

FISHING LAKE SIMCOE NEWSLETTER

SPRING 2004 EDITION

Editor's Corner:

Overall the spring of 2004 was wet and cooler than usual. The winter season for ice anglers was finished by the end of March and ice-out occurred on April 16 th when the majority of the lake became ice free. Although there was a warm spell here and there during the spring, cooler air temperatures meant water temperatures were much slower to warm up, resulting in less aquatic plant growth than is usually the case by the end of the spring.

In this issue of the Fishing Lake Simcoe Newsletter we will begin with a special feature on the status of the lake herring (cisco) in Lake Simcoe that is based on a technical report prepared by the Ministry of Natural Resource's, Lake Simcoe Fisheries Assessment Unit (LSFAU). The Unit is part of a provincial network mandated to assess the relationship between man-made stresses and fish communities. The unit which has been in existence since the late 1960s makes an important contribution to the management of this extremely important resource.

We have also included an article on wetlands. And, as many of you know, wetlands are among some of the most important natural features in a watershed that regulate water quality and flows....natures filter. Naturally we have our regular species by species update and be sure to check out our News section.

SPECIAL FEATURES SECTION

The Status of Lake Herring in Lake Simcoe

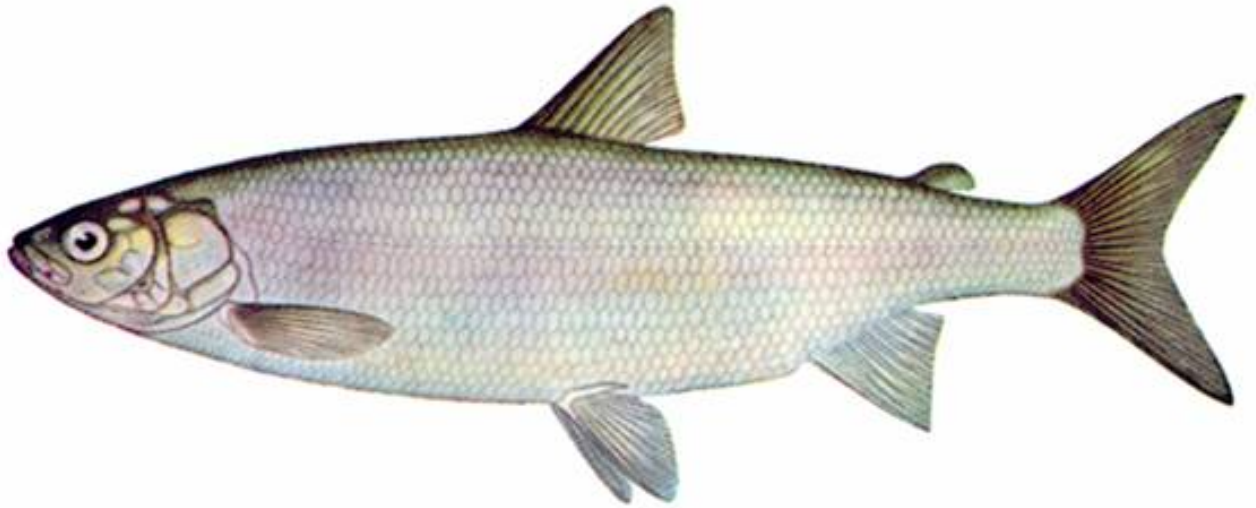
Background

Lake herring (cisco) were once an abundant species in Lake Simcoe , sustaining a large recreational fishery and serving an important ecological role as the principal forage species for lake trout. Beginning in the 1980s cisco started to show signs of recruitment failure and the population began to decline. Cisco have continued to decline and are now exceedingly rare in the lake. A catch limit of six cisco per day was implemented in 1995 and the recreational fishery was subsequently closed on January 1, 2001 to protect the remaining stock.

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The impact of eutrophication on Lake Simcoe's coldwater species habitat has been identified as the primary reason why the lake's naturally sustaining coldwater fish species (cisco, lake trout, lake whitefish and burbot) are no longer reproducing successfully. The Lake Simcoe Environmental Management Strategy (LSEMS) was established in the 1970s to coordinate efforts to reduce nutrient/phosphorus loading which would help restore a self-sustaining coldwater fishery.

The update below provides a summary of the major findings from a more detailed report on the status of the cisco in Lake Simcoe. All long term data provided here and in the state of the resource report was collected by the LSFAU. The complete "Status of Lake Herring (Coregonus artedii) in Lake Simcoe" report was originally prepared by Paul Johanson and Frank Amtstaetter. For further information or to obtain the original report please contact: *the Aurora District Office*.

Population Trends

The number of cisco caught by winter anglers began to decline in the 1980s, reaching extremely low levels by the mid to late 1990s. During this time period overall angler effort continued to increase, but the number of people fishing for cisco decreased. Cisco catch in the LSFAU fall index trap netting program began to decline in the 1980s, reaching extremely low levels by the mid 1990s. Because nets were fished later into the fall from 1982 to 1984 (mid December) than in previous and subsequent years, catch was relatively high. In most years, the fall index trap netting program monitors only the start of the cisco spawning run which begins in early December.

Trends in size

The mean fork length and weight of cisco sampled during the winter fishery and fall index trap netting program increased steadily from the late 1970s to the late 1990s. The observed increases in mean size and weight are likely the result of an increase in the average age of the population and less competition for food among the remaining cisco population, resulting in increased growth rates. Assessing changes in the age structure of the population has been limited because scales were used to assess age and scales typically underestimate age compared with other ageing structures such as otoliths bones of the fish.

Growth Rates

Recent trends in cisco growth were assessed by plotting the mean fork length of four year old cisco from 1981 to 1994. These were chosen for this analysis because scales provide a reasonable age estimate for younger fish, whereas using scales to age older fish is less reliable. From 1981 to 1994, cisco growth increased steadily. Although the observed increase in growth rate is likely due to an aging population and reduced competition we must also consider the numerous ecosystem changes which have impacted the Lake Simcoe ecosystem in recent years.

Lake Simcoe Ecosystem Change

Phosphorous loading into Lake Simcoe has increased to over three times pre-European settlement rates due to urban and agricultural activity within the watershed. The result has been an acceleration of the eutrophication process and the degradation of deep water and near shore shoal spawning habitat necessary to sustain natural reproduction and survival of coldwater species. The abundance of wild lake trout, lake whitefish, cisco and burbot has declined significantly in Lake Simcoe. Wild lake trout are now virtually absent from the lake but stocked lake trout abundance has increased steadily from the late 1970s to the 1990s. Although lake trout and cisco once coexisted in Lake Simcoe, the presence of a large population of stocked lake trout may represent a considerable stress, through predation, on the already diminished cisco population.

Rainbow smelt found their way into Lake Simcoe in the early 1960s and quickly became well established in the lake. Possible negative interactions between rainbow smelt and cisco include competition for food resources and predation of larval cisco by rainbow smelt. However, rainbow smelt and cisco coexisted for approximately 10-15 years with no obvious impact on the cisco population.

Spiny water fleas are large predatory crustaceans native to Europe that became established in Lake Simcoe in the mid 1990s, and have been observed in the stomachs of cisco. Although negative interactions may exist between spiny water flea and cisco (e.g., competition for native zooplankton) what impact spiny water flea may have on cisco in Lake Simcoe is unknown. Zebra mussels entered the lake in the 1990s and were abundant by 1995. They have had a profound impact on the lake ecosystems by filtering particulate matter from the water column which then increases water clarity. Other potential impacts include the diversion of energy to benthic environments from the pelagic zone of the lake and reduction of zooplankton populations which are critical for the survival of larval fish stages.

Summary

To protect and rehabilitate cisco in Lake Simcoe an ecosystem level management approach is required that incorporates fish community interactions and strives to reduce nutrient loading. Consideration must also be given to managing the effects of introduced species and prevention of future introductions. Despite the prolific nature of cisco under suitable habitat conditions, their ability to recover in Lake Simcoe must be brought into question given their precariously low levels of abundance and the degradation of cold-water habitat which they rely upon.

SPECIES BY SPECIES UPDATE

Lake Trout: Belowseasonal water temperatures after the mid May lake trout opener are known to keep trout relatively shallow. This is often the only window of opportunity for anglers long line trolling without the aid of downriggers or wire line, to catch these cold water species. To a large extent, this was the case this spring ... due to the cold water temps. However many anglers also reported trout suspended throughout the water column and not only did some of these trollers catch them with thin body baits such as a blue and silver Rapala floating minnow, but those who like to jig with spoons also had remarkable success. *"The key was to watch your sonar for suspending fish ... and when you saw these, - or even one arch, bring the spoon up just above the mark on the graph,"* responded Mike Hayakawa, sports editor for the Markham Economist and an avid Lake Simcoe angler.

Whitefish: A slower than usual start after the mid May opening had some anglers

concerned that this exciting spring angling opportunity would not be as good this year as in years past. The delay in hot open water whitefish action was well worth it however as most hard core whitefish anglers reported great success. In fact, many newcomers to this world of open water jigging for whities told us that they too soon figured out how to catch these oftentimes big, hard fighting fish. Lonnie King, a well known multi-species anglers and field editor with Ontario Out of Doors Magazine recalled some of his first impressions. *'It was actually easier than I thought it would be, especially considering how finicky whities can be in the wintertime. With only a general idea of where to start looking, we homed in on a group of boats anchored in about 70 ft of water and before we knew it we had a couple of nice Simcoe whitefish*

on. *Landing them was a bit tricky at first, but after a few trips out, we refined our approach to small Williams spoons and jigging Rapalas, with ultra sharp hooks. Braided line, limber rods and light drags was also part of our equation. What amazed me the most was the size of the fish - they averaged 4 to 5 lbs which is unheard of anywhere else in the province, except perhaps Lake Superior."* Lonnie concluded by saying *this about finding fish. 'If you choose to break free of the pack, a good sonar unit is essential in waters ranging from 50-75 feet deep. I spent a great deal of time just cruising along and monitoring the bottom with a Lowrance X-15, and just about everywhere we found a good concentration of fish, we scored.'*

Black Crappie: The mysterious Lake Simcoe crappie continues to excite area anglers despite the unpredictable behaviour of this popular panfish. One factor that has become somewhat routine is that shortly following ice out crappie will begin to show up in adjacent marinas, rivers and harbours. Not far behind this early seasonal movement will be large groups of anxious anglers eager to try their open-water fishing equipment for the first time of the year. Typically this first movement sees smaller crappie move in first and then the larger ones 'some time' after that. That in-between period of non-activity can be frustrating for spring crappie anglers as the often-heard "You shoulda been here last week" is a standard response, that soon becomes the last words you wanted to hear from your fellow fishermen. For those who combined their knowledge of the habits and habitat of the black crappie with a strong will and determination to find their quarry, the rewards of a few big Simcoe slabs did materialize.

Yellow Perch: An interesting phenomenon took place this spring that pleased many avid perch anglers who revel in catching jumbos from what is recognized as one of the premier perch lakes in North America . The spring perch were considerably bigger than they had expected based on this past winter's results. In a spring catch and release perch tournament that allowed a 15 perch limit the winners – Dave Chong and Don Sheldrake brought in 20.18 pounds. In fact, the top six teams all had more than 15 pounds – or perch that averaged over a pound a piece! Cooler water temperature kept many perch shallow well into the month of May and some anglers reported perch that were still full of eggs in mid May – suggesting a later spawn than usual.

Northern Pike: In a recent article in In-Fisherman magazine, Gord Pyzer, retired district manager of the Kenora Ministry of Natural Resources office, explained how dramatically northern pike are affected by water temperatures and by cold fronts. This excellent piece of reading could not have been more bang-on when it came to explaining the pike action on Lake Simcoe during the spring of 2004. If we received a few days of stable, relatively warm weather, the pike fishing would be tremendous. However, if you chose to fish during a major cold front, with cool winds, blue bird skies, falling air and water temps, then you could be assured of very tough fishing conditions. This was the case for the Aurora Bassmasters Annual Pike Tournament and Transfer on May 29 th – as the 64 anglers experienced the slowest fishing this event has ever had. Normally limits of pike are common but this year half the field came in skunked and only two teams could muster a three fish limit. The winners, John Mellish and Craig Severn brought in 19.84 pounds and they were also the team with the biggest pike of the tournament at just over 13 pounds.

Carp: Although interest in this hard fighting bottom-dwelling species is growing at a remarkable rate within the overall Canadian angling scene, there is little evidence to suggest that on Lake Simcoe or its slower moving tributaries, that many more anglers are targeting carp this spring compared to previous years. Chris Weidenfelder , an Urban Fisheries biologist with MNR's Aurora District office, went so far as to say "And, it really is too bad that more people are not taking advantage of the incredible carp fishing opportunities that Lake Simcoe and its tributaries has to offer. Places on the lake like the lower part of Cooks Bay, the shallow waters around the Virginia basin and of course the lake's slower moving rivers like the Holland or Black – can all be excellent spring carp fisheries."

Chumming with a few kernels of canned corn before fishing can help bring the carp to your fishing area ... and oftentimes the only bait required on your small single hook is a kernel or two of corn. But be prepared to beef up your tackle somewhat as Simcoe's carp are know to push the 25 pound mark and your ultra light tackle may not be up to the task. "With the cold, wet spring we had in 2004, it would not surprise me if great carp fishing could still be had in some of our rivers and the main lake for the better part of the summer", concluded Chris .

Lake Simcoe News

Lake Simcoe Wetland Is Provincially Significant

MNR's Aurora District staff Emma Followes , Steve Varga, and Stefan Romberg , Albert Garofalo, Pat Mohr and Jennifer Jung recently completed The Maskinonge River Wetland Summary report. The purpose of the summary was to highlight the importance of this precious wetland and to update the original wetland evaluation that was completed in 1987. The inventory gathered for this summary is part of an ongoing effort to document all wetlands in the Greater Toronto Area. The following are some of the excerpts from the summary that may be of interest to readers of this newsletter . For a complete copy of this summary please contact address listed below the Last Cast section.

The provincially significant Maskinonge River Wetland Complex covers most of the Maskinonge River (sometimes referred to as the Jersey River) watershed which flows into Cook's Bay, Lake Simcoe . It is located in the Towns of Georgina and East Gwillimbury . The Maskinonge Wetlands sustain a diversity of surrounding upland habitats including coniferous, mixed and deciduous forests, regenerating meadows, agricultural lands including sod farms and hedgerows. Adjacent uplands are important for many wetland species in the Maskinonge Wetlands and are critical for the maintenance of wetland functions . The diversity of wetlands and adjacent uplands at Maskinonge explains its diversity of plants and animals. There are 405 plant species, mammals such as White-tailed Deer, Eastern Cottontail, Eastern Chipmunk, Coyote, Beaver, Muskrat, Raccoon, Red Fox and Mink and reptiles and amphibians such as Snapping Turtle, Midland Painted Turtle, Gray Treefrog, Spring Peeper, Wood Frog, Chorus Frog, Leopard Frog, American Toad, Bullfrog and Green Frog. Twenty-six fish species are found in the Maskinonge River .

Social Component

The Maskinonge River Wetland Complex plays host to several recreational activities. Waterfowl and deer hunting occur in the wetlands and fishing is common in the lower reaches of the river. Some trapping for muskrats and other furbearers occurs. Landowners have developed trails through and around the wetlands for nature appreciation and hiking. Most of the wetlands are in private ownership, with the exception of some rivermouth wetlands in Keswick owned by the Town Of Georgina . The lower reaches of the Maskinonge Wetlands go through the Town of Keswick , west of Woodbine Avenue .

The Maskinonge River Wetland Complex is a remnant of what was once a much larger wetland system. The remaining wetlands are in relatively good condition. Agricultural drains have contributed to some drying out of wetlands. A closed Georgina Landfill site and former smelter abuts the southeast side of the largest wetland in the complex. The Maskinonge Wetland Complex may experience several major impacts in the near future with proposed highway extensions that may go through portions of the wetland complex. The southernmost tributary of the Maskinonge is in an urban designated area around the Town of Queensville .

Fish, Wildlife and Aquatic Plant Component

The Maskinonge Wetlands have 22 significant species. There are four regionally rare and 19 locally rare plant species that occur in a variety of wetlands. Eight of the species, Northern Water-meal, Columbia Water-meal, Ribbonleaf Pondweed, Richardson's Pondweed, Large-leaved Pondweed, Nuttall's Waterweed, Pale Water-milfoil and Tape Grass, are restricted to the open water aquatic communities in the first two kilometres of the Maskinonge River. Fringing marshes in this area also support seven more significant species: Marsh Hedge-nettle, Sweetflag, Small Beggar-tick's, Water Sedge, Silky Dogwood, Swamp Rose and Fragrant Umbrella Sedge. The other significant species occur elsewhere in the wetland complex.

The Maskinonge Wetlands are important for wildlife. Its 42.3 hectares of mixed and coniferous White Cedar swamps and deciduous swamps with White Cedar are locally significant for wintering White-tailed Deer. The swamps and associated upland forests support sensitive breeding forest bird species such as the Ruffed Grouse. Waterfowl such as Wood Duck , Canada Goose, Mallard, Blue-winged Teal and Green-winged Teal were observed staging in the lower reaches and mid-reaches of the Maskinonge River . The first three of these species also nest in the wetlands. The Wetlands are also noteworthy for supporting a Great Blue Heron rookery. It is one of less than 20 such colonies known from the Greater Toronto Area and like the others is highly sensitive to disturbance. This colony consists of at least 21 nesting pairs, with the

nests located on dead tress in one of the wetlands. The colony was observed in 1995, 2001 and during the 2003 wetland survey which was the basis for this summary.

The wetland supports a locally significant fish community particularly among the lower reaches and mouth of the Maskinonge River which sustains warmwater fish species such as Northern Pike, White Sucker, Yellow Perch, Rock Bass, Black Crappie, Pumpkinseed, Largemouth Bass, Bluegill, Walleye, Common Carp, Brown Bullhead, Bowfin Emerald Shiner, Golden Shiner, Spotfin Shiner, Spottail Shiner, Rainbow Smelt, Trout-Perch and Bluntnose Minnow (LSRCA 1998). The rivermouth marshes and open water aquatic communities are considered significant spawning and nursery habitat for Northern Pike. A warmwater and coolwater fish community also occurs in the headwaters and mid-reaches of the Maskinonge River . The Maskinonge River Wetland Complex is provincially significant an its 53 wetlands comprise a large and diverse wetland complex, noteworthy for its marshes and swamps, its significant species and its heronry.

Attention Lake Simcoe Cottage Owners

Please remember that shore protection, dredging and certain types of docks and boathouses built on shore lands require work permits from the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR). Contact the local MNR office for info rmation on whether a work permit is needed for your specific project. For projects on the Georgina or Thorah shoreline contact Mark Patterson in Aurora at 905 713-7388. For projects along the Simcoe County shoreline contact staff at Midhurst District Office-Brenda Robinson (705 725-7524) or Jeff Haelzle (705-725-7566). MNR Work Permit info rmation is also available at www.mnr.gov.on.ca/mnr/crownland, look under *Activities on Crown Land Requiring Specific Approvals*. Land use occupational authority (e.g. land use permit, lease) may be required for an occupation of Crown land, even if a work permit is not required to build the structure. Builders should check with their local Ministry of Natural Resources offices to determine if proposed structures require land use occupational authority.

Proposed structures could have an impact on fish habitat or public navigation. Work permit applications for projects that can affect fish habitat are referred to the local Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority (905-895-1281) or the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans. If there is concern that a project may impact the navigation of a waterway, the Navigable Waters Protection Branch of the Canadian Coast Guard should be contacted at 519 383-1865 for more info rmation.

Lake Simcoe ... It's your lake and watershed

Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority (LSRCA) is developing a Lake Simcoe Watershed Plan (LSWP) with the support and assistance of LSEMS partners which will help ensure the restoration and protection of the health of the lake and its surrounding watershed. LSEMS public consultation sessions are now underway for the LSWP. The objective of these first public meetings is to hear what the community has to say. What is your vision for Lake Simcoe ? What are some practical solutions for getting there?

These first meetings are also the time for exchanging info rmation on what we know about the lake and the watershed and how the planning process works. The **State of the Lake Simcoe Watershed 2003** is a major report prepared by the LSEMS partners for the watershed planning. The report summarizes what we know about the watershed and its main issues. The top issue is the need to reduce all sources of phosphorus entering the lake to help restore a naturally reproducing coldwater fishery.

Two public meetings have already taken place: July 12 at the De La Salle Chapel in GeorginaTownship and July 14 at the Ramara Centre in Orillia . Upcoming public meetings are scheduled for August 11 at the Oro-Medonte Township Arena, September 9 at Bradford-West Gwillimbury (location to be advised) and September 15 in Uxbridge (location to be advised).

See www.lsems.info or your local library for the **State of the Lake Simcoe Watershed 2003**. An executive summary of the report is available by calling Brian Kemp at (905) 895-1281 the LSRCA. A paper 'executive summary' of the report is available from the LSRCA calling Brian Kemp at 905-895-1281

Jane Sirois, Aurora District

T. 905-713-7344

Last Cast:

We would like to thank all of our readers for their continued feedback and suggestions and to wish you all an excellent summer on the bountiful waters of Lake Simcoe. If any of you happen to catch any uncommon fish like muskie, we would love to hear the details and receive a photo or even a scale sample. For more information about the lake or to make a contribution please contact:

Wil Wegman, Ministry of Natural Resources

Aurora District

905-713-7730 or wil.wegman@mnr.gov.on.ca

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