

Wild trout program a stocking success

Fish succeeding in repopulating streams

MADISON - Trout anglers in 2005 will have more wild fish and more stream miles to challenge them than ever before, thanks in large part to Wisconsin's nationally-renowned, decade-old program to stock trout hatched from wild parents instead of from fish raised for generations in a hatchery.

Recent research has shown that the wild trout Wisconsin stocks survive in far greater numbers after being transferred to streams and live longer than the offspring of "domestic" fish spawned from parents that represent generations of fish raised in hatcheries, providing anglers action longer through the fishing season and in subsequent years.

Perhaps most importantly, the genetic superiority of the wild fish has spurred Department of Natural Resources fish managers to use them to restore self-sustaining trout populations to hundreds of miles of streams where water quality and flow has improved as a result of changing land use and farming practices, and where DNR trout habitat projects have improved instream habitat.

"Anglers will find there are far more streams to fish -- and far more wild fish to catch -- as a result of the wild trout program," says Dave Vetrano, a DNR fisheries supervisor and longtime fish manager of streams in Crawford, La Crosse, Monroe and Vernon counties.

In those four counties alone, the stocking of wild trout has played a major role in allowing more than 325 miles of streams to be formally classified as trout waters for the first time or upgraded to a higher classification within the state's three-tier system. At least 15 of the streams receiving upgrades to Class 1 -- the highest quality category and indicative of self-sustaining trout populations -- occurred because DNR's stocking of wild trout successfully established self-sustaining populations in those waters, among them Bishop Branch Creek, Blackbottom Creek, Copper Creek, Sugar Creek, and several small tributaries to the Mississippi River.

Statewide, it's unclear how many of the 600 miles of trout stream upgraded in 2001 to Class 1 improved their status because wild trout stocking built self-sustaining populations in those waters. But the success of the wild trout stocking program stretches from one corner of the state to the other. For example, the stocking of wild trout combined with habitat improvement projects have successfully established a brook trout fishery in the Steiner Branch in Lafayette County, and the stocking of wild brown trout in Couderay River, Devils Creek, and the Big and Little Weirgor systems in Sawyer and Rusk counties appears to be working where previously, stocking domestic strain in these streams had been a near-total failure.

"The program definitely has been a success and has grown from an experimental status to become an integral part of trout management in Wisconsin," says Matt Mitro, a DNR fisheries researcher who recently analyzed how well the wild trout program was meeting its goals."

Mitro found that stocked wild fish had survival rates two to four times greater than stocked fish spawned from domestic parents, and found stocked wild trout surviving to three years and older in some streams while there was no evidence of domestic fish surviving beyond two years.

Over many generations, domestic fish are selected for characteristics suitable to survival in a hatchery system and maximizing egg production, so their offspring are consequently now better suited to survival in hatcheries than wild streams, and we therefore see poor survival when stocking "domestic" trout, Mitro says.

While Vetrano and his crews conducted early, small-scale efforts to hatch wild trout in an old springhouse, DNR officially began its wild trout program in 1995. The move was spurred by hopes of producing a fish that would survive longer into the fishing season, following the sobering discovery that stocked domestic fish weren't surviving in good numbers despite drought closing many streams to fishing in the late 1980s.

"It took some out of the box thinkers in the hatchery system to take this on, because raising wild fish required some methods that went against the traditional ways things were done," says Larry Claggett, DNR's cold water specialist.

Nevin State Fish Hatchery Supervisor John Komassa and technician Don Dodge are among the hatchery personnel who have taken on the challenge of using new methods to raise wild trout on a large scale. After the wild brook trout are collected from Ash Creek and wild brown trout from Timber Coulee, the fish are brought back to Nevin, spawned and then returned to their home waters.

Because fish managers' requests, or "quotas" for wild brown trout is more than the stream could provide, a captive, wild broodstock is maintained at Nevin. These are first generation fish that are from the wild brown trout taken from Timber Coulee. Each year only enough fish from the stream are taken to continue the broodstock.

The eggs are hatched at Nevin, and Komassa and Dodge subsequently limit human contact with the fish to keep them wary. They use automatic feeders so the fish do not become reliant on hand feeding or learn how to activate demand feeders. They also use shade covers over the tanks to simulate the cover the fish might find in a stream, and keep the density of fish in the tanks at half that for domestic trout.

Nevin was and continues to be the workhorse for raising and stocking wild fingerling trout, but is now sending more eggs to other hatcheries to hatch and raise. Critical partners in the program are the sports clubs that receive a growing number of small fingerling wild brook trout from Nevin to raise an additional year and stock out in the following spring. In 2004, five state hatcheries and 22 cooperative facilities filled requests for 242,881 wild brook trout and 839,858 wild brown trout for stocking.

Fish managers have identified a goal of having 50 percent of the trout stocked in Wisconsin waters from wild parents; wild trout now comprise about 40 percent. Those fish will continue to be stocked into Class 2 streams that are promising candidates for restoring self-sustaining populations, Claggett says.

"We're essentially producing a wild fishing experience that anglers say is priceless, but also succeeding in building fisheries that don't just last a month, but in many cases, will be there for their children and their grandchildren."

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT: Larry Claggett (608) 267-9658; John Komassa (608) 275-3246; Matt Mitro (608) 221-6366; Dave Vetrano (608) 785-9009