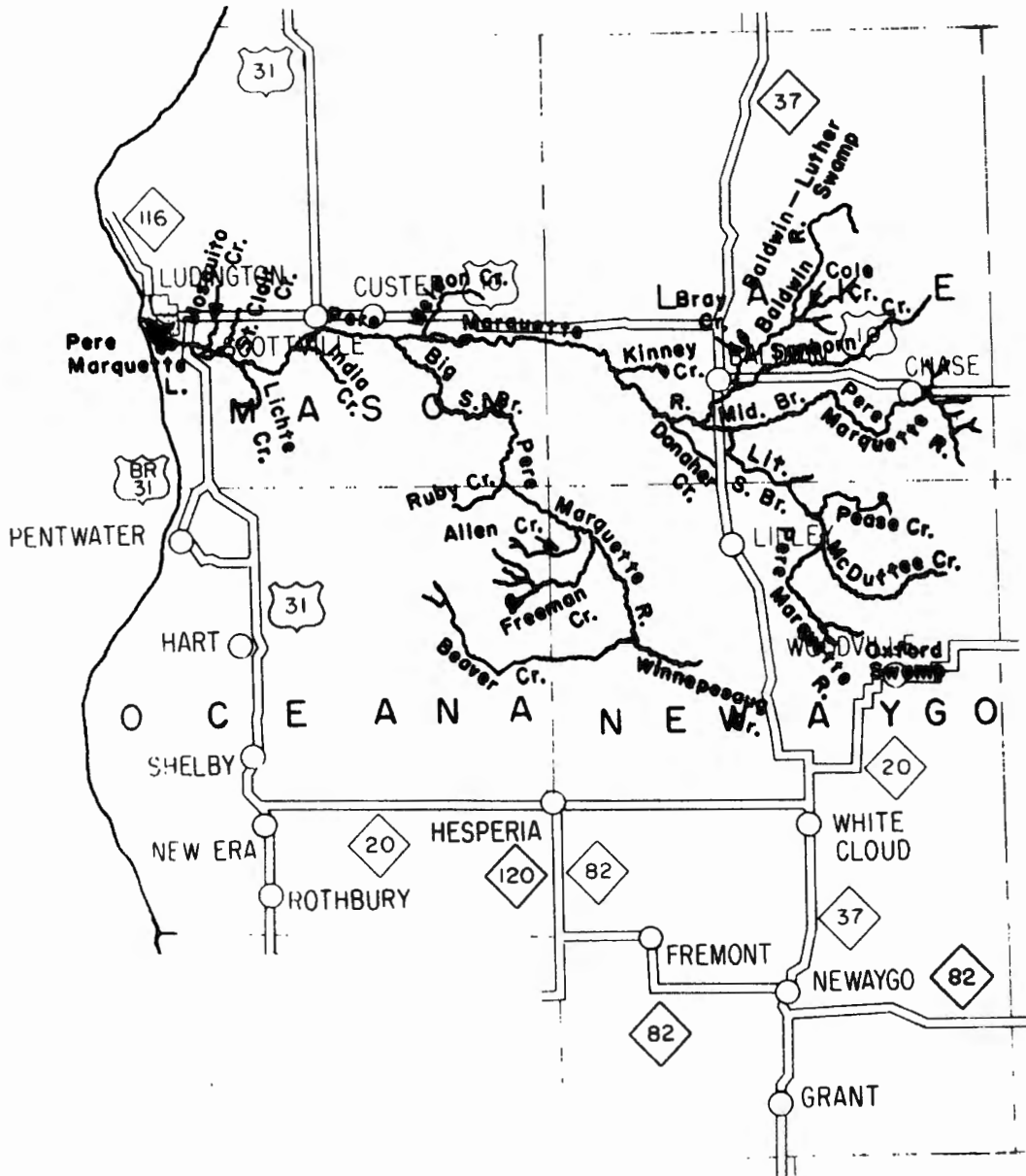
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SERIES: THE TROUT STREAMS OF MICHIGAN
NO. 11 PERE MARQUETTE RIVER

David P. Borgeson, Inland Fisheries Section
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The Pere Marquette River with its four main branches and many small tributaries embodies 138 miles of some of the finest, most varied trout water in America. Prior to the 1880's it was a fine grayling stream. When brook trout became established, they too provided excellent fishing. But, Michigan's first brown trout were planted in the Pere Marquette in 1883, and rainbows came shortly thereafter. These two species have dominated the river and been the mainstay of its legendary fishing ever since.

The Middle Branch

Numerous small intermittent creeks and springs in the Chase area give birth to the Middle Branch which flows west for 17 miles before it merges with the Little South Branch to form the Mainstream of the Pere Marquette River. Through heavy spring seepage, the Middle Branch quickly gains fishable size within 2 to 3 miles southwest of Chase. The bottom is gravelly, and brown trout are abundant. The Middle Branch is one of the few good grasshopper streams in Michigan which can mean mid-day fishing for sizeable brown trout in late summer - a rare combination for Michigan fly fishermen (remember though, that the hopper is the rare green oak variety). Steelhead set up housekeeping from March through May and provide many hours of frustration for the angler trying to outwit a trophy in a small clear stream. Most of the riverfront property along the Middle Branch is privately owned, but several good sites accommodate fishermen.

As the stream passes out of the maple-oak covered headwaters into the typical oak-pine-sand country south of Idlewild, the gradient lessens, gravel loses ground to sand, and the holes deepen. Tag alders and willow form a dense bank cover and provide conditions more suited for the bait fisherman. Log jams and undercut banks and clay ledges become common. Added cover is provided by the extensive stream improvement structures which were completed in the early 1960's.

The Little South Branch

Beginning in the Oxford Swamp in north-central Newaygo County, the Little South Branch flows almost straight north to meet the Middle Branch.

This moderate sized but excellent trout stream has been quite famous over the years for two primary reasons: (1) it was one of the first streams in Michigan to receive brown trout, and (2) it was the site of one of the big navigability court decisions concerning the wading fisherman--the Taggart Case.

Due to the river's low gradient and silt-covered bottom in the headwaters, brown trout are not abundant above Jackson Bridge. The stream is already sizeable at Jackson Bridge and here it begins to increase in velocity, and shallow gravel areas appear. Steelhead reproduction is good here, and good holes and log-brush jams provide excellent cover for brown trout.

McDuffee Creek (10 feet wide) flows through private farmland, but it is lined with a dense cover of elms, alders, and willows. It is good to excellent brown trout water and also produces some respectable brook trout. Below the mouth of the McDuffee, the Little South Branch improves in size and quality noticeably with some good open water available to the fly fisherman.

Pease Creek, one of the finest coldwater trout tributaries in the area, joins the Little South a half mile above Curtis Bridge. A heavy canopy of alder and willow follow for most of its length and provide habitat for all 3 species of trout. In spite of its small size (5 to 15 feet wide, up to 3 feet deep), brown trout in the 12 to 14 inch range are common. Brook trout are present, though not abundant; and steelhead utilize the lower reaches quite extensively for spawning.

From the mouth of Pease Creek to the Lake-Newaygo county line, the Little South flows through a pleasant succession of sparkling gravel riffles and dark pools and is excellent fly water. It, too, produces good daytime fishing during the summer grasshopper season (which by the way, is the green oak grasshopper, not the yellow-brown variety). From the county line to its junction with the Middle Branch, small feeder streams and springs add to its flow until the stream is canoeable without much difficulty. As with the Middle Branch, over 90 percent of the stream frontage is privately owned. Access is possible at all bridges.

The Baldwin River

The Baldwin originates in the expansive Baldwin-Luther Swamp and flows southward through the trout fishing village of Baldwin in Lake County. Brook trout thrive in its headwaters which are almost totally shaded by cedar and other swamp growth.

After the first 3 or 4 miles, brown trout from 7 to 12 inches occur. Cole Creek joins the flow about 5 miles northeast of Baldwin and provides some excellent coldwater spawning grounds for browns and steelheads. Cole Creek harbors brook trout although they seldom exceed 9 inches.

Below Cole Creek, the Baldwin slows down, deepens, and becomes a haven for larger browns. Some of the surrounding country was farmed in the past, and the streamside has grown back to alders and willow.

Below Foreman Road, the banks are again timbered and the stream shaded. Spring seepage keeps the water cool. Here the stream widens (20 to 30 feet) enough for fly fishing and gravel areas appear. During the spring, steelhead anglers fish this area and downstream to the mouth. The State Forest Campground at Bray Creek offers an excellent setting for the camping fisherman.

Just east of Baldwin, on the river, is one of the State's trout rearing ponds where brown and rainbow trout are grown to planting size.

Sanborn Creek, one of the better brook trout streams in the county, enters the Baldwin just below these rearing ponds. Arising north of Chase, Sanborn Creek remains small (2 to 3 feet) for most of its length. Beaver dams, present along its upper reaches, produce some excellent brookies up to 16 inches. Brown trout become dominant as the stream passes north of Nirvana.

Below the village that shares its name, the Baldwin becomes more gravelly, its holes are deeper, and its brown trout are bigger. It finally enters the mainstream of the Pere Marquette a mile west of M-37, 2 miles south of Baldwin.

Fifteen percent of the Baldwin is publicly owned and access is excellent.

The Baldwin River is too small to provide comfortable canoe travel, but it offers the trout fisherman all he could ask for in a small river.

The Big South Branch

In sharp contrast to the limited public frontage on the Middle Branch and Little South Branch, the Big South has over 30 percent of its banks in public ownership. It is a large stream, quickly becoming "wadeable with care" below its origin at the junction of Beaver and Winnepesaug Creeks in northwestern Newaygo County. It is canoeable although the log jams and overhanging brush make this mode of travel challenging.

Beaver Creek holds a few pike in its lower reaches but offers little for the trout fisherman. The Winnepesaug is brushy and dark colored, as is Beaver Creek, and supports some brown trout and brookies.

As the Big South continues toward the northwest corner of Newaygo County, it is joined by Freeman and Allen Creeks. Freeman is a small stream (5 to 10 feet wide) which flows through pine plantations and elm swamps. Brown trout are scattered throughout and brookies are found in its headwaters. Allen Creek has a fine population of brook trout.

Steelheads are common in this section of the Big South and provide excellent angling challenges.

The water itself has a "strong tea" color most of the year which is caused by its drainage from oak-pine uplands and the surrounding cedar swamps.

While passing through northeastern Oceana County, Ruby Creek enters the Big South Branch and provides an excellent nursery stream. Brookies are common in this small feeder (5 to 15 feet wide) flowing almost entirely through a narrow cedar swamp which is publicly owned. Large brown trout spawners from the Big South run Ruby Creek in the fall, and big steelhead take over in the spring.

Located on Ruby Creek is a Department holding pond in which hatchery reared steelhead smolts are held for a 3 to 4 week period prior to release to increase their homing instinct and provide added sport for the Pere Marquette. Browns are reared here during the summer, fall, and winter to be released in early spring.

The Big South, only a fair trout stream, is at its best at Ruby Creek. Gravelly riffles, bend holes, log jams, and smooth runs make for fine, good-looking fly water. Most of the river in Mason County flows through public land. This section is readily canoeable although frequent log jams make short portages a necessity. Wading is possible, but use caution. During late fall and spring months, many good steelhead and brown trout are taken. Summer temperatures are sometimes a shade warm for trout causing them to concentrate in spring holes. This section also provides excellent fall coho and chinook salmon opportunities from strays finding their way into the system.

Once the Big South reaches the flood plain of the mainstream, it slows down and spreads out. Many bayous provide excellent northern pike fishing. This water is best fished from a boat or canoe.

The Pere Marquette Mainstream

The Pere Marquette River mainstream begins at "the Forks" of the Middle and Little South Branches, one-half mile east of M-37. The first 8 to 10 miles of river consist mostly of large riffle areas in the straight sections broken by deep, slow-water holes on the many sinuous bends. This is the "heart" of the Pere Marquette. The riffles are literally covered with spawning steelhead during the early spring months. Ideal water temperatures, cover, and bottom type make it a haven for fine brown trout.

Fly hatches of all descriptions occur almost continuously from mid-April through October. In 1970, "fly fishing only" year-round regulations were applied to the river from M-37 downstream to Gleason's Landing, a distance of about 7 river miles.

The first 2 to 3 miles of stream are dotted with quality cottages and homes along with a handful of the old traditional fishing camps. Tall white pine, red pine, oak, and elm line the high banks and provide an ideal setting for the trout fisherman. Areas such as the "Whirlpool, Birch Hole, Grayling Hole, Claybanks, and First Rollway" and the famous fishing camps add historical interest for the fisherman or canoeist.

Upon reaching Danaher Creek, the river slows somewhat and deepens. The surrounding lands vary more from elm lowlands to high oak banks. Near Bowman Bridge, the water is not easily wadeable and is best fished by canoe or boat. Big brown trout are available and reach well into the 20 inch size range.

Downstream from Bowman Bridge, the current quickens again, and a few gravel riffles reappear with many good bend holes. Kinney Creek, a fine trout tributary, enters from the northeast. This is the beginning of truly big brown trout water and is also excellent steelhead water. Since most of the streamside property is privately owned, a river boat or canoe is the best means of fishing. Some sections are wadeable but only with caution. Rainbow Rapids is a fine public take-out point after a day's fishing down from Bowman Bridge.

As the river nears the Mason-Lake county line, it becomes strictly boat and canoe country. The fly fisherman has plenty of room and the "garden hackle" man can find more brushy holes and log jams than he can use.

The area around Upper and Lower Branch Bridges and Walhalla Bridge is known for big brown trout sometimes reaching the 8 to 10 pound class. These heavy brown trout feeding on "caddis" hatches on warm June nights shatter the composure of the most calloused veteran fly fisherman.

Weldon Creek enters above Indian Bridge between Walhalla and Custer in an area of broad marshland provides additional spawning grounds for both browns and steelheads and holds a good resident brown trout population of its own (one of the best small streams in Mason County in this respect).

At Custer, the scene of a big indian war, the Big South Branch enters and the river is best fished from a boat. Lunker pike frequent the many bayous in this section. Suckers also begin to enter the creel and the "ol' forked stick" pole rest becomes a common site on sand spits and river banks.

Downstream from Scottville, the river breaks up into several channels as it meanders through marshland. The river banks are often separated by 1/2 to 3/4 of a mile of cattail marsh, and a canoeist or boater

can easily become lost and stranded. The river water generally has a murky brown color by now due to drainage from the agricultural lands of western Mason County.

India, Litchie, Swan, St. Clair, and Mosquito creeks all enter the mainstream between Scottville and Ludington. None are good trout producers, primarily due to the open farmland drainage and lack of spawning areas. This particular section of the Pere Marquette is one of the wildest to be found on the entire system. The floodplain is wide and undeveloped and for about 13 miles only one building is visible from the stream. Trout numbers are low compared to upstream waters but during the steelhead runs, many fish are taken here.

At US-31, the river has branched just prior to its entrance to Pere Marquette Lake. Warmwater fishes are common here with pike, bass, and suckers taking the place of trout except during steelhead season.