



LAKE • GEORGE
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NEWS RELEASE

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Waterkeeper Releases New Report on 2010 Rainbow Smelt Population/Migration in Lake George

Sampling was undertaken in early spring of 2010 during annual smelt run in streams surrounding Lake George

Lake George – The Lake George Waterkeeper today released a new report on annual smelt run in streams surrounding Lake George. Please find a copy of this report at www.lakegeorgewaterkeeper.org. The study found smelt activity in all 16 streams studied during April, with heavy activity in five streams, including English Brook, Finkle Brook, Hague Brook, Indian Brook, and West Brook. Smelt enter streams shortly after ice out each year to spawn. As a small fish, smelt cannot travel beyond a natural or man-made barrier and they cannot enter a stream with a steep grade. This limits the number of viable streams around the lake that can support smelt spawning.

This report was done in partnership with the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation and Lake George Fishing Alliance.

“The smelt run is truly something to see and makes you think about how important our streams are to the vitality of the Lake George fishery” said Chris Navitsky, the Lake George Waterkeeper. “Smelt are an important prey item for most of the larger game fish, such as salmon, lake trout, pike, pickerel, among others.”

“There is an obvious connection between the smelt runs and stream health and the smelt study was an opportunity to expand the ecological component of the Lake George Waterkeeper's Stream Assessment Project,” said Chris Navitsky. “There has been a lot speculation over the years on the status of the smelt population and the intensity of their annual migration. We took the initiative to formalize a process and gather some data in attempt to document this important component of the Lake George fisheries. Including a data gathering component may also provide some insight if any changes occur in the future.”



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Rainbow smelt (*Osmerus mordax*) are a slender fish with an average length of 7-8 inches, a long pointed head, protruding lower jaw, deeply forked tail, and a small adipose fin. They are silver with a conspicuous streak running lengthwise along each side. Rainbow smelt are anadromous and live in saltwater, but enter freshwater streams to spawn. However landlocked populations have been established in freshwater environments throughout the United States, including Lake George. Smelt were likely introduced into Lake George as a forage item for larger game fish like the lake trout. It is unclear when rainbow smelt were introduced into Lake George, but recorded stockings date back to 1918 when nearly 3 million smelt were released and in 1921 when 5 million smelt were released. Smelt have become an important component of the fishery as a fish food resource, among other things.

In Lake George, smelt spawn shortly after ice-out when water temperatures approach 7°C or 45°F and continues for a couple of weeks into mid-April when thousands of smelt swim into its tributaries. During spawning the adult fish will generally move into the stream in the evening and return to the lake the next morning. Typically, females are accompanied by several males when they migrate into streams to spawn. In the stream, females hover just above the streambed and move their bodies slowly from side to side releasing small groups of eggs. A single female can produce thousands of eggs in one spawning season. The eggs are deposited on the streambed, which are demersal, adhesive, and are 1.0mm to 1.2mm in size. After the female releases her eggs the males fertilize them. Smelt runs have been recorded in numerous streams in the Lake George watershed.

However, previous concern over the rainbow smelt population resulted in a ban on the collection or possession of smelt in the Lake George watershed in 1988 by the NYSDEC. The NYSDEC continues to be concerned about the stability of the smelt population in Lake George in the face of abundant predator fish populations and variable spawning success of smelt. Regardless of the importance of rainbow smelt to the Lake George fishery and the concern over the stability of the smelt population, little data has been collected on these fish in Lake George aside from anecdotal observations.

The report focused on 16 streams on the west side of Lake George that were easy to access. Of these 16, all were found to have smelt present. Five streams had massive runs including West Brook and English Brook in the Town of Lake George, Indian Brook and Finkle Brook in the Town of Bolton, and Hague Brook in the Town of Hague.

NYSDEC Ban on Collection or Possession of Rainbow Smelt in Lake George

The collection or possession of rainbow smelt in the Lake George watershed is prohibited by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation who continue to be concerned about the stability of smelt populations in Lake George in the face of abundant predator fish populations and variable spawning success.

The Lake George Waterkeeper

The Lake George Waterkeeper was launched in 2002 with a mission to defend the natural trust public resources of Lake George and its basin, which provides for the common good of the community and the watershed. The Lake George Waterkeeper is a resource for concerned citizens in the Lake George Basin who are concerned about land use and water quality. The Waterkeeper responds to all public inquiries and acts as an ombudsman with respect to issues having an environmental impact on Lake George and its watershed. The Waterkeeper monitors and intervenes in development proposals around Lake George and provides professional analysis by a licensed engineer to local and state regulatory agencies. The Lake George Waterkeeper (www.lakegeorgewaterkeeper.org) is a program of the FUND for Lake George. The Lake George Waterkeeper is a member of the Waterkeeper Alliance, which represents over 180 water bodies nationally and internationally.