



# Lake Erie Salmon and Trout

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Lake Erie salmon and trout offer anglers, visiting Northeast Ohio in the fall or spring, an opportunity to land a hard fighting trophy fish. Four species offering fun and excitement to the Ohio fisherman include the Coho Salmon, Chinook Salmon, Rainbow Trout (Steelhead) and Brown Trout. All of these fish (except the Chinook Salmon) are currently being stocked in the Ohio waters of Lake Erie.

Identification of your catch is very important, since catch limits vary for different species. Most lake-run salmonids (salmon and trout) are quite similar in appearance and can be difficult to identify.

Lake Erie is stocked with salmon and trout by Ohio, New York, and Pennsylvania. Salmon have been stocked in Ohio's portion of Lake Erie since 1968 by the Division of Wildlife, Ohio Department of Natural Resources. Current O.D.N.R. wildlife stocking plans include Coho Salmon, Rainbow Trout (Steelhead), and Brown Trout. Ohio has stopped stocking Chinook Salmon because of poor returns. Some Chinook Salmon will continue to be caught in Ohio waters as long as New York and Pennsylvania continue to stock these fish. Salmon have a wide range and migrate throughout Lake Erie as long as water temperatures remain low and oxygen levels stay high.

Recent New York Sea Grant sponsored research in the Eastern Basin of Lake Erie indicates that over 50 percent of tagged salmon entered streams that were not stocked with salmon. In Ohio, only two streams are stocked with salmon, yet fishermen catch salmon from virtually every Lake Erie tributary in northeast Ohio.

Salmon are a fall spawning fish with the greatest spawning runs occurring between September and November. The first spawning runs up the tributaries of Lake Erie begin as the lake water temperature cools to 68-70 degrees Fahrenheit in the fall. Heavy, cool fall rains that raise the water levels in the streams trigger the salmon schooled offshore to run up the streams. Runs are first reported in eastern Ashtabula County and are reported further west as the spawning season gets older.

Light fall rains can create heavy salmon concentrations off the mouths of Lake Erie tributaries and along the shoreline. This often results in excellent nearshore boat and beach angling opportunities. Even when the rains are heavy, good nearshore fishing can be found by trolling and surfcasting anglers. Radio tagging studies conducted by New York Sea Grant researchers found that 70 percent of the radio contact locations were within one half mile of Lake Erie stream mouths. Pre-spawning movements by radio tagged salmon and trout were concentrated within 55 to 437 yards of the shore.

A brief explanation of the life cycle of a Lake Erie salmon will be useful here. Salmon stocked in the spring in the Ohio waters of Lake Erie began as eggs collected in December in Michigan by Division of Wildlife personnel. These eggs are hatched at Put-in-Bay and are then reared in troughs or cold water ponds for one summer. They are then stocked in the Huron River and the Chagrin River in the spring, when they are 16 months old, and 4" to 7" smolts.

They remain in the streams a short time. As the streams warm up, the juvenile salmon move out into the open lake. The Coho Salmon spend two summers in Lake Erie feeding on smelt, gizzard shad, alewives, and shiners. Smelt make up the bulk of the diet. Sea Grant researchers reported that of 64 salmon stomachs examined in the eastern basin, smelt were found in 70 percent of the stomachs, gizzard shad, and alewives in 11 percent, shiner in 2 percent, and unidentified fishes made up 17 percent of the diet.

Much is unknown about salmonid movement in Lake Erie. They appear to move in a clockwise pattern in the lake. It is thought that most of the salmon remain in the Eastern Basin of the lake during the warm summer months. Recent angler success far offshore of Cleveland and Fairport may indicate salmon are also summering in the Central Basin. Salmon appear to orient within the thermocline in Lake Ontario and eastern Lake Erie. In the Eastern Basin of Lake Erie, New York Sea Grant researchers found no salmon were present in the warm upper layer, and few were found on the bottom.

Most of the salmon caught in experimental nets set in the late summers of 1979 and 1980 were resuspended within the well developed thermocline. The thermocline is a zone of rapid temperature change. The thermocline probably provided preferred temperatures and a concentration of the major prey species, smelt.

After their second summer in the lake, most Coho Salmon mature and migrate up the streams in northeast Ohio to spawn. Coho Salmon generally return to spawn at age III, with some not maturing sexually until age IV. Chinook Salmon stay in the lake three summers before maturing and spawning. They return to spawn at age IV, with some not reaching sexual maturity until age V. Once salmon begin to produce viable sexual products (eggs or sperm) they will make their spawning run in that fall, regardless of age. Occasionally, male salmon will mature after only one year in the lake. These fish are called "jacks." They return to spawn after only one year and are about 14 to 16 inches long. All salmon die after the spawning effort. Unfortunately, poor water quality and unsuitable habitat eliminate the natural reproduction of salmon in Ohio's streams. For this reason, it is necessary to continue stocking programs in order to maintain a successful fishery.

Rainbow Trout (Steelhead) return to the streams as stream temperatures go down to 60 degrees Fahrenheit with the salmon in the fall. (Trout may be fall or spring spawners.) Rainbow Trout are stocked as fingerlings into several Lake Erie tributaries.

Rising water temperatures force most of the Rainbow Trout out into the lake. The lake run Rainbow Trout grow to large sizes due to the large supply of forage fish found in Lake Erie. (Rainbow Trout remaining in cold water streams are generally smaller due to a lower availability of food organisms. They also expend more energy fighting stream currents.) The Rainbows that enter the open lake are generally referred to as "Steelhead" or Lake Run Rainbow Trout. Steelhead may enter the tributary streams in the fall to feed on salmon eggs or simply to winter over in the streams for spring spawning.

Steelhead thus are available to stream anglers from September to May, depending on the stream water temperatures. In the fall or winter, trout are attracted to bait fish in streams and near hot water discharges at electric power plants. A state record Rainbow Trout was caught near the hot water discharge at Avon during late March of 1982. It weighed 18 pounds, 3 ounces. Trout do not die after spawning. They may live to be 8 to 10 years old in Lake Erie. The spring trout fishery is gaining popularity. Trophy sized fish are becoming more common.

Virtually every tributary of Lake Erie in Northeast Ohio annually yields a good number of hefty salmon and trout to the enterprising angler. The most popular streams include the Chagrin River, Grand River, Arcola Creek, Wheeler's Creek, Cowle's Creek, Ashtabula River, and Conneaut Creek. (There is currently a health advisory in effect warning people not to eat fish caught in the lower Ashtabula River from the 24th Street Bridge out to and including the harbor area within the breakwalls.) In Northcentral Ohio, the Rocky River, Vermilion River, and Huron River are popular salmon and trout streams in the fall.

Ohio plans to stock at least 300,000 Coho Salmon annually — divided between the Huron River and Chagrin River. About 300,000 Rainbow and Steelhead Trout and 100,000 Brown Trout are planned for the Chagrin, Grand, Rocky, and Vermilion Rivers and for Arcola, Cowle's, Wheeler, and Conneaut Creeks annually.

O.D.N.R. Division of Wildlife stocking decisions for salmonid fishes in Lake Erie tributaries depend upon the amount of public access, parking availability, water quality, size of the stream, past return rates from the stream, and availability of fish from the hatchery. Emphasis will be on maintaining the Coho Salmon and Rainbow Trout fishery with Brown Trout as the fish of the future. As these fisheries improve and gain popularity, stocking programs may increase in order to supply the fisherman's demand.

Fall angling for salmon begins as early as the last week of August and continues through December. However, the peak period of activity for stream, shoreline, and offshore boat anglers occurs between mid-September and late October, from Cleveland to Conneaut. The Huron River salmon fishing generally starts a little later and is good from early October through late November.

Radio tagging studies in New York were used to learn more about salmon movements in the fall. The tagged salmon exhibited three types of behavior: stream searching, stream testing, and false runs. Stream searching was defined as the movements of salmon in the lake prior to entering a stream. Stream testing was movement of salmon into and out of streams other than the one chosen for spawning. False runs occurred when salmon entered and then left a stream they eventually chose for spawning. Out in the lake, the tagged salmon made frequent direction changes. Most salmon made runs up streams when stream water levels were rising. Stream temperature levels were lower than the lake water temperatures.

Anglers have success trolling or drifting and casting near river mouths and along the shore. Trolling anglers reportedly use flat line medium to deep diving crankbaits, such as bomber (6A, 7A, 8A) model A's: Hot-N-Tots, Wiggle Warts, Bill Normans and Flatfish in the following colors: silver, gold, yellow, green, chartreuse, orange, red, pink, and hot tiger. Spoons, such as Daredevils, Cop-E-Cats, Devil Dogs, Flutter Chicks, Little Cleos, and K-O Wobblers are also reportedly productive. The spoons are trolled without added weight if they are down deep. Large spinners such as Meyers black fury and Rooster tails in red, orange, pink, and black reportedly produce fish when trolled. Use a good swivel to attach your lure to the line to avoid line twist.

When boat anglers observe fish rolling on the surface or observe heavy concentrations of fish on electronic fish locators, excellent catches can be made by drifting over or through the school and casting any of the above lures.

The lures mentioned above are for illustration purposes only. No endorsement is intended or implied by the authors or the Ohio Cooperative Extension Service. Contact your local bait dealer or tackle shop to see what lures are currently being utilized effectively.

Anglers must remember that salmon can be very picky, and a lure or lure color that produced yesterday, or even in the morning, may not elicit a strike the next day or in the afternoon. A variety of lure colors is essential, and after fishing one color for 20 to 30 minutes without a strike, another color or lure should be tried.

A good tip for trolling anglers is to change **frequently** your trolling direction and/or speed. Following salmon may be enticed into striking a lure by a change in the direction or speed of the lure. Figure 8 and "S" shaped trolling patterns, as well as zig-zag, work best with trolling speeds of 1 to 4 knots.

Trolling anglers frequently troll in rivers with the Grand and Huron Rivers being the best due to river width. Trolling in the Rocky and Chagrin Rivers can be productive, but anglers must remember that conflicts with banks or wading anglers can occur and lure "hang-ups" will be more frequent due to shallower depths. It is advised not to troll deep diving crankbaits in shallow rivers such as the Chagrin. Spoons, spinners, and shallow diving crankbaits work best in these areas.

Nearshore anglers may also want to incorporate downriggers into their fishing plans. Downriggers, long popular on the upper Great Lakes, can give anglers that added advantage of keeping the lure at a specific depth. If salmon are present at a 20 foot depth in 30 feet of water, lures fished at 15 or 25 feet will not be as productive as lures fished at the 20 foot depth. Spoons, spinners, and shallow diving crankbaits are best bets for downrigger anglers.

Stream anglers may fish from the bank or use chest waders to gain the added advantage of fishing closer to prime salmon holding areas such as deep pools or river channels. All of the previously mentioned lures work well when cast into the river. Live bait, such as minnows and nightcrawlers, as well as the salmon eggs or spawn sacs, are productive during the early part of the spawning run. Anglers must remember, however, that the longer the salmon are in the stream and the later the season gets, the less apt salmon are to taking live bait. Fish live baits and spawn sacs on the bottom with a slip sinker rig or with a bobber for best results. Late season anglers (December, January) may find live bait, spawn bags, and single salmon eggs to be effective for Rainbow Trout. Fish below dams and in deep pools, or the bottom in tributaries such as the Chagrin, Rocky, and Vermilion Rivers. Be sure to use a slip sinker as attached weight may cause the leery Rainbow to drop the bait.

Surf or beach anglers can be successful casting from shore during the fall. Chest waders, although not a necessity, allow the angler to cast farther out into the lake. Many anglers will cast the previously mentioned crankbaits, spoons, and spinners for fall salmonids with fairly good success. Salmon will cruise the nearshore areas in search of their "home" tributary, and in many cases, **any inflow** of water into the lake, which they can swim up to spawn. Anglers have also been successful fishing live bait and spawn bags on the bottom with a heavy slip sinker. The weight of the slip sinker is determined by the wave action; only enough weight is used to keep the bait and the sinker from drifting towards shore with about 2 feet of line used between the bait and the sinker. Simply cast out from shore, place your line, sit back, and watch the end of your rod for a strike. Calm days are best for wading and casting while anglers can still fish on rough days by the previously described method. Long rods (8-9 foot) are generally used when bait fishing in rougher waters as this will keep the line above nearshore breaker waves. Don't forget a landing net while beach fishing; this can be your most important piece of equipment. Best bets for shore fishing include the beach areas at Arcola, Cowle's, and Wheeler Creeks.

The winter and early spring months (January-April) can provide excellent fishing for Steelhead Trout and juvenile salmon. Hot water outflow areas from electric power plants at Lorain, Avon Lake, East 72nd Street (Cleveland), Eastlake, and Ashtabula produce some fine catches of steelhead during January-March. Access can be a problem, however, and seems to change annually. Check with local bait/tackle shops concerning access areas. Best catches in these hot water discharges seem to come from fishing live bait, spawn bags and single salmon eggs on the bottom with slip sinkers. Spoons and spinners can also be productive. Ask the bait shop in your area what bait is best.

Spring anglers can find success for Rainbow and Jack Salmon in most tributaries that have been stocked. Spring stream bank anglers, surf casters, open lake nearshore trollers, and river trollers can find success with the same methods and in the same areas fished during the fall months. Areas which seem to be especially good include the Chagrin River and Eastlake Power Plant, Grand River, Rocky River, Vermilion River, and nearshore trolling off the Avon Lake CEI Plant. Spring salmon and trout fishing begins **as soon as** the ice is off the lake, and generally continues into early May. Check with local anglers, bait shops, your Sea Grant Extension Agent, or your district O.D.N.R. Division of Wildlife Office for catch reports, active areas, and preferred bait/lures.

Remember, Lake Erie salmon and trout can provide good fishing, sometimes very excellent fishing, during the winter and early spring months. Don't store that fishing gear away in October with plans to resume activity in May; give this fall-winter-spring fishing a try — you'll be glad you did.

## **SUMMER SALMON/TROUT IN OHIO'S LAKE ERIE WATERS: A YET-TO-BE-DISCOVERED FISHERY**

After water temperatures begin to rise during May, salmon and trout seek deeper, cooler waters. It has been theorized that salmonid movements in the Central Basin are clockwise; nearshore in spring, west, and north movements in summer to colder, deeper waters, southeast movement in late summer, and back to the south shore during the fall for spawning. However, no scientific studies have been done in Ohio waters as of yet to prove this theory correct.

During the summer months of 1983, some anglers ventured out 12-15 miles north of Cleveland in search of walleye. Not only did they catch walleye, but they also caught salmon. The location of summer salmon schools depends upon many things: location of preferred food, weather, depth of thermocline, water temperature, and area of anoxic hypolimnion (bottom waters).

**A NOTE OF CAUTION:** For Lake Erie boating, a large boat with a deep V hull and a wide beam is needed. Flat-bottomed boats are not designed for Lake Erie wave conditions. Be sure your boat is seaworthy and has all safety devices in operating order before you set out. A marine band radio is useful in keeping in touch with the changing weather conditions on the lake. File a float plan with someone on shore and wear your personal flotation device. Check your compass and other navigational aids. Use common sense and think "safety first" before you range too far from a safe harbor.

**Popular access points and fishing areas include:**

**Huron River.** From the Ohio Turnpike to the Monroesville Dam, the easiest access is west of Route 250 on Route 13. Also, Fries Landing off of Route 113, Erie City, has boat launching access in the town of Huron for Huron River, harbor, and nearshore Lake Erie.

**Vermilion River.** There are boat launches in Vermilion (some public access) along Vermilion Road in Lorain City. The best fishing is from Turnpike Bridge downstream toward the lake.

**Rocky River.** Contact Cleveland Metroparks Rocky River office for fishing activity information. To get to Rocky River from the Metropark Drive, go from the first pond to Route 90 bridge. Metropark boat ramps are available with other points upstream to the Interpretive Center near Cedar Point Road.

**Chagrin River.** Stream fishing at Daniel's Park is available off of Route 84 in Willoughby just west of Route 306; Todd Field off Route 20; Gilson Park off Lost Nation Road; and at Woodlawn Park near Lakeshore Marina on Route 83.

**Grand River.** Painesville City Kiwanis Recreation Park near the Main Street Bridge, Masons Landing off Vrooman Road, and near the dam at Harpersfield. Arcola Creek off Dock Road (only limited parking is available here).

**Geneva State Park.** Wheeler Creek and Cowle's Creek; easy access and plenty of parking.

**Ashtabula Harbor.** Walnut Beach for shore fishermen (west breakwall in Ashtabula Harbor) and Lake Shore Park for boaters trailering boats.

**Conneaut.** The west breakwall and creek are accessible by wading up to the PA line. Boaters can launch at the public ramps inside the harbor.

Public launch ramps are available at Chagrin River at Route 283, Grand River, Fairport Harbor, Ashtabula Lake Shore Park, and Conneaut Harbor.

Use medium power, fast to medium action rods with 8 to 12 pound test line to fish for salmon. Your reel should have a good, smooth adjustable drag on it. Set the drag so that it takes 5 to 6 pounds of pull or so to reel off the line. If the drag is set to light, the fish will run away with your line and get away; too tight and the line will break.