



Left: The author with a Lake Erie Smallmouth. Top: A lake-run brown trout from a Lake Ontario tributary. Photos courtesy of Rick Kustich.

Moving through Pennsylvania into New York State, there are a number of streams and small rivers found at regular intervals that feed Lake Erie. Almost every one of these tributaries to the lake receives a run of migratory rainbow trout or steelhead. After spending two to three years in Lake Erie, adult fish return to the tributaries to spawn with an average body weight of five to ten pounds. Steelhead are a wonderful fish that exhibit great beauty, spirit, and fighting ability.

The annual migration begins in September and can be at its best in October and November. During mild winters the fly fishing possibilities last throughout the season and peak in the early spring. Water conditions have a significant impact on the fishing on a day-to-day basis. Steelhead readily take a range of flies from those tied to represent drifting eggs and aquatic insects to a variety of streamers and patterns similar to the style that has traditionally been used for Atlantic salmon or west coast steelhead.

Egg and nymph patterns are fished with a dead-drift technique that gives the appearance of the fly floating freely with the current. Streamers and traditional patterns are fished with the wet fly swing which swims the fly across the current where the movement of the fly entices the steelhead to strike. Some of the better tributaries are Elk Creek and Walnut Creek in Pennsylvania and Chautauqua Creek, Canadaway Creek, Cattaraugus Creek, and Eighteen-Mile Creek in New York.

From a fly fishing standpoint, the smallmouth bass fishing on Lake Erie is an underutilized opportunity. The numbers and size of the

FLY FISHING THE SEAWAY TRAIL

An expert shares the essentials of fly fishing the lakes, rivers and tributaries of the Seaway Trail.

BY RICK KUSTICH

Fly fishing is often thought of as a manner of fishing creeks and rivers for stream-bred trout. The vision of an angler laying out a rhythmic cast to a surface-feeding trout was made popular by the 1990s movie, *A River Runs Through It*. With the movie's setting in western Montana it gave many viewers the impression that this was the best or only place to wave a fly rod. I commonly find people who are surprised that I fly fish so close to my home along the Niagara River and shocked to learn that the fly fishing opportunities can be world class. Advancements in fly fishing equipment and techniques allow an angler to tackle almost any type of water and every fish species with a fly rod. One doesn't have to move too far along the Seaway Trail to find some outstanding fly fishing.



Left: Rick Kustich and a large, fresh Chinook salmon caught from the Salmon River. Photo courtesy of Rick Kustich.

smallmouth that exist in the lake rivals any smallmouth fishery in the country. In May and June smallmouth will be found in relatively shallow water in easy reach of the fly fisher. Using either a floating line or a twenty-four to thirty foot sink-tip and working the water near concentrations of boulders, drop offs, and manmade piers, smallmouth bass can easily be coaxed to a well presented fly. Fishing the still water of the lake requires that motion be applied to the fly by stripping the line. Thus the retrieve is made by first pinching the line with the index finger of the rod hand against the cork of the grip and drawing or stripping it with the opposite hand. The movement of the fly can then be controlled by the speed or the cadence of the stripping motion. Smallmouth can come to a surface fly with a crashing explosion or with subtlest of takes. Lake Erie smallmouth enjoy good growth rates and it is quite common to catch three to four pound fish on a fly. Each year I

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fool a few in the five to six pound range into taking one of my feathery offerings. In the middle of the summer the bigger fish tend to seek deeper water but will move to the shallows again in September and October. I use a small boat to cover a range of water but there are plenty of opportunities for the fly angler restricted to wading and fishing from piers. Some anglers like using personal devices such as a float tube or kayak. A baitfish imitation such as the Clouser Deep Minnow is a great smallmouth fly. I also utilize crayfish and leech patterns. A variety of poppers can be used to bring smallmouth to the surface. Great smallmouth fishing exists near Presque Isle in Pennsylvania and near the Barcelona, Dunkirk, and Buffalo harbors in New York.

The Niagara River is also host to a population of smallmouth as well as largemouth bass. But when fly fishing the stretch of the river above the falls I focus my attention on Muskellunge. Known for their size, teeth, and predatory nature, fly fishing for musky is gaining in popularity. When the New York State season opens on the third Saturday in June, the dark, lurking form of a musky can often be found in the sandy shallows. An accurate cast with a small, weighted baitfish pattern fished on a floating or intermediate line can occasionally entice a musky into a vicious strike. Later in the summer and through the fall months the fish will be located in deeper water near boulders, reefs and breaks in the weeds. Blind casting with sink-tip lines and flies as long as ten inches becomes the predominant technique for musky at this time of year. Because of their sharp teeth, a wire bite guard is required to bring one to the boat.

The carp, long maligned as a trash fish, is gaining recognition among fly fishers for the sport that it provides. The fact that carp feed regularly on shallow flats provides the opportunity to stalk and cast to visible fish that can exceed twenty pounds. Floating lines and small flies representing nymphs and crayfish are used to fool these surprisingly selective feeders. Carp flats exist in the bays and flats of Lake Erie, the Niagara River, Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence. The best time is May- June.

Below the falls on the lower Niagara River another world class fishery exists. Trout and salmon make their way from Lake Ontario all

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Dan Mulbolland proving that fly fishing is a great family activity. Photo courtesy of Yankee Fly & Tackle, Pulaski, NY, www.FishtheSalmonRiver.com.

the way to the base of the falls. Chinook salmon can reach thirty pounds and can be found in the lower Niagara from September through early November. Some fly fishing for salmon can be found along the shore and by boat but much better opportunities exist for steelhead and lake trout. Good numbers of steelhead can be found in the lower Niagara from October through the following May. I prefer to fish these deep, quick waters with a two-handed fly rod. Using a variety of spey casts I can efficiently cover water using large bait fish patterns tied on heavy tubes. While using the wet fly swing, lower Niagara steelhead often strike the fly in an aggressive fashion. Access can be found through a series of state parks that are complete with hiking trails that allow one to fully appreciate the awesome beauty of the river. Lake trout will normally be found in the fall and again in the spring and will strike streamers, egg patterns and nymphs. Steelhead runs can also be found on a number of other Lake Ontario waters such as Oak Orchard Creek and the Genesee River.

Anglers come from all over to fish the tributaries of Lake Ontario for lake-run brown trout. The forage-rich lake produces brown trout that average four to eight pounds with those between ten and twenty pounds caught each year. There are few places in the country, or in the world for that matter, that produce brown trout of these trophy proportions. Of course brown trout measured in pounds as opposed to inches are going to raise a few eyebrows and the fishing pressure can be quite heavy during the peak of the run. Brown trout begin to enter the streams and rivers for their fall spawning run as early as September when consistent water flows can be found. The most reliable numbers of brown trout will be found from the middle of October through November. Brown trout also nose their way into the lower ends of many tributaries in March and April to feed on bait fish that are drawn to the warming waters of spring flows. Aggressive fall and spring brown trout will take streamers and Wooly Buggers. Heavily pressured fish may be more susceptible to small eggs and nymphs

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Fighting a muskellunge on a fly in the Niagara river. Photo courtesy of Rick Kustich.

fished on light tippets. Almost every creek, stream, or river entering Lake Ontario receives some type of brown trout run.

Possibly the most famous fishery along the Seaway Trail exists at the eastern end of Lake Ontario. The Salmon River at Pulaski is known by many as a tremendous fishing resource. It is named for the great runs of Atlantic salmon that once migrated the river but were wiped out in the 1800s by over fishing and destruction of spawning grounds. Now it is the runs of Chinook and coho salmon along with steelhead that give this river system its notoriety. Chinook salmon with an average size near twenty pounds, but reaching weights over thirty, can be caught regularly on a fly rod. Chinooks begin to ascend the river in late August and continue through October. At the beginning of the run the fish are fresh, bright and full of incredible power. Fishing pressure is also at its lightest at the beginning of the run. I focus on the early-run fish in the lower

reaches of the river, specifically the water contained within the Douglaston Salmon Run. I make my casts to the deep pockets and runs where salmon rest on their way up the river.

This lower end of the Salmon River represents one of the best places in the entire Great Lakes basin to catch a big, bright Chinook salmon on a fly. The smaller but energetic coho salmon actually tend to take a fly more readily than the Chinook and are capable of wild battles. The river also provides a tremendous venue for fly fishing for steelhead. The river is intimate enough to be covered easily with a single handed rod but large enough for two-handed rod anglers to feel quite comfortable in most of its scenic pools. The steelhead fishing begins in September and lasts all the way to the following May. Normally the river flows freely all winter providing a nice way to alleviate cabin fever. Egg patterns, nymphs and a range of flies incorporating rabbit strip and marabou work on both the salmon and steel-

head. The Salmon also receives a run of brown trout as well. The Black River at Watertown is also a big river that receives runs of salmon and steelhead.

Moving north Lake Ontario drains into the St. Lawrence River which flows 700 miles to the Atlantic Ocean. The first 114 miles of the river form the border between New York State and the Province of Ontario. The St. Lawrence is home to the same diversity of species as my home Niagara River. The New York portion of the St. Lawrence can be divided into three areas. The most popular section of the river is the Thousand Islands Region from Tibbetts Point near Cape Vincent downriver to approximately Morristown. The lower section of the New York waters which was created by the construction of the Seaway is referred to as Lake St. Lawrence. This is the water between the Iroquois Dam and the Moses-Saunders Power Dam near Massena. The section that lies between is known as the Middle Corridor.

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FLY FISHING continued

In the Thousand Island Region, the variety of islands, points and bays provide perfect habitat for smallmouth bass, possibly the river's best fly fishing target. Searching the shallows in the spring or fall, especially in the first and last light of the day with a surface fly can produce surprising results. Sink-tip lines are used when fishing the deeper holding areas. The structure found in the Thousand Islands is truly a bass fisherman's delight. There are some areas for wade or shore fishing for smallmouth, but a small water craft allows for much greater access. Access to the 1000 Islands area can be found in Cape Vincent, Clayton, Alexandria Bay, and Chippewa Bay.

The St. Lawrence is also well known for musky although it seems to be a little more difficult to fish with a fly rod than the Niagara. However, just after the season begins on the third Saturday of June and again in the fall, there is always the chance of catching a musky on a fly by focusing on rocky structure, weed edges, and funnels or ambush points. Largemouth bass and northern pike may be found in this type of water as well.

Carp numbers on the river are so large that there is an annual carp tournament. This would be a fun event to try with the fly. For more information visit <http://northcountryguide.com>. The tournament is in August for 2007 but fly anglers might find conditions more to their liking in May and June. The St. Lawrence is also host to great numbers and diversity of panfish. Fly fishing for perch, sunfish, and other panfish with a small minnow imitation or nymph can be a fun and easy way to enjoy fly fishing. And even a catch and release angler such as myself can enjoy, guilt free, the bounty of freshly caught and properly prepared panfish. Fly fishing for perch or sunfish is also a great way to get kids interested in fly fishing.

It is incredible to think that so much good fly fishing exists in one geographic area. It would be difficult to drive more than five minutes along the Seaway Trail without finding quality fly fishing water. It is a collective fishery that provides hours of enjoyment for both residents and visitors to the area. Sometimes the most difficult part of fly fishing along the Seaway Trail is actually choosing where and what to fish for given the vast array of quality options.

RICK KUSTICH is a freelance writer, photographer, and publisher, and co-author with his brother Jerry of *Fly Fishing for Great Lakes Steelhead*. He fly fishes extensively throughout New York and North America. Visit his website at www.westriverpub.com

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