

Atlantic Salmon Stocking Program Big Flop So Far



Tom Opere

Emil Dean Catches Fish By the Tons

MANISTEE

Someone once said that gill nets were the most efficient method of fishing known to man. Or maybe it was grenades. I don't recall. But in case of a doubt, I nominate Emil Dean.

I always knew he was a good fisherman. And as a professional charterboat skipper and steelhead guide, he fishes most every day the weather allows. But I didn't realize just how successful he was at it until the other day.

We were rolling along Lake Michigan's swells between lake trout aboard Dean's craft, the Mary E, and I went down into the cabin to fetch a beer or two.

I spied Dean's carefully logged record book on the console and, since trolling along anywhere without fish is boring, in my humble opinion, I sat down for a minute to peruse the skipper's past history.

Thirty minutes, a couple scraps of paper and some scribbling later, I sat back in wonderment.

From April to October last year, fishing first out of South Haven for lakere, brown trout, spring coho and the occasional chinook and steelhead — and then from his home port of Manistee for more lakere, bigger cohos, chinook and the odd brown trout — Dean's Mary E had taken aboard close to 1,200 fish. That's strictly hook and line fishing, mind you.

SO FIGURE IT out for yourself. Dean told me once he figured the average fish his parties caught weighed seven to eight pounds. That's probably close. Most lakere weigh more today and cohos (counting the smaller spring variety) less. Browns are usually less than that and chinook much more.

But at, let's say, seven pounds, it totals out at 8,400 pounds.

Get that! More than four TONS of fish were hoisted in 1974 off the Mary E!

That, of course, doesn't even take into account the steelhead he takes fall and winter on the Big Manistee or the St. Joe Rivers. They aren't as numerous, naturally, but Dean's own mark is a fish topping 71 pounds. (He even caught the state record whitefish this year, a fish weighing more than 18 pounds.)

What price this success? Perseverance. Dean says . . . sticking to it when the going's rough. Paying attention to water temperatures (the thermocline), particularly for lake trout, the "bread-and-butter" fish for all charterboaters, depths, trolling speeds and lures.

Right now, he says the best combinations for lakere seem to be Fireplugs or Rattle Tadpoles in the greenish fluorescent colors.

Manistee Wobblers and other smaller, thin spoons are



Greedy lake trout actually hit two spoons at once for Emil Dean.

okay, too, often fished alone on the line. The plugs are usually trailing cowbell attractors (Dean designs and makes his own).

For cohos later on, he uses Dodger and streamer combinations almost exclusively.

OUR LUCK THIS DAY was probably a little below the norm. After a long morning drouth, one 11-pound lakere was hauled aboard by Bill Boswell of Southfield. Brother Jack Boswell followed with a six or seven-pound coho that grabbed a Fireplug as it was being lowered on the downrigger.

Then we waited . . . and waited . . . and eventually a small flurry of lakere hit and two more were hoisted. John Markham of Livonia managing the first one. Mate Randy Cornell slipped the landing net under the final fish just before quitting time.

It wasn't a big haul, to be sure, just five fish Dean's average take-home number, according to the log book, is about nine or 10. Figuring a half-dozen break-offs or ripped plugs where the fish didn't get hooked, and that's a load of action for any full day's trolling.

I guess I just hadn't realized how deadly a hook and line can be in the hands of the right man.

BY TOM OPRE
Press Press Outdoor Writer

BOYNE FALLS — The return here this summer of the Boyne River's Atlantic salmon has been disastrous. But no one is ready to scrap the fledgling program just yet, least of all the Michigan biologist who administers it.

Sieve Swan, Department of Natural Resources fisheries expert at Gaylord, recognizes the problem is a big one. Just 42 of some 15,000 Atlantics from the 1973 plant have returned.

All but six of them have died from some mysterious cause.

And these are to be sacrificed this week for study by a fish disease expert from a Toronto University.

"There could be many causes for the dieoffs," Swan believes, "but we're most inclined to think it's some kind of environmental stress."

Pollutants — like PCBs and DDT — could be building in the salmon as they swim and feed in the Great Lakes. If so, it could begin to affect the fish as they undergo the rigors of spawning and development of sexual glands.

"It's the most popular theory, anyway," Swan said, admitting that the DNR had no firm idea what caused the disease, an illness that starts with spotty blemishes turning into red lesions that eventually become bleeding ulcers on the fishes' skin.

SINCE IT'S PREVALENT on the lower jaw — often producing an actual hole in the jaw — biologists think it may be associated with some thyroid problem. "That's hopefully what the Canadian expert will determine," Swan said, "since he's an endocrine system specialist."

Such lesions are characteristic of a common fish disease, frunculosis. But Swan points out that spores of that disease are not common to all the dying Atlantics.

"If it's a single cause — not a combination of environmental damage — it's not a pathogen, no common virus, bacteria or parasite," he said confidentially. "That much we do know."

Michigan experts have not recovered any eggs from the Atlantics bought in Quebec and planted in the Boyne and Au Sable rivers. Only 13 survived from some 180 showing up at the Boyne weir last year, but they were all males.

Yet the high number of returns, plus an angler's crowd success of possibly 75 fish, make biologists confident. Some 250 fish actually represented a 2 1/4 percent survival return on the initial plant of 10,000 smolts in 1972.

That percentage compares favorably with survival rates for chinook.

But this summer's disappointing returns allow less than 30 creelied by anglers in addition to the few showing up to die at the weir site.

AT FIRST, BIOLOGISTS thought warmer river water temperatures could be the cause. But an expensive well project (which now slows 800 gallons of 47-degree water per minute) keeps the holding pond cool now, yet the salmon still die.

"Perhaps the '73 plant of fish didn't smolt out of the river within a week or so, as is normal," Swan offered. But he doesn't really believe that himself. Maybe the young fish were stressed when planted and died two or three weeks later. But there's no way to prove that.

Imprinting in 1973 might have failed, too, since biologists released the smolts directly into the Boyne rather than holding them in the weir pond for a week or two.

Or perhaps open lake trawlers are getting a sizable share before the Atlantics run the river. Swan doubts it, though.

"Most fish have been caught in the streams," he said, pointing out that even the current state record, a 28-pound, one-ounce fish, was taken at the mouth of the Au Sable this past spring.

If, indeed, the cause is environmental and our Atlantics

Outdoor Calendar

- Aug. 10-15 — Fifth session, Teachers' Environmental School, Michigan Lake State Univ., Huron River Planning Board, Huron, Mich. 12:00-1:00 p.m. Aug. 10-15 — Michigan Resources Commission, Detroit, Mich. Aug. 11 — State training of hunting dogs, hunting staffs, 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. at camp, Keweenaw and Keweenaw Islands, Michigan. Aug. 11 — Grand River Advisory Committee, media, Grand River headwaters, etc.

Aug. 17 — 4th National Federal Council on Parks, 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. at the

Aug. 18 — 1974 River natural rivers program, 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. at the

Aug. 18 — Michigan Environmental Science, 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. at the

Aug. 18-19 — Michigan Water Resources Commission, 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. at the

will not prove to be a future egg source for sustaining the runs, all, is not lost, according to Swan.

"We can have hatchery production from a protected brood stock," he pointed out, "just as we do for rainbows and browns and, up until recently, for lake trout."

WAITING IN THE WINGS, too, are the Gullspang strain of Atlantics, imported from Sweden. These fish reportedly reach 70 pounds in their native environment and are entirely landlocked in fresh water, unlike the ones we've been stocking, the Cascapedia strain, which reach adulthood in the open sea.

Some 15,000 more Cascapedia strain fish were stocked in the Boyne this spring, plus 3,500 Gullspang (some Gullspang went into Gull Lake, too, to test their feasibility in large inland lakes).

Swan is confident something will work out.

"We need these fish," he said, "they run behind the steelhead and before the cohoes, right in the middle of the summer tourist season. And the best fishing occurs at noon, not midnight like the browns trout."

Atlantics are a close cousin to the brown trout, another fish that's not native to Michigan. Britain's sea trout, for instance, are simply sea-run brown trout.

"Our problem now is to isolate the disease factor, if possible," Swan said, "and to find a remedy, if one exists."

If not, Michigan will likely go to a hatchery brood stock production which would be more limited, naturally.

"Atlantics are a sensitive fish," Swan added, "a good indicator species. I'd like to think we can make our environment good enough once again — in maybe 10 years . . . or 200, who knows? — that fish like Atlantics can survive naturally."

"We'd know for sure then we're on the right track. For if fish like the Atlantics go, can other less sensitive species and eventually mankind be too far behind?"

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