

Who are These Steelheads Anyway? ***“Oncorhynchus Mykiss Irideus” – an excerpt by Jerry Tone***

What are these fish that excite anglers and bring them off their couches in the fall, winter, and spring into a river, braving frost bite, snow and freezing rain just to catch a fish that they usually carefully return to the river with a pat of encouragement and a bit of thanks?

The steelhead trout, *Oncorhynchus Mykiss Irideus*, gets its common name from the steel-blue cast along its head and back and its poetic sub-species name, a reference to the goddess of the rainbow, from its tendency to develop an iridescent rosy lateral stripe toward spawning time. They are a Pacific Ocean fish with their native range stretching from rivers in the Kamchatka Peninsula in far eastern Russia to Alaska and down the west coast of North America south to Malibu Creek in northern California. Chagrin steelhead are direct descendants of these Pacific steelhead migrating to a lake instead of an ocean.

Spawning runs from the ocean or lake to the river occur year-round and after spawning the adults return to their ocean or lake leaving the fertilized eggs to fend for themselves. After hatching, the Pacific steelhead spend their first two to three years feeding and growing to 6-7 inches in their natal rivers. They then undergo a process called “smoltification” that prepares them to endure salt water. This complete, they travel downstream to the Pacific where they spend two to three years feeding and growing powerful enough to return to their natal rivers and successfully navigate for hundreds of miles upstream through rapids and up waterfalls to spawn. They can repeat this annual cycle several times and, in that span, grow quite large with the record fish being over 42 pounds.

All of this natural history may be interesting, but how did these fish get from the Pacific coast rivers to the Chagrin? Well, the eastern migration started in 1876 with a shipment of rainbow trout eggs from the McCloud River in northern California to the Au Sable River in Michigan. By accident a good percentage of the eggs in that shipment were from steelhead, a relative of the non-migratory Rainbow, so steelhead fishing became a reality in rivers flowing into Lake Michigan. New York State was next introducing steelhead to rivers flowing into Lake Ontario. Over the next 100 years Pennsylvania and Ohio followed stocking rivers flowing into Lake Erie. Unfortunately, the summer flows of the Ohio rivers are too warm and too shallow to provide suitable habitat for the spawn so very few survive and the stock must be replenished annually.