



The Midwestern fly angler's mecca

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I wish again... To fish again... In Michigan

EXPANDING URBAN CENTERS AND INDUSTRIAL POLLUTANTS of all kinds have eliminated blue ribbon quality trout fishing from hundreds of our nation's rivers. Some fishing does remain near our major cities, even New York, but this means either crowded fishing for hatchery trout or stealing a day from the office and driving for several hours for relative peace and wild fish.

Dreams of truly great fishing are centered in the Rocky Mountains area, Canada and Alaska or the more exotic lands of New Zealand and South America. These are all beautiful areas, much publicized and justly famous for the productivity of their waters, but unfortunately, the average sportsman cannot afford the expense or the time for such fishing vacations on a regular basis. Today's trout fisherman of moderate means usually settles on somewhat local accommodations with spouse and spawn and hopes for the best, or he busts a fair percentage of the family treasure for a dream trip that just might not be the ideal vacation for the rest of the family.

I have been fortunate enough to fish some of the best waters in the United States and Canada and have been duly impressed from Maine to Montana, Pennsylvania to Utah and New Brunswick to Ontario. Still, I have not yet discovered an area that offers so much high quality, trophy fishing within such easy access of so many as Michigan — the "Great Lake State."

I lived in Michigan for twenty-five years and fished its trout waters feverishly from the time that first brookie came squirming and flopping from Oyster Brook on my seventh birthday until a company transfer necessitated a move to the East Coast four years ago. Since then my appreciation for Michigan's thousands of miles of great trout streams and scores of productive lakes has grown tremendously. Happily, business takes me back to my home state in the spring and fall, and it is a pleasant drive with my wife and children from our home in Connecticut for the summer vacation. Even so, these past four years have required carefully planned trips in order to insure the most efficient use of the limited time available on vacations and business trips.

Considering these unavoidable time pressures, I have prepared several suggestions for different trips of limited duration and at various times of the year, and I hope they will assist you in planning an enjoyable and memorable angling excursion.

The northern half of the Lower Peninsula and the entire Upper Peninsula offer the angler superb trout fishing, but because the Lower Peninsula is more accessible to the visitor with a tight schedule, its waters are emphasized here.

The beaver dams and deep, tobacco-colored streams of Michigan's isolated Upper Peninsula offer near-wilderness angling to the foraging angler. Photograph by Don Zahner; photo by author unless otherwise indicated.



Upper half of Michigan's Lower Peninsula offer friendly, accessible streams, among them such storied waters as the lovely Pere Marquette.

Spring, particularly April, is the time of the fantastic and justly famed steelhead fishing in the Great Lakes tributary waters. The steelhead is anadromous, ascending the streams to spawn, where the fry are hatched and develop for one to two years. After growing to the "smolt" stage, they descend the rivers to the open water of the Great Lakes and reach tremendous size on the lakes' abundant food supply. The adult fish begin ascending the streams in late fall and continue arriving throughout the winter months. Spawning begins in March and the "run" usually peaks in Mid-April during an average year. The steelhead fishing is usually over by May 10 although occasional fish are taken even later, but a further coverage of this "bonus" would be inappropriate in this late-spring issue.

WARM WEATHER BECOMES INCREASINGLY DEPENDABLE during May in Michigan. Snow finally leaves the cedar swamps and hillsides, budding leaves fill out the gray naked trees of winter, deer feeding on the sweet grasses in fields and at roadside, and the streams, although still high, are clear and alive with activity. Brooks, browns and rainbows, hungry and



Michigan streams still give up large brownies, especially during the false "caddis" hatch in early summer. Brookies and rainbows are regular attractions.

Rivers such as the Au Sable are easily wadeable for much of their productive lengths, and long stretch of that river east of Grayling is restricted to fly-fishing only.



During April, hardy anglers have the added bonus of the famous freshwater steelhead run, as migratory rainbow return from the Great Lakes waters to spawn.

lean after months of frigid weather and limited, sluggish feeding, are taking nymphs, earthworms, minnows and hatching mayflies with relish.

As the weather continues to improve throughout spring and summer, the nature of the game changes. The heavy tackle that worked so well in April on steelhead is replaced by much lighter gear, and different techniques are employed. Two ounce fly rods that balance light lines and long leaders are more often the tools of the successful angler.

The brown trout is the star at this time of year, and his admirers are numerous and dedicated. Brooks and rainbows also receive considerable attention and fortunately, many of the top rivers have wild populations of all three.

From May through July my favorite bases for short trips are Luzerne, Rose City, Boyne and Wolverine. Luzerne, Michigan, is between the Au Sable River towns of Mio and Grayling, only minutes from both. Big Creek flows through Luzerne and provides several miles of excellent fishing for browns and rainbows before it empties into the fabulous Au Sable above Mio.

This area is famous for its caddis and mayfly hatches which are in full swing by mid-May and continue through the summer. The high point is the hatch and spinner fall of the Michigan "Caddis" which appears during the last week in June and lasts throughout the first week in July. This insect, *Hexagenia limbata*, is not a caddis fly at all, of course, but a giant mayfly that brings outsized browns and rainbows to the surface in orgiastic feeding sprees rivaled only by the "salmon fly" fishing of the West. To catch trout over four pounds is not uncommon while this hatch is in progress, and it usually takes a fish in the six-pound range to turn the heads of the veterans.

This year I hope to be on the Au Sable, upriver from Mio and about thirty yards below the mouth of Big Creek, when the hatch begins. Last year I landed four fish averaging three pounds on three successive evenings. The third evening the hatch began and fish started to feed about 9:30 p.m. Ten minutes later I hooked a tremendous fish that broke off when I attempted to snub a run toward a tangle of roots. The leader point had tested at seven pounds.

Much of the water in this section of the state is managed for trophy fishing, and special regulations are in effect on much of the water around Grayling, Lovells and Mio. Allowable fishing methods are varied as are the size and creel limits, so be sure to double check the restrictions before fishing. Conservation officers are fair and helpful, but they are strict when it comes to enforcement.

Other rivers that have major *limbata* hatches are the Boyne near Boyne Falls, the Pere Marquette, the Little Manistee, the Sturgeon near Wolverine, and the Rifle River downstream from Lupton. Numerous smaller streams also have limited hatches of this giant insect and will provide very good fishing when the Michigan "Caddis" is on the water.

Rose City is sixteen miles south of Mio and surrounded by very good "small stream" fishing. The Houghton, Klacking and Wilkins Creeks and the Rifle River are all within a few minutes drive of town with the Wilkins and Houghton flowing right through the city limits. The Rifle River and Houghton Creek are my favorites. They are fine gravel- and sand-bottomed streams with abundant insect life, and wild, free-rising brown trout are the main attractions.

Light sensitive fly rods are in order on these waters, and cautious wading and delicate presentation are absolutely necessary to success. Fish will run from ten to 16 inches in length, with 13 inches being a fair average and 20 inches a trophy. Much larger fish are present, and an early state record brown of 17 pounds came from the Houghton. My best fish from this area was a four-pound brown taken on a Dun Variant in July, 1969.

Boyne, between Charlevoix and Traverse City, is another good choice. The Boyne River, downstream from the dam, produces large browns and rainbows to rival the Au Sable,

Little Manistee and Pere Marquette. The fishing is best in the evening when "caddis" are on the water and the big fish move out of the deep holes to gorge on the surface. A word of caution is offered if you intend to fish this river after dark. Pick your spot carefully and study it thoroughly before nightfall and then stay put. Do not move around. The river is tricky and deep and, at night, I have discovered it is very cold and wet.

Other excellent streams in the area are the Boardman near Traverse City, the Platte near Honor and the Sturgeon, just a short drive east to Wolverine. The Sturgeon parallels Interstate 75 for several miles south of Wolverine and has large native populations of brooks, browns and rainbows. Large specimens of all three are taken annually throughout the year. Successful flyfishermen usually score best on weighted nymphs and streamers unless there is serious surface activity — then it's "match the hatch."

If a longer stay is possible for you, a serious effort should be made to branch out and sample the fishing in the Little Manistee, the Pigeon, the Maple River near Pellston for large brookies, the Big Sable and the Pine. For a change of pace try the lake trout fishing in Grand Traverse Bay, the rainbow fishing in Walloon and Crystal Lakes and the fishing for trophy browns in Burt Lake near Cheboygan.

All of the areas listed have comfortable accommodations at reasonable rates, abundant campsites and restaurants, golf courses, horseback riding, sightseeing, swimming and boating for non-fishing family members. Several rivers have sections set aside for youngsters under 16 years of age, and it's a great opportunity to introduce a son or daughter to your favorite pastime.

Practically anywhere you can wet a line in the Upper Peninsula is trout water. If still more time is available, sample the Laughing Whitefish, Yellow Dog, Escanaba and Big Two-Hearted for superb, uncrowded fishing and magnificent scenery. "Coaster" brook trout and lake trout are handsome favorites along the southern shore of Lake Superior, and good fishing can be found from Sault Ste. Marie to Ironwood. This part of the state has so many productive streams and lakes, camping spots and scenic wonders that it is impossible to sample them all in a year, let alone two weeks, and the cataloging of only the top waters would fill a book.

The late-season fishing in Michigan is split into two distinct types that are so completely opposite in style and goal that it is difficult to move from one to the other without feeling there has been a passage of considerable time and distance.

The first half of the late season July 20-Sept. 20 is primarily midge and terrestrial fishing for the fly-rod man. Grasshoppers are abundant, and high-floating imitations such as Joe's Hopper, the Letort Hopper and the Muddler Minnow in sizes #10-14 provide good catches from late July through September. The best 'hopper fishing is in August, and top streams for outsized fish are the Rifle, Pere Marquette, Houghton, Boardman, Au Sable and Sturgeon, roughly in that order. All of the state's trout rivers provide some good fishing to 'hoppers, crickets, ants and jassids. Other favorites are the Little Manistee, Pigeon, Big Creek, Pentwater, Black and Big Sable.

With two to five days available during August, I would headquarter in Grayling and split my fishing between the Au Sable at Lovells, and the trophy water downstream from the Mio Dam. A short drive north would take you to the Sturgeon near Wolverine. Driving south to Rose City is another good bet, and I would fish the Rifle River area four miles east of town.

Another good choice for base camp would be Traverse City. Beaches, shopping, nightlife and excellent restaurants are available and the nearby fishing is superb. I would fish the Boardman, then drive west to Honor and try the Platte, downstream from the fish station, with 'hoppers and crickets in sizes #12 and 14. Other short drives would take you to



Dawn on the Au Sable above Stephan Bridge, site of the popular Gates Au Sable Lodge. Photo courtesy of Cal Gates.

the Boyne and the Pigeon, where good catches are made on crickets and ants during the day and on larger deer-hair-bodied dries such as the Irresistible, or Night Moth in the evenings.

Still another good bet for the family man is the Manistee. Located south of Traverse City on highway 31, Manistee offers all of the necessities and most of life's luxuries at affordable prices. Clean lakes for swimming and pan-fishing for the youngsters, shopping, golf, good restaurants, sightseeing and guide services are all available. I would fish the Little Manistee, Bear Creek and the Pentwater with terrestrial patterns during the day and large dries or black marabou streamers in the evening. Coho and chinook are becoming active offshore at this time of year, and there are numerous skillful charter-boat captains who will take the whole family out for a day of fishing for these silvery gamesters.

If more time is available, up to two weeks, I would split the schedule to provide equal fishing time on both east and west sides of the state. A very enjoyable vacation would base five days in the Grayling-Mio area, four days in the Charlevoix-Cheboygan vicinity and five days between Traverse City and Manistee. This would provide a blend of small stream and big river fishing, comfortable accommodations, and numerous activities for the non-fishing members of the family. Bonuses would be offshore fishing for coho and chinook salmon and the possibility of a chance to fish for Atlantic salmon. The first upstream run of young salmon (grilse) should occur this year in the Au Sable and Boyne Rivers. This will probably be no-kill, flies-only fishing, and the Department of Natural Resources should be consulted for up-to-date regulations.

The last half of the late season (Sept. 20-Dec. 31) begins in the fall on those rivers with special extended seasons providing late fishing for salmon, steelhead and lake run browns on their upstream spawning runs. A complete list of these rivers, with notes on special restrictions, can be obtained by writing to the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, Lansing, Michigan 48926. There are approximately 45 Lake Michigan streams, 16 Lake Huron streams and 50 Lake Superior streams with seasons extended through December.

The offshore and pier or surf fishing is fantastic at this time of year. Coho Salmon to twenty pounds, Chinook Salmon to thirty five pounds, Steelhead to twenty pounds and brown trout (or "footballs" as they are called due to their heavy dimensions) up to 15 pounds are willing takers for a variety of lures, and large streamer flies.

Once these fish begin the upstream migration it is not impossible to hook three out of the four on a given day. The spawning runs of the salmon and trout overlap considerably in some rivers, and the added element of suspense is a real bonus. The salmon are especially strong when they first enter the rivers, and the steelhead are generally much more vigorous and electric than in the spring.

This is my treasured time of year and favorite spots for fall fishing are the Manistee, the Little Manistee, the Au Sable and the Platte. The leaves are on fire, and the streams are low and clear. Fishing pressure is heavy on weekends but very light from Monday to Friday. Days are warm, evenings are cool and pleasant. It's a beautiful time to combine the best in trophy fishing with a bow-and-arrow deer hunt or with scatter-gunning for ruffed grouse.

Then, in a few weeks snow will cover the cedars and pines of Michigan, ice will form on the rocks and slack water, and the streamside visitors will be snowshoe hares and deer. But tonight the campfire cracks and dances, and its light flicks across taut canvas, chest-high waders and tired, happy faces. ■

A photograph of a person fishing in a stream, framed by a dense canopy of green trees. The person is positioned in the middle ground, slightly to the left, wearing a light-colored shirt and dark pants. The water is visible through the branches, and the overall scene is lush and green.

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