

CONNECTICUT FISHING REPORT

by Bob Sampson Jr.

March is a transition month between winter and spring. Due to the fact that the migratory patterns and behaviors of fish are controlled to a large degree by temperature, the available fishing options and how productive these options may be, are totally dependent on the weather and prevailing temperatures, to some degree the severity of the winter leading up to ice out time.

As this is written, the region was gripped in a winter cold snap, with below normal temperatures, that brought the first ice and snows to Connecticut, on the heels of what had been a very mild and wet winter, through the first half of January.

If a mid-winter thaw takes place in February and temperatures remain mild from that point (like last year), everything will be "honkey dory". Fish will begin to move early and the area will experience some degree of spring fishing successes during March.

If however, it stays cold and temps drop into the 30's even 20's at night through May, like it did for a few years in a row ((2003-05), the blue crab population that began a resurgence last year will be wiped out and coastal fishermen will be waiting until the end of March or April before things begin to happen along the coast. Even during the coldest winters, ice is usually gone from coastal estuaries and embayments by the middle of March. Once the waters are open enough to fish from shore or launch a boat, two options open up immediately along the coast, Thames River stripers and searun brown trout, with winter flounder following closely, when the season opens on April 1.

For sheer fishing action during March, the best fishing option anywhere is the schoolie striped bass in the Thames River, with some other smaller wintering areas in coastal rivers and around warm water discharges throughout the region also coming to life as temperatures rise. Whenever water temperatures reach the 50's F mark, these fish begin to move and feed, creating fisheries where ever they are located. The Thames River, has thousands of fish that spend the winter in its upper reaches from Norwich to Montville, so when these huge schools that stack in the Norwich Harbor area on a daily basis to depths of 20 feet or more spread out down river and begin moving into the shoals to feed, this river turns on big time, creating a shallow water light line fishery that is as good as it gets.

At this time anglers will be successful using soft plastics (such as Slug-Go's, Zoom Flukes, and Fin-S Fish), speed jigging with Salt Shakers and other shad body plastic teasers, Storm minnows, shallow running plugs and flies. Due to the sheer numbers of fish that can be caught and released it's best to use single hook lures rather than plugs with multiple treble hooks.

When possible, try to fish during the approach of storm fronts, during the ebb tide and for added torture after dark to improve the odds of catching some larger stripers. For the best odds of racking up numbers of fish, even during

the difficult fishing period of March, on the Thames, find the fish, use small lures, no more than four and a half inches and present those lures, wherever the bass are found, whether they are in the shoals or suspended five or ten feet off the bottom in the channel.

** Note: Connecticut Regulations require a license to fish the Thames above I-95 and the limits are two fish per day 28 inches for striped bass.*

Another excellent March ice out fishing option along the coast is sea run brown trout. This fishery has been improving over the past few years in the rivers that are listed in the "Connecticut Anglers Guide" as "searun trout stream" in color coded, blue lettering.

There have always been a few natural drop down trout of all species to be found in most of the estuaries along the coast. However, during the searun trout hey day of the 1960's and early 70's, places such as Latimer Brook, Mystic, Housatonic and Saugatuck Rivers all produced some decent browns, on a regular basis from ice in, during the fall, through April or May most years.

These fisheries disappeared for a decade or more after the searun program was scrapped during the late 1970's to make room in hatcheries for Atlantic salmon that were first returning to Connecticut waters at that time.

In 2001 with the creation of a new Connecticut Trout Management Plan in the state, the searun trout program was resurrected. In the new plan, the DEP no longer stocked "genetically engineered" searun browns that had some European "blue blood" in them, that had been brought across the ocean as eggs, from Danish stocks of fish during the 1960's, they were simply Connecticut hatchery brown trout fingerlings.

The new program, which is very cost effective, simply involves the stocking of these fingerlings into the tidal areas of selected coastal streams and rivers. The major cost in trout rearing is getting them to catchable size, so these babies are relatively cheap because hatcheries always produce excess fingerlings. Therefore the fingerlings for this new stocking concept are readily available and essentially "free", because at some point excess fish are released into appropriate locations or somehow disposed of due to space limitations in hatcheries as they grow.

With five years of stocking fingerlings into

the places listed in the "Connecticut Anglers Guide", which include the Eight Mile River, Haddam; the Farm River, Branford; Hammonasset River, Madison/Clinton; Latimer Brook and Oil Mill Brook, both in the upper Niantic River estuary in, East Lyme; Mianus River, Greenwich; Saugatuck River, Westport; and Whitford Brook, Mystic anglers are starting to look for them once again. In addition, sea runs from the natural, down stream movement of trout from regular spring stockings are caught in the large rivers such as Pawcatuck, Thames, Housatonic and Connecticut Rivers and their tributaries, but on a sporadic basis.

Fishing for searuns begins during the late fall, October and November, when they move into their home estuaries and rivers to spawn. After spawning they drop down to their home estuary where they spend the remainder of the winter and spring until warming water temperatures drive them out into the cooler waters of the Sound or in some cases up stream into cooler feeder streams.

The "new" searun program has generated newfound interest in this challenging species and a few fish (probably regular stockie drop downs, or remnants from test stockings in the sea run rivers) may be giants. A friend of mine hooked fish to four pounds two winters ago and Ron Meroy of western

Connecticut has entered what is potentially a new state record for searun brown trout. Its a monster 31.5-inch, 10.5-pounder that he caught in early January from the Saugatuck River using a two inch long, Storm "Silver Shiner". If his fish doesn't prove to be a drop down seeforellen brown from Saugatuck Reservoir, he will have topped the previous record by more than half a pound!

Winter flounder fishing has been touch and go since they were wiped out during the late 70's and 80's by a combination of commercial over harvest and super warm winters that were not conducive to successful breeding for this cold water species. Over the past few years, local populations appear to be improving slightly, which, in my opinion, is due to a combination of favorable spawning temperatures and increased protection through regulations on both the recreational and commercial fisheries.

Winter flounder spawn in the upper reaches of bays and estuaries such as Poquonnock River,



Shaquasia Hunter, a student of mine, tagged this striper during a field trip last spring. It was one of 140 tags we placed in a one day in a single spot on the Thames on April 13, 2006. This fish was recaptured in July 2006 off the Saco River, Maine!

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