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SERIES: THE TROUT STREAMS OF MICHIGAN

NO. 12 SOUTHWESTERN MICHIGAN STREAMS

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Introduction

Southwest Michigan contains many fine trout streams. This report covers three of the most important systems, plus three individual streams that warranted mentioning. There are many other small streams with a limited fishery, that were not included.

There is one aspect of trout streams in southern Michigan that stands out and that is lack of public access. As a general statement for the streams in this report, access is limited to road bridges or consent of the landowner, unless otherwise stated in the text.

Kalamazoo River System

The Kalamazoo River, as it flows across southwestern Michigan from east to west, picks up water from quite a few good trout streams. The Kalamazoo itself, is basically a warmwater stream, except the stretch below Allegan Dam in Allegan County, where we have a coho salmon run in the fall. This same area has also produced some nice brown trout from 3 to 5 pounds. Spin casting with hardware is the best way to fish this area.

Augusta Creek:

Starting on the east side of the area and working downstream, this is the first good trout stream, which empties in at Augusta. This stream originates in Barry County, but produces the best fishing after it enters Kalamazoo County.

This stream ranges from 15 to 20 feet wide; bottom is predominately gravel and has ample cover and holes to create a good fishery. The surrounding country ranges from oak covered ridges to tag alder and tamarack swamps. The stream lends itself best to bait and spin fishing, but there are also many areas where the fly fisherman can work very effectively.

Many good catches of brown trout are taken every year with some fish running 2 to 4 pounds. An occasional brook trout is also taken, with one weighing 3 pounds taken in 1967. From the opener through the second or third week, pressure is heavy, but after that the angler can have the stream pretty much to himself, as is the case with many of our streams in southern Michigan.

The Kellogg Forest Area below M-89, which is managed by Michigan State University, is open to the trout fisherman. All they ask is that you keep the area clean and fill out a voluntary creel census report.

Spring Brook:

As you head on downstream, between Kalamazoo and Plainwell, this quality trout stream flows into the river just north of Parchment.

This stream starts near the Barry-Kalamazoo County line. It is a relatively short stream of about 8 miles, but it picks up a large amount of spring water in this distance. Average width runs from 10 to 18 feet wide, with about a 50-50 sand and gravel composition. The banks are mainly tag alders with most of the upland cover consisting of large oaks.

Good catches of brooks and browns are the rule rather than the exception on this stream. Browns predominate, but brooks are numerous enough that you will normally end up with a mixed creel. Browns will run from sub-legal to 15 inches and brooks up to 10 or 12 inches. Bait or spin casting is the most successful mode of fishing, but there are some areas open enough for limited fly fishing. All of the brook trout and many of the browns result from natural reproduction, as we have not stocked brook trout in this District for quite a few years.

Silver Creek:

The mouth of this stream is about 3 miles upstream from Plainwell. Although this is a small stream, its contribution to the trout fisherman in southern Michigan is significant because of the brook trout fishing it provides in an area where this fish is becoming relatively rare. This fishery has held up so far, even though part of its headwaters in Allegan County are contained in Lake Doster, a man made impoundment.

The stream is only 4.5 miles long with a width of 6 to 10 feet. The upper portion flows through a somewhat swampy wooded area, but with enough gravel areas to provide ample habitat for natural reproduction. The lower area is more in the pasture and small woodlot type of cover, with bottom mostly of sand.

Most of the brook trout are taken in the upper portion, with browns most numerous in the lower stretch. Most fish taken are not bragging size, but when the stream is a little high and colored you should be able to get a few for eating. Live bait or spinners produce the best results.

Gun River:

The mouth of this stream is located about half way between Otsego and Plainwell. It is the largest trout stream tributary to the Kalamazoo River. It starts at the Barry-Allegan County line as the outlet of Gun Lake. Within 2 or 3 miles it picks up enough cooling water to be suitable for trout. Although it was dredged many years ago as

part of the county drain system, its banks have now grown over with brush. It is still maintained as a drain, but despite this it harbors some very fine trout fishing. For the most part it flows through rather low ground, consisting of soft maple swamps and muck farms. Most of these farms drain many springs into the river and this contributes a lot of good cold water. There is also some good fishing in these feeders in the spring. With the heavy growth along both banks, the fisherman gets the feeling of isolation as he fishes this stream.

Average width is 30 to 35 feet and the bottom is predominately sand. Fishing is mostly in holes or along aquatic vegetation near the banks. To fish this stream effectively, you should have waders. Brown trout are the only species available and they may be taken by most conventional gear. Fly fishing is good on this stream. There are no large fly hatches to speak of, but most summer evenings will have a hatch large enough to show you feeding fish. Most fish will run from sub-legal to 14 inches long. Occasionally fish in the 2-5 pound class are taken.

In the last couple of miles below US-131, the stream becomes deeper and slower. Warmwater species show up more in this area, including some large northern pike. A 7½ pound brown trout was taken here in the spring of 1969.

Pine Creek:

About 1½ miles below Otsego this stream joins the Kalamazoo River. It is known locally by three different names as it flows through three different counties.

In Kalamazoo County it is known as Sand Creek. As the name implies, it has a predominately sandy bottom, but there are some gravel areas. This is where the bulk of the natural reproduction for the entire stream system takes place.

It is a relatively small stream of 6 to 12 feet wide and flows through old abandoned and brushinfested farms. The fish are quite small in the upper portion, but as the stream becomes larger, the fish do likewise. The last 1½ miles, before it leaves the county, are the best for brown trout.

As the stream enters Van Buren County, it is called Mentha Drain, deriving its name from the once prosperous community of Mentha and its many hundreds of acres of mint farms that it drained. These drains contribute a lot of good spring water to the stream and also increases its size.

Its width will vary from 15 to 20 feet and is deep enough that you should have waders to fish it effectively. Bottom is a combination of sand and silt, in most areas. This, combined with the many dead

elm that have fallen into the water, makes for hard wading and fishing. But, good brown trout catches and fish surveys made by the Fisheries Division show this to be among the top brown trout waters in southern Michigan. For the fisherman who wants to accept the challenge of hard wading, large mosquitoes and numerous snags, the fish are there for the taking. Fish running from 10 to 16 inches are not uncommon with some in the 2 to 5 pound class. Live bait and rising water is the best combination, but fish are also taken at other times on live bait, spinners and in limited areas on flies.

As this same stream flows into Allegan County it is then known as Pine Creek. Shortly after it enters this county warmwater tributaries from lakes begin to raise the temperature of the stream. Consequently, in the first mile or two the brown trout gives way to other fishes such as northern pike, bass, suckers, etc. However, in this area, the trout that are taken are larger due to the abundance of minnows for food and the bigger water. Probably the best way to fish here would be with minnows or hardware with an imitation minnow effect.

Swan Creek:

Moving downstream quite a ways now the popular Highbanks goose hunting area, this tributary enters the river. Most of its trout water is in the state owned Allegan State Game Area, so public access is assured.

The stream starts at Swan Lake in the southern portion of Allegan County. For the first 4 or 5 miles it is not trout water. Starting at 110th Avenue, an occasional brown trout is caught and from there downstream it is widely known for its fine trout fishing. Most popular spots are "The Iron Bridge" on 115th Avenue and below Swan Creek Pond on 118th Avenue. There are also some good areas for the person who wants some peace and quiet, by walking into the more remote areas with the aid of a compass and county map. There are campgrounds in the area for the fisherman who wants to stay for a while.

Swan Creek is an average size stream of about 25 feet wide and waders are nice to have, but not necessary to effectively fish it. The stream banks are basically tag alder lined and the upland is predominately oak forest with a few white pine here and there. The bottom is mostly sand but there are some areas of nice gravel for spawning and food production. At this writing a stream improvement project is in progress to increase cover and improve spawning conditions.

Many good catches of browns are taken every year from this stream. During the spring, with higher water levels, is the best time. Fishing is by most conventional gear, but the fly fisherman would be hindered in some areas because of brush. In fact, some of these hard to get

to spots are where the "old lunkers" are taken by the fisherman with the patience to work them out. Most fish will run from 10 to 15 inches and quite a few, for the size of the stream, up to 5 pounds. Swan Creek Pond also is stocked with trout.

Sand and Bear Creeks:

These next two tributaries enter the Kalamazoo River near M-89. The streams are quite similar, with the Bear being the larger of the two. They are spring fed and their size increased quite rapidly. For the most part, they flow through state owned land. These two are among Southern Michigan's most picturesque streams, as they flow over countless rocks and riffles, through a steep walled valley that is studded with large hardwood and hemlock.

Brown trout are numerous enough to make it interesting, with the fish running up to 15 inches. There is ample food, cover, and spawning grounds. It is reasonable to presume that Bear Creek is responsible for some of the large browns that are caught below Allegan Dam on the main river.

Rabbit River:

This sizeable river joins the Kalamazoo just above New Richmond. Steelhead run to the dam at Hamilton and for the most part are going unharvested. Fishing from shore or a boat with hardware or spawn sacs is the best method. Above Hamilton the stream has been chemically reclaimed and restocked with brown trout which are doing very well at this writing.

Mann Creek:

This is the last tributary on this system, which enters the river at New Richmond. Although there is some state owned land on the upper portion, the major portion of the stream is not publicly owned.

Brook trout are the main species in this stream, with occasional fish up to 12 inches. Stream width varies from 8 to 15 feet and is quite brushy. This limits fishing to bait or possibly small spinners. From the headwaters to below 54th Street, the bottom has many springs and is too soft to wade. Below this area, however, it changes to sand and gravel. Most of the surrounding country is scrub oak forest with tag alder swamps in the immediate vicinity of the stream.

Paw Paw River System

The headwaters of the Paw Paw River are in eastern Van Buren County. Its three major branches converge near the city of Paw Paw, at which point the warming effects of an impoundment (Maple Lake) and other

warmwater tributaries make it no longer suitable for trout. However, in this area it is excellent northern pike and fair smallmouth bass water. At the town of Lawrence, the stream has once again cooled by groundwater inflow to the high sixties in summer and is capable of supporting trout down to the dam in Watervliet. As larger numbers of brown trout become available, this stretch should be stocked to establish the species in this area. The lower section, down to Benton Harbor, is primarily a warmwater stream. However, salmon and steelhead runs are likely to become established in time.

North Branch of The Paw Paw:

The headwaters of this branch begin in some enormous spring holes (privately owned) north of the Wolf Lake State Fish Hatchery near the eastern boundary of Van Buren County. Below these springs it is known as Campbell Creek.

Within a half mile, at 28th Avenue, the stream is 10 to 12 feet wide and has some nice holes below the road. Bottom is mostly sand and quite soft for wading. Brook trout are the dominate, but there are also some nice browns. Occasional brookies will run over 12 inches in length.

Most of the drainage on this entire branch is broad flat elm and maple swamps. This causes the stream to overflow its banks quite frequently after a rain or during spring run off.

Below Fish Lake Road it is then known as Whiskey Run, or the North Branch. From here on downstream, the stream is slower and deeper. In order to fish effectively, you should have an inner tube and waders, or with some difficulty you could use a canoe. The stream averages 25 to 30 feet wide and has a soft, sandy bottom. Many good catches of brown trout are taken, especially early in the season. There are a few taken every year that exceed 5 pounds. Fish may be taken on all conventional gear, including flies. The bait fisherman may become discouraged at times because of the large number of chubs and suckers that move up from the lower section of the river. By the time you get to M-40 the trout have given way to warmwater species.

East Branch of the Paw Paw:

This stream heads up near the Kalamazoo-Van Buren County line in Paw Paw Lake, which is a good producer of rainbow trout. It ends in Maple Lake at Paw Paw, where it meets with the West Branch. Some local people also call this Lawton Creek.

This is a very good producing brook-brown trout stream, with brooks giving way to browns about midway downstream. The stream is 25 to 30 feet wide and it gives up an occasional large fish. There was a brown of over 7 pounds taken in 1967 and a brookie of almost 3

pounds in 1966. The bottom is over 50% gravel, which makes for good food production and spawning. Surrounding country is mostly grape vineyards, farms and small woodlots. The banks of the stream are pretty much covered with brush and trees.

Fishing techniques are up to the individual, as most gear is equally effective. The fly fisherman gets some good fly hatches in May, June and early July.

West Branch of The Paw Paw:

This branch starts in southern Van Buren County, near Decatur. As it flows towards Maple Lake at Paw Paw, through predominately farm country, it picks up a few nice spring fed tributaries. These improve the stream as trout water in its lower 4 miles.

This entire branch was chemically treated in 1963 to remove all rough fish, and was restocked with brown trout that same year. Although there are some rough fish coming back again it is still providing some fair fishing for those who work at it. It is part of the county drain system, so it is quite straight and has a sandy bottom. Most of the cover consists of countless trees that have fallen in and dug holes in the sandy bottom.

Tributaries to Main Paw Paw River:

A significant tributary which enters at the town of Lawrence, is Brush Creek. Along with its two tributaries, White and Red Creeks, it startles the unwary fisherman, with the size of the fish that come out of it.

With much of the stream no wider than your living room (12 to 14 feet), it continues to give up browns 16 to 18 inches and larger. This is partially due to the fact that the stream has many shallow gravel riffles that drop off into deep pools and undercut banks. These riffles also produce many aquatic insects for food. Most fish are taken on live bait, but other gear could probably be used to a more limited degree. Surrounding country is mainly farmland with wooded borders along the stream.

As you go into Berrien County at Watervliet, Mill Creek enters. It starts in Van Buren County and flows through a heavily wooded area, draining many springs into its watercourse. The gravel bottom starts to change to sand as it flows through farmlands near the county line.

Most brown trout taken run 10 to 14 inches, with an occasional larger fish taken in the lower stretch. The upper end is bait water because of the heavy cover, but most types of gear could be used on the lower. A live grasshopper or one of the good imitations floated along the grassy banks in June or July is an effective technique.

The last stream to come in before the river reaches Lake Michigan is Blue Creek. Its headwaters start above the site of the former Milburg State Fish Hatchery.

Although the upper portion isn't too large, it yields a good number of eating size brown trout. By the time it reaches Milburg it has picked up enough ground water that it now averages 15 to 20 feet in width. From here on it becomes a very good stream for most types of gear. There are many deep holes and clay banks so that you would want waders to fish effectively. Fish become progressively larger as you move downstream, with some reaching 16 to 18 inches or larger.

Surrounding country is orchards, farmlands and woodlots. The stream bottom varies from gravel riffles to clay shelves and sand.

Dowagiac River System

The headwaters of this stream begin in southern Van Buren County as the outlet of Lake of the Woods, and its counterpart, Dowagiac Creek, starts in northeastern Cass County as a drain system for many lakes in that area. Both of these streams produce good catches of brown trout, along with the tributaries that they pick up on the way to Niles and the St. Joseph River in Berrien County.

The river itself contains mostly warmwater species until you get northwest of Dowagiac. By then it has picked up enough cooling water to become a good brown trout stream. This is big water, so you can fish as you please, and even use a canoe if you like. The major portion of this whole system is through farm country, but with quite a wide belt of trees along the waters edge. The bottom is a good mixture of gravel and sand. The two best areas for large browns are in the vicinity of Sumnerville, where there is a public access site, and below the dam north of Niles. Fish of 6 to 10 pounds have been caught occasionally in these areas with some limit catches the early part of the season.

Going back up to Dowagiac, this is where the Dowagiac Creek joins the river. From Volinia to Lake LaGrange is the best area on this stream. Brown trout of 14 to 16 inches are not uncommon. The stream is not trout water below Lake LaGrange.

Heading downstream towards Pokagon, you cross Peavine Creek, a small stream containing a few browns.

At Pokagon you cross an excellent stream named after the town. On the headwaters of Pokagon Creek, and on Kimmerlee Creek, a tributary near Dailey, are some fine spawning grounds for the browns in these waters. Its width varies from 10 to 20 feet and is about 50% gravel. It flows through many farms and woodlots on its way to the river at Sumnerville. There are enough deep holes that you should have waders if you fish the lower section. Most fish are average size, but some will run 16 inches and over.

There is one more stream that empties in at the Berrien-Cass County line, namely McKenzie Creek. This is a relatively short stream, but it does produce some nice browns for the passing fisherman and also to the main river system. There are many good gravel stretches for natural reproduction and enough good holes for fishing.

Glass Creek:

This is an isolated tributary to the Thornapple River that deserves mention. For the most part it flows through the Barry State Game Area, so public access is assured.

It has been a good producer of brown trout over the years. Most fish will run average size but occasional fish of 2 to 4 pounds have been taken. The stream will average 15 to 20 feet wide with some gravel areas. It winds its way through a valley bordered by oak forests most of the way to the river.

It can be fished with most types of gear, but the bait fisherman may become discouraged during the daytime by the numerous creek chubs and suckers. This stream is being evaluated for a possible chemical treatment to get rid of this competition and to make fishing more productive and enjoyable.

Cedar Creek and Spring Creek were chemically treated in 1970 and restocked with brown trout.

Cedar Creek is a tributary to the Thornapple River, near Quimby, in east central Barry County. Average width runs from 20 to 40 feet and it has some gravel areas for natural reproduction. It is large enough for all types of fishing. It winds through dense tag alder thickets and cattail marshes bordered with oak forested ridges.

Spring Creek, a tributary of the Prairie River in St. Joseph County, empties in at the town of Centreville. It is almost identical to the Cedar, except that this stream flows through predominately farm country with a narrow border of trees and brush along its banks. This should provide some good brown trout fishing in an area where trout streams are very scarce.