

WISCONSIN'S LAKE MICHIGAN STEELHEAD STRAINS



Steelhead and rainbow trout are essentially the same species of fish. Steelhead is the name given to the silver ocean going form of this species. This species is native to the western U.S. where steelhead inhabit the coastal waters and rainbow trout live in rivers, streams, and lakes. Steelhead undergo a process called smolting during which they change physiologically to adapt for life at sea. This change usually occurs when the fish is 7-8 inches long and 1-3 years old. Soon after the fish “smolts” it goes out to sea where it lives for 2-4 years before returning to spawn in the river it was hatched in. Unlike coho or chinook salmon it doesn’t die after spawning, but returns to the sea. A steelhead may spawn several times during its life, although most only spawn once or twice. Lake Michigan steelhead live a life that is very similar to that of their ocean going relatives. The lake serves as a substitute for the ocean and they return to spawn in its tributary streams. Wisconsin is presently stocking three strains of steelhead in Lake Michigan. The spawning migration of each strain occurs at a different time of the year, which makes fish available to anglers for an extended season.

Skamania summer-run steelhead: This strain was developed at the Skamania hatchery in the state of Washington. Wisconsin originally obtained eggs from Indiana, but we now take eggs from adults returning to our streams. The spawning migration (known as “the run”) begins in late June and early July. The good stream fishing doesn’t begin until the water temperatures start to cool, usually in mid-September. Spawning occurs from mid-December through mid-March with the peak occurring in January and February. The majority of spawning fish are four and five year olds. Four year old fish average 28 inches and 8 pounds while five year old fish average 32 inches and 12 pounds.

Chambers Creek winter-run steelhead: This strain originated at Washington’s South Tacoma Hatchery. Eggs for our program were originally obtained from the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. The spawning migration starts in late fall and continues through winter and early spring. Some of the best stream fishing is during mid-November through December and again in March and early April. The majority of spawning adults are three and four year old fish. Three year olds average 25 inches and 6 pounds while four year olds average 29 inches and 9.5 pounds.

Ganaraska River winter-run steelhead: This strain originated on the west coast and has since become naturalized in Lake Ontario. It uses the Ganaraska River on the north shore of the lake for spawning. Although referred to as a spring-run fish in Ontario, the Ganaraskas stocked in Lake Michigan also contribute to the fall and winter stream fishery. Strong pulses of these fish run up the rivers from November to December and again from late March through April. Peak spawning time extends from April to early May. This is the last strain to leave the stream and has extended the fishing opportunities an extra 2 to 4 weeks. Returning adults average 23 inches at age 3 and 26 inches at age 4.