



2003 Fishing Lake Simcoe Newsletter

Editor's Corner:

We're back! Welcome to the 2003 "catch-up" edition of the Fishing Lake Simcoe Newsletter. Although not publishing for over a year, our intent remains to produce a quarterly newsletter that will continue to inform and educate the public about the wonderful fishery of Lake Simcoe. With this special issue, we will have a look at the previous winter conditions of 2003, followed by a brief synopsis of what occurred in the Lake Simcoe fishery over the last year, a special feature on whitefish by outdoor writer Drew Myers and then a Lake Simcoe Environmental Management strategy update by Brian Kemp. We will begin with the winter season, which remains as the period when more anglers fish the lake than at any other time.

Winter/2003 - Conditions

After the record warm winter of 2002, when parts of the lake never froze for more than 48 hours, many ice anglers were concerned that the winter of 2003 would be the same. Fortunately, their fears were put to rest early, when several anxious perch anglers were already walking on hard water a full two or three weeks before Christmas. By the New Year, some hut operators were already set up with huts on the shallower, nearshore perch areas, and in mid-January many hut operators were busy transporting huts to the main lake trout and whitefish grounds. Without any major mid-winter thaws, the ice continued to thicken to the point where it was close to three feet in many areas by mid-winter. Just so that conditions wouldn't be too ideal, Mother Nature dumped plenty of snow onto the ice - which made travel very difficult in areas that were not plowed and maintained regularly by commercial ice hut operators.

As the regular winter season came to an end with the closure of the lake trout and whitefish seasons on March 15, anglers scrambled to try and get their huts off the ice by the same date/deadline. Tim Boyd, Enforcement Supervisor of the Aurora District reported that *"Even with arduous heavy-snow conditions, the vast majority of hut operators and individual hut owners diligently removed their huts in time."* Stories of anglers making four or five pain staking attempts with snowmobiles, ATVs and four-wheel drive vehicles were common-place before they were finally able to haul the huts off the ice. Some folks had to resort to hiring the services of a local commercial hut operator, who would tow huts in for a fee. There were even reports of one enterprising local farmer who used his tractor to haul as many as four or five huts off the ice at a time. Tim Boyd concluded by saying, *"We were very impressed with the efforts most ice anglers made to get their huts off in time for the March 15th deadline. Although some years it may be tempting to extend that deadline, we believe that from a safety standpoint we need to maintain it. We would like to thank all those who respected the deadline and had their huts off in time."*

Ice and More Ice:

Once most of the huts were off, pike and walleye anglers enjoyed another 15 days of hard water action before their

season closed on March 31st. Most winters, by the end of March all ice fishing is usually finished, however for the '2003 winter that didn't want to let go', hard water perch action continued. For the relatively few late-ice perch fanatics who came from across Ontario and the southern US to experience the rare late-ice phenomenon, the fine perch fishing, glorious weather and good ice, made this one of the best late ice periods in recent memory. In fact, it wasn't until April 15, that a small number of anglers had to stop walking out due to unsafe ice when record setting 28 Degree C. temperatures accelerated the destruction process. The ice finally left the whole lake for good on April 29 ... the last time it did that was in 1997.

The winter of 2003 was not just one of the coldest in recent memory around Lake Simcoe but across most of Ontario as well. For the first time in years, the entire surfaces of Lake Superior, Lake Huron and Lake Erie froze over, according to ice experts at the Canadian Ice Service of Environment Canada. This winter rarity usually occurs only once a decade, and only for fleeting periods, with the last two big freezes in 1994 and 1982. ``They were all 100% covered with ice. That's quite unusual," said Claude Dicaire, senior ice forecaster for the Canadian Ice Service.

The Great Lakes region was not alone in having massive amounts of ice. The Gulf of St. Lawrence had 25 per cent more ice than normal, and the Atlantic coast down to Halifax was covered with sea ice, a tribute to the intensity of the deep winter freeze that gripped Eastern Canada this past winter. Ice extending as far south as Halifax in the Atlantic is considered as unusual as shoreline-to-shoreline freezing of some of the Great Lakes.

Winter, 2003 Species by Species Update

Lake trout: Although there was no doubt that several typically productive lake trout areas did not produce well for most of the winter, there were others that yielded outstanding catches of Lake Simcoe trout. A remarkable number of anglers reported success was very tough to come by if they used standard live minnow rigs, yet once they switched to artificial baits like a Williams spoon or large jugging Rapala, their luck changed for the better.

Whitefish: As with lakers, whities were tough to come by throughout vast stretches of their traditional winter range. However, once anglers pinpointed the smaller holding areas where the whities seemed to concentrate, there was outstanding action. Many anglers reported seeing 'hoards' of whitefish in pods 'on-the-move' while viewing their underwater cameras. These large roaming packs of 4-10 pound fish would readily take the same artificial lures as their lake trout brethren.

Northern Pike: With the early start and late finish to the winter season in such prime areas of pike habitat as Cooks Bay, anglers had plenty of opportunity to capitalize on their chances of catching some nice hardwater pike. Many of them did, and targeted areas of remaining green aquatic plant growth where the pike seemed to congregate. It was noted that several anglers were taking advantage of being able to fish with two lines during the winter and had one hole rigged for perch with small baits and light line and the other with larger baits and heavier line for pike.

Yellow Perch: Being able to walk on water early in the winter season made several perch anglers confident that 2003 would be a great year. In many respects it was as the beginning of the season was very productive. However by mid-season the action for Simcoe's most popular species slowed to a crawl in many areas until later on in the season when it picked up dramatically.

Record Perch?



Evidence that Lake Simcoe remains as one of the premier trophy yellow perch waters in North America was re-enforced on March 21st /03, when John Delicata of Alcona, ON caught a 2.35 pound perch from Lake Simcoe near Gilford. The perch nudged out the current Ontario record of 2.25 pounds, caught in Lake Erie in 1995. However, unbeknownst to the jubilant hard-core angler, the day before John caught his possible record perch Dave Leslie pulled in an even larger perch from the icy waters of that other famed trophy perch fishery - Lake Erie. This 2.42 lb perch was caught near Long Beach ON, on a minnow through the

ice. John caught his big Simcoe perch on a Lunker City plastic finesse fish in 26 ' of water. When Mr. Delicata was told the Erie perch was caught on a live minnow, his response was "Ah ... come on, a live minnow? At least I had to trick my perch with an artificial one; that should count for something!" According to Rhonda Barkley Fish and Wildlife Technician with the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters' Big Fish Registry, the Lake Erie perch should receive official recognition as the new Ontario record early in 2004 (as long as no other larger perch comes in before the end of 2003.) John Delicata's Lake Simcoe perch shown here, measured 15 inches long and had a girth of 12 ½ inches. At 2.35 pounds, it did indeed break the old Ontario record of 2.25 lbs and unofficially stands as a Lake Simcoe record perch.

SPRING 2003

Yellow perch: A slow start due to late ice out held many perch and the anglers who chase them on shore. Many perch anglers reported slow action for several weeks after ice out until the water warmed up enough when anglers began to experience their customary success.

Black crappie: A relatively short window of opportunity right after ice out enabled some eager crappie anglers to take advantage of the crappies' movements to marinas, rivers and channels. Much of the activity took place while the main body of Lake Simcoe was still frozen.

Lake trout: The cool spring did not hamper the lake trout activity as several trout anglers explained that they were still able to catch their quarry by long line trolling without downriggers for several weeks after the May 10th opener. Once the trout moved deep, those same anglers who brought out their down riggers continued to enjoy success throughout the spring period.

Whitefish: Somewhat slower at the start of the season than their coldwater brethren the lake trout, open-water whitefish none the less proved once again that they are quickly becoming a favorite among more and more Lake Simcoe anglers.

Northern Pike: Cool water temps throughout the early part of the spring period kept the life-giving aquatic plants of Lake Simcoe at bay until the latter part of the season. For this reason, anglers had difficulty finding good healthy new green weedgrowth and therefore difficulty in finding these toothy critters. As the important underwater plants began to materialize however with warmer water and longer days, so too 'miraculously' did the

pike ... and so did successful pike anglers.

Walleye: Not much has changed in the walleye world on Lake Simcoe. There were still lots of big walleye spawning up such traditional Simcoe rivers as the Talbot, however once the season opened and these big fish dispersed back into the main lake, they became difficult to target. Reports of the odd walleye being caught around Beaverton and down in Cooks Bay did materialize, but for the most part fishing was rather poor for them in the spring of 2003.

Summer 2003

Yellow Perch: The summer months are traditionally a time when the perch fishery gets a break from the angling pressure it sees throughout the rest of the year. The summer of 2003 was no exception however recreational anglers did catch their fair share of warm-weather perch on Lake Simcoe. Not found in the tight schools that are commonplace later in the year, anglers still reported they found co-operative perch in most areas around the lake.

Northern Pike: By early summer, the pike were co-operating nicely for the dedicated anglers who seriously chase these strong fighting fish. Trollers reported action in the shallows slowed to a halt by mid-summer, however those who moved deeper and began working slower moving jigs near bottom kept on catching pike.

Lake Trout: The late spring did indeed favor the trout anglers as they were still able to enjoy remarkable success right throughout almost the entire first half of summer.

Whitefish: As noted in the spring update, whitefish were late in turning on, however this benefited those who continued to chase whitefish early in the summer. With the aid of good sonar and GPS units, anglers could pinpoint and retain otherwise hard-to-find off-shore locations. Most other years, open-water whitefish action is almost over in time for bass opener, but not in the summer of 2003. In fact, I recall the following occurrence on the opening day of bass season. *"I was out there early for the opener but at 8am I had to take a scheduled break to answer the cell phone and report on the start of bass season for a live radio show - the Outdoor Journal Radio Hour. One of the Viola brothers asked me if there were a lot of other bass boats out there fishing too. I told him how surprised I was that, despite there being a major bass tournament on the lake that day, I had seen only one other boat fishing bass that morning ... But even more surprising was that I was looking at about 35 other boats way off in the deeper water who were jigging for whitefish!"*

Smallmouth Bass: A cool spring resulted in a later than usual spawn for many of the lakes' famous smallmouth bass, however anglers reported that they had expected to see far more bass on beds than they actually did. Instead many astute anglers focused on areas adjacent to where they believed bass would have spawned and some even found those legendary 4-6 pound smallmouths that Simcoe is renowned for.

Largemouth Bass: Unlike their smallmouth cousins, largemouths were not as affected by the latter start to the summer and it appeared most had completed spawning in time for the last Saturday in June opener. Anglers reported good action in shallow weedy sections of the lake, around docks, pencil reeds and some of the adjoining rivers like the Holland. Here anglers flipped or pitched Texas rigged worms or jig and pig combos to undercut cattail banks or around Lilly pads and arrowhead plants.

FALL, 2003

Northern Pike: As the waters began to cool and the shallow-water weeds began to die off, the toothy critters of Lake Simcoe began their customary movements to deeper waters ... searching for baitfish and virtually any fish smaller than themselves that they could try and eat. With the increase of aquatic plant growth throughout so many sections of Lake Simcoe, it is usually not too difficult to locate productive fall pike spots. Anglers who looked for and found deepwater (20-40 feet) breaks alongside shallower weedier water usually did quite well. Some anglers noted that the shallower water weeds which were quite healthy and prolific in the summer had died off during the fall and that the deeper water adjacent to these spots still held some gorgeous luscious green, living weedgrowth. This deep, clear water can often see vibrant coontail plants thrive throughout the fall months ... and in some cases even during the winter. Fortunately, Simcoe is blessed with many such spots - which make it one of the finest fall pike fisheries in South-Central Ontario.

Yellow Perch: Perch anglers were back at it in full force by late September when these tasty little fish began to form tighter schools in about 30 feet of water. As the fall season progressed and the water cooled, these groups of perch began their normal progression to shallower water. Good locations for this fall's perch fishery included the areas out from the Pefferlaw River, Virginia, Jackson's Point, Sibbald Point, Roches Point, Gilford and Barrie. Although the majority of perch anglers still preferred to use live shiner minnows as their favorite presentation, an increasing number are learning that they can also experience outstanding results with some of the new lifelike finesse plastic minnow imitations on the market.

Black Crappie: Late fall reports of crappie moving into Lake Simcoe marinas and up its rivers like the Holland, sent many anglers off to these locations in hot pursuit. Several enjoyed reasonable success tossing small brightly colored tube jigs near structure.

Largemouth Bass: The early part of the fall period saw very good largemouth action as these fish moved from their shallow water haunts to deeper water. Deep diving crankbaits and jigs were especially productive along deep weedlines next to shallow water flats or humps. As the season progressed largemouth fishing became very hit and miss. The 'miss' was especially prevalent when strong winds would cause water colour to become quite dingy in places like Cooks Bay. In fact, after one major wind storm in mid-November, a mud line from the murkier waters of Cooks Bay, extended all the way to Lefroy.

Smallmouth Bass: As in many renowned smallmouth waters, the autumn period on Lake Simcoe usually offers the finest fishing opportunities of the season. In recent years, big smallmouth bass have become the rule instead of the exception on Lake Simcoe however the year 2003 may go down in history as possibly producing the biggest smallmouth bass ever. Not only did several fall tournament weights top the magic 25 pound mark for five smallmouth, but on Saturday October 25, the lake produced a mind-boggling 29.59 pound bag of smallies to set a new Canadian tournament record.



Jayson Saliba (far left) from Windsor, Bob Formosa, Toronto and Des Barnes, Stittsville (near Ottawa)

With the five bass that almost weighed 30 pounds. All Bass were live released back to Lake Simcoe.

SPECIAL FEATURE

Geriatric Whitefish by Drew Myers

Some Lake Simcoe whitefish might be 53 years old, making them the longest-living specimens of their species recorded in North America. "In 1990, the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) looked at the age of Simcoe's whitefish to help determine the success (or lack of) natural reproduction in the lake and the effects of stocking on the population," said Dr. John Casselman, senior scientist for fisheries research. We found naturally reproduced whitefish that were 40 years old. We repeated the study in 1999...and again in 2000, when 50-year-old whitefish were found.

"Generally, the oldest fish live in the far north, where they grow slowly. Finding such old fish in a southern lake is quite remarkable," he added. "The year class of 1950 must be great for there to be still some in Simcoe."

He notes commercial-fishing records indicate Lake Huron also had a bumper year class in 1950. This points to climatic conditions having a great impact on whitefish spawning success. While many anglers assume that the oldest fish are the largest, Casselman said many of Simcoe's oldest whitefish weighed just a few pounds. Yet, fish as young as 12 years weighed almost nine pounds, says Frank Amtstaetter, formerly with the Lake Simcoe Fisheries Assessment Unit.

The lake's whitefish are aged two ways. The first method is to remove the otolith or ear stone from the fish's head. Each year, a fish adds a new layer, much like a tree ring, to the otolith. By cutting a cross section of it and counting the layers, biologists get a fairly accurate age of the fish. The second method is called Carbon 14 "bomb dating." According to Casselman, "During the 1950s and 1960s, the testing of dirty bombs, like nuclear weapons, around the world increased radiation levels in Canada. They were recorded in the otoliths of Lake Simcoe whitefish. By finding the radiation signature in the otolith, the age of the fish can be determined."

Lake Simcoe Environmental Management Strategy (LSEMS) Update

By Brian Kemp, Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority

Phase I of the Lake Simcoe Environmental Management Strategy (LSEMS) Implementation Program was formally launched in 1990 as a partnership between the provincial government, represented by the Ministries of Agriculture and Food, Environment and Natural Resources, and the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority (LSRCA) as the lead agency of this program. Phase II of the LSEMS Implementation Program, commencing in 1996, was expanded to include the Regions of York and Durham and the County of Simcoe. For Phase III, which commenced in 2001, the partnership was further expanded to include the Chippewas of Georgina First Nation, the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans, the provincial Ministry of Municipal Affairs and the municipalities of Bradford West Gwillimbury, Innisfil, Barrie, Oro-Medonte, Orillia, Ramara, New Tecumseth and Kawartha Lakes.

2003 marks the second full year for the Phase III project. The activities undertaken range from information collection (eg. monitoring), analysis and decision making (eg. studies) to implementation projects (ie. creating tools such as models for stormwater management strategies, undertaking capital projects and building public awareness and understanding.

The goal of the Lake Simcoe Environmental Management Strategy is to improve and protect the health of the Lake Simcoe watershed ecosystem and improve associated recreational opportunities by:

- Restoring a self-sustaining cold-water fishery;
- Improving water quality;
- Reducing phosphorus loads to Lake Simcoe; and
- Protecting natural heritage features and functions.

In 2003 LSEMS partners have achieved the following:

- Developed a Total Water Quality Program - data collection has been a priority in 2003 in order to assemble information on population projections, planned developments and servicing from municipalities. The Ministry of the Environment and LSRCA will analyze this data, develop the terms of reference and initiate a municipal pilot project.
- Delivered a Communication Strategy - the main objective of this strategy is to provide better messaging to target audiences, ensure heightened public awareness and understanding and increase support to ensure community action. Highlights in 2003 include the 1st Annual Lake Simcoe Environmental Festival, publication of 3 LSEMS Progress Reports, an Action Guide and Consumers Guide and a new LSEMS display was developed for the Toronto Sportsmen's Show.
- Environmental Assessment for the Holland Marsh Water Quality Improvement Project - the environmental assessment process has commenced with funding from York Region and the town of Bradford West Gwillimbury. Several public sessions and notices are planned to assist in the development of options, analysis and conclusions.
- Rural Water Quality Healthy Futures for Ontario Agriculture/Lake Simcoe Water Quality Improvement Program - in

2003 there were 126 projects approved with a total value of approximately \$1.6 million. These projects are designed to address nutrient pollution and are completed in partnership with the landowner.

- Watershed Health Monitoring - water quality/quantity, atmospheric loading and fish community monitoring was continued in 2003 by the Ministries of Natural Resource and Environment and the Conservation Authority.
- Completed the "State of the Lake Simcoe Watershed Report" and commenced the "Lake Simcoe Watershed Plan" - the State of the Watershed Report was completed in October 2003 and will be distributed in final form in December 2003. A scoping exercise commenced in October, 2003 to gather information and opinions from the public, interest groups, various agencies and LSEMS partners. The Terms of Reference for the Lake Simcoe Watershed Management Plan are to be drafted in January of 2004.
- Launched the Web Based Communications Pilot Project - the LSEMS website (www.lsems.info) was launched in May 2003. The site provides information on scientific information such as; water mass balance estimates, distributed runoff models, information on surface water quality/quantity (historic, real-time and predictive data), and general public information on projects and programs.
- Continued the Development of Urban Stormwater Management Strategies - Stormwater management strategies have been developed for Schomberg, Barrie and Bradford in 2003, and a study for Orillia is underway. Five municipalities have environmental assessments underway for stormwater facilities and one municipality is proposing to commence a project in 2004.

For a full version of the LSEMS III Year End Progress Report for 2003 please contact Jane Sirois at 905 713-7344 or Brian Kemp at 905 895-1281.

Last Cast:

- *Now that this "catch-up" edition of the Fishing Lake Simcoe Newsletter has been completed, we look forward to receiving your comments, suggestions and Letter to the Editor contributions. Since it has been over a year that this newsletter has been mailed out, we encourage all subscribers and anyone else interested in receiving this newsletter, to please update their mailing address, including their email address. We are seriously considering an electronic-only version of this newsletter sometime in 2004.*

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