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Annual Ruffe Survey Conducted on Lake Huron

By Anjanette Bowen

During fall 2015, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Alpena Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office (FWCO) conducted an annual survey to detect populations of Ruffe in Lake Huron. Bottom trawling gear was used to target nine nearshore port and river mouth locations in U.S. waters of Lake Huron. Locations included Port Dolomite, Cheboygan River, Port of Calcite, Stoneport, False Presque Isle Harbor, Thunder Bay River, Thunder Bay, Au Gres River, and Saginaw River - all within Michigan. Ruffe were not captured following sampling at all but three locations by late September. Sampling at all locations is anticipated to be completed by late October. This effort is part of a coordinated search for new Ruffe populations on the periphery of their range in lakes Huron, Erie, and Ontario. Sampling in lakes Erie and Ontario is conducted by the USFWS Lower Great Lakes FWCO.

Ruffe are thought to compete with native species for habitat and food resources. They have been found in Lake Superior (Thunder Bay, Ontario south and east along the south shore to Whitefish Bay), Lake Michigan (Green Bay), and Lake Huron (Cheboygan River, Trout River in Rogers City, and Thunder Bay area).

Within Lake Huron, Ruffe were captured from the Thunder Bay area in Alpena, Michigan starting in 1995 and were abundant in bottom trawls by fall 1999. Their catch rates declined from 1999 to 2003 and Ruffe have not been captured from the area since spring 2003. Anecdotal sightings of Ruffe have been reported from the Trout River in Rogers City, Michigan during spring 2008 and the Cheboygan River in Cheboygan, Michigan during spring 2011 and 2012. Alpena FWCO conducts additional sampling using electrofishing gear and trap nets during the spring targeting areas where Ruffe have been reported from the Trout River, Cheboygan River, and Thunder Bay area.

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Staff examining and quantifying the trawling catch during ruffe surveillance efforts on Lake Huron. Photo credit: USFWS.

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Motorboat Operator Certification Course Open-Water Module Held in Bayfiled, Wisconsin

By Adam Kowalski

Motorboat Operator Certification Course (MOCC) instructors Adam Kowalski (Alpena Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office (FWCO)), Dave Wedan (Regional Watercraft Safety Coordinator, Lacrosse FWCO), and Steve Witt, Thomas Richardson, Mark McCool, and David Cooper all from the National Park Service (NPS), put on a three day Open-Water Module in Bayfield, Wisconsin from September 15 to 17, 2015. The Open-Water Module is designed to give Department of Interior employees additional safety training, over and above the standard MOCC training, for operating larger vessels on the open waters of the Great Lakes and large inland waters.

Students stay together and await rescue during the abandon ship drill conducted at the recent Open Water Course held in Bayfield, Wisconsin. Photo credit: National Park Service.

Students were provided the tools, resources, and knowledge required to safely operate a vessel on a large water body. Focusing on the "Know Before You Go" risk assessment concept, the course stresses checking weather conditions and where to find local weather, marine information, and updates while planning and conducting any mission. Crew supervisors and operators (crew leader) must assess and prepare the crew he/she may be working with, confirming that their abilities, training, experience, and fitness level is equal to the task to be completed, while being prepared for all environmental and mission evolution challenges and situations. The course also offers experience in navigation, using a chart and charting tools with and without the aid of electronics, and how to operate and navigate using GPS and radar units. Students get the chance to operate larger-sized vessels on one of the Great Lakes, in open-seas, and possibly out of sight of land - conditions not usually seen on smaller inland lakes and rivers. Vessel maintenance addresses minor breakdowns at sea, such as fouled spark plugs, how to replace them, and how to troubleshoot and deal with other mechanical issues. The students get "hands-on" experience in what to do in case of an emergency, such as a crew member overboard, vessel sinking, change in sea or weather conditions, in-water survival, and rescues.

The Great Lakes Open-Water Module mandates the need to always file a float plan, how to fill out a float plan, who should receive the float plan, and how to use the risk assessment Green-Amber-Red (GAR) model. The GAR model is a Coast Guard designed process used to calculate the risk of each mission from planning to completion. We also complete an abdandon ship drill during this course, in partnership with the NPS search and rescue team. We informed students that their vessel was sinking, and they were required to don their immersion or dry suits in preparation for abandoning the vessel. After radioing a mayday call, the students entered the water and awaited rescue. While in the water, the students accounted for everyone, checked for injuries, stayed together, and continue to check on the condition of each person at regular intervals. Instructors were with the students at all times to facilitate proper communication and ensure the safety of everyone. A National Park Service vessel staffed with three instructors was within sight and communication for the duration of the drill.

Everyone completed the course and deemed it a success. Students reported that they felt the course was a great addition to the regular MOCC because it prepared them for open water boat handling and emergency situations.

Alpena Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office Joins Thousands at the 68th Annual Pointe Mouillee Waterfowl Festival

By Andrew Briggs

The Pointe Mouillee State Game Area is recognized as the largest freshwater marsh restoration project in North America. Pointe Mouillee, located near Brownstown, Michigan, contains over 12 miles of dikes and 86 water control structures and is home to excellent waterfowl hunting and bird watching opportunities. However, as the largest freshwater marsh restoration project, the Pointe Mouillee State Game Area (run by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources) requires considerable funding, which is provided by the Pointe Mouillee Waterfowl Festival held annually for the last 68 years. The two day event attracts 8,000-10,000 people each year and is free to attend, but donations are accepted.

This years' festival offered something for everyone. Events included shooting contests, boat racing, a decoy contest, a wildlife art show, hip-boot races, a live auction, and fish-decoy carving, duck-decoy carving, and fly-tying demonstrations. Many vendors also attended the event to sell outdoor related items. Additionally, there were many games and activities catered towards kids, including a BB gun shoot, archery shoot, slingshot contest, face painting, and clowns.

This year, staff from the Alpena Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office – Waterford substation attended the festival to showcase the work the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service conducts in the area. They brought with them two young-of-the-year (less than one year old) lake sturgeon, some of the tags and equipment

Staff from the Alpena Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office (Waterford Substation) discussing lake sturgeon at the Pointe Mouillee Waterfowl Festival near Brownstone, Michigan. Photo credit: USFWS.

used in the field, and examples of invasive species. Attendees took great interest in the lake sturgeon. Most had never seen lake sturgeon before, especially ones that young. Aside from questions about the lake sturgeon, people also inquired about invasive species in the Great Lakes region and their impacts to the ecosystem. This event offered a great opportunity to spread awareness for the hard work being conducted to conserve and protect our natural resources.

Viral Hemorrhagic Septicemia Virus Survey Assistance to The University of Toledo Great Lakes Genetics/Genomics Laboratory

By Anjanette Bowen

The Alpena FWCO provided assistance to Megan Niner, University of Toledo Great Lakes Genetics/Genomics Laboratory, with fish and mussel collections for a survey to determine if Viral Hemorrhagic Septicemia virus(VHSv) continues to be present in Great Lakes populations. The University of Toldeo study involved sampling a number of

locations across the Great Lakes for fish and mussel tissue in an effort to determine if VHSv was present. The Alpena FWCO assisted with collections in the Saginaw Bay area of Lake Huron. Fish were collected in July from the Saginaw River mouth and included sampling channel catfish, walleye, round goby, emerald shiner, freshwater drum, quillback carpsucker, and yellow perch. Zebra mussels were collected in September from the same location and tissues were extracted and provided to the Genetics/Genomics Laboratory. Fish and mussel tissues will be tested for the presence of VHS virus using PCR. Study results should be available in 2016.

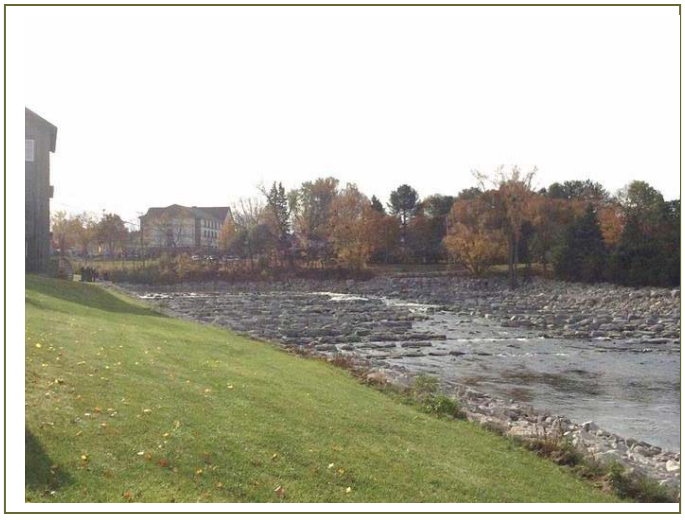
Frankenmuth Fish Passage Project

By Justin Chiotti

On October 27th, a ribbon cutting event was held along the banks of the Cass River in Frankenmuth, Michigan showcasing the most recent fish passage project in the Saginaw River watershed. For over ten years, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) along with many partners have been eagerly awaiting the day when the Cass River is reconnected to 73 miles of high quality fish spawning habitat upstream of the Frankenmuth Dam.

The Frankenmuth Dam was constructed prior to the Civil War and has been a part of Frankenmuth's history for over 160 years. The dam was originally built as a mill and the impounded water upstream of the dam serves as a tourist attraction where the "Bavarian Belle Riverboat" and "Frankenmuth Fun Ships" operate during the summer. In order to maintain the impoundment created by the dam, but still allow for fish passage, it was decided that a rock ramp structure be constructed to meet both economic and ecological goals. The rock ramp imitates natural rapids and consists of fourteen wedge shaped weirs spaced about twenty feet apart. The entire rock ramp is approximately 300 feet in length.

The ribbon cutting event was well attended by the media, local dignitaries, governmental representatives, and members of the community. During the ceremony speakers highlighted not only the ecological importance of reconnecting the river, but how important this project is to the City of Frankenmuth and Saginaw River watershed. The Service's National Fish Passage Program Coordinator, Susan Wells, was on hand to deliver a speech on behalf of the Service. Prior to becoming the National Fish Passage Program Coordinator, Susan served as the first Fish Passage Coordinator for Alpena Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office. During her time in Alpena she was involved in the initial conversations regarding the Frankenmuth Dam removal project so it was nice to have her present to celebrate this momentous occasion.



The rock ramp constructed in the Cass River in Frankenmuth, MI now provides fish with 73 miles of previously inaccessible habitat. Photo credit: USFWS.

Since 2010, fish biologists from the Alpena Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office have been collecting fisheries data above and below the Frankenmuth Dam in order to evaluate the fish community. In the upcoming years pre and post assessment data will be used to monitor changes in the fish community and evaluate the success of the rock ramp to allow fish passage. The Saginaw River watershed and Saginaw Bay contain some of the best walleye fishing in the world. Reconnecting the Cass River will provide valuable spawning habitat for not only walleye, but smallmouth bass, and many other native fish species as well.

The Frankenmuth fish passage project was a collaborative project with many different funding agencies, for more information and live webcam please visit http://www.frankenmuthcity.com/information/damproject.