

Promising start in efforts to help “Coasters” back into native habitat

By Matt Dunn

The Great Lakes are justifiably famous for their excellent salmon and steelhead fishing. These species spend most of their lives in the competitive open lake, eating baitfish and growing large. They enter tributaries in the fall and spring and make their way to suitable spawning habitat. Anglers from all over the country and the world come to fish for them in these rivers. Hooking one of these big-lake fish in a small river is an experience unparalleled in the sport.

Steelhead and salmon are not native to the upper Midwest. They were introduced from the Pacific coast starting in the late 1800s. With the help of commercial overfishing, they took the place of a native fish that rivaled them in size and, in most people's opinion, outdid them in beauty: the coaster brook trout.

The brook trout we are familiar with today rarely grow larger than eight inches long. They live in small streams and are appreciated most for their aggressive disposition, beautiful colors, and sweet

tasting meat. But one variety of brook trout, the coaster, is admired also for its size: averaging up to five pounds in weight with some specimens reaching fifteen pounds. Like steelhead and salmon, coasters spend most of their lives in the big lakes, making annual runs up tributaries to spawn.

Unlike the modern steelhead and salmon fisheries, coaster brook trout historically occupied only Lake Superior and the northern portions of Lakes Huron and Michigan. It is very likely that Beaver Island itself once hosted a run of coasters, and the newly formed Beaver Island Conservation Club has plans to restore this population to its native habitat in Iron Ore Creek.

Very few populations of modern coasters have remained intact since the arrival of white settlers to

the Great Lakes. Today, native populations of coasters exist only in Lake Superior watersheds. In fact, only four populations have survived in US waters: three on Isle Royale and one in the Salmon Trout River in Marquette. Several native populations still survive on the Canadian side of Lake Superior,



most famously and abundantly in the Nipigon River of Ontario.

Modern rehabilitation projects have been attempted in several areas of Lake Superior including Pictured Rocks National Seashore near Munising Michigan, creeks near Ashland Wisconsin and near Grand Portage Minnesota.

Beginning in 1999 and ending in 2005, more than 100,000 coaster brook trout fingerlings hatched from eggs from Isle Royale strain fish were stocked in Mosquito, Seven Mile, and Hurricane Rivers in the Pictured Rocks National Seashore on the south shore of Lake Superior. Stocking was suspended in these rivers because studies revealed that native brook trout there were already migrating to the lake. While no coaster-sized brook trout have been found in these

rivers or in nearby areas of the lake, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Park Service will continue to monitor these populations and perhaps continue stocking efforts in the future.

The US Fish and Wildlife Service in Ashland Wisconsin began stocking various life stages of

Isle Royale strain fish in Whittlesey Creek in 2003. They have stocked eggs, fry, fingerlings, and adults. Their efforts have met with little success. No large brook trout have been found in the creek or in areas of the lake near the creek.

In Minnesota, the Grand Portage Tribe and the US Fish and Wildlife Service began stocking Nipigon strain coasters in 1992 in Little Lake Creek, Hollow Rock Creek and Grand Portage Creek. Eyed eggs, fingerlings, and yearling coasters were stocked and it was found that the eyed egg stage was the most effective. In 1997, it was discovered that coaster brook trout were reproducing in at least two of these streams. Of 52 sexually mature coasters sampled

that year, the average size was about seventeen inches with several fish topping the twenty inch mark. The Minnesota state record brook trout is a 24 inch, six and a half pound coaster caught in the Pigeon River just a mile north of Grand Portage in 2000. While these are not giant lake run fish, they are truly giant brook trout and represent a promising start in the efforts to rehabilitate coasters to their native habitat.

The Beaver Island Conservation Club hopes its efforts meet with similar success. They are already off on the right foot with help from St. James and Peaine townships, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians and the Natural Resources and Eco Tourism Commission. These organizations assisted in getting funding for a new culvert on Iron Ore Creek. The previous culvert was too small to allow coaster brook trout passage from the spawning habitat in the upper creek to the lake.

Gavin West, one of the founding members of the Beaver Island Conservation Club, says that in moving forward, the club is looking for additional funding sources including Trout Unlimited and the US Fish and Wildlife Service to continue coaster restoration work like further stream restoration and a stocking program. The club is also waiting for final clearance for federal non-profit 501c3 status. This will allow them to apply for a variety of federal monies including US Fish and Wildlife and US Department of Agriculture grants. West says that they hope to have an active stocking program in place within five years.



Growing up in Pennsylvania, author Matt Dunn fished for pretty much everything that swims. He is a student and outstanding fishing guide. He earned an MS. in Biology and an MA. in History and Philosophy of Science. During the past several years, however, much to his Ph.D. adviser's consternation, he did a lot more fishing than dissertation writing.

He has fished extensively in Colorado, New Mexico, and the UK. He likes good draft beer and even designed and taught a course for several years at Indiana University on the history of beer and brewing. He has a booming laugh and a warm personality. He was once mistaken for a Sasquatch. Dunn is a guide for Indigo Guide Service. They serve Beaver Island and can be found on the Chamber web site www.BeaverIsland.org under Hunting and Fishing.