West Michigan Fishing Paradise

Grand Rapids is looking forward to welcoming all of you to the 47th Annual meeting of the Society for the Study of Reproduction (SSR). With so many of you coming from all over the United States, Canada and beyond it provides an opportunity for those of us living and working here to talk about the great things about West Michigan that you can enjoy in addition to the fabulous science that will be presented. When it comes to outdoor activities, West Michigan is really outstanding! This blog will focus on some of the great fishing within the city itself and within a short drive from the city.

It is not just our opinion that the fishing is great here but also that of Field and Stream one of the largest outdoor publications in the world. Their writers ranked Grand Rapids as the 6th best fishing city in the US.

Let's start with our fishing team.

Sue Ferguson. Sue is a Research Assistant working for Asgi Fazleabas at Michigan State University and is our Department’s expert in tissue acquisition and all things related to such processes. More importantly, Sue is our downtown-fishing contributor who regularly fishes the Grand River and Reeds Lake with the locals.

Emma Risinger. Emma, aged 9, is part of the JET Farm fishing team. JET farm is John, Emma and Tracy Risinger’s farm in Belmont, Michigan about 11 miles from downtown Grand Rapids and located in scenic Cannon Township. Emma sometimes accompanies her Dad on his fishing exploits.

Tracy Thompson (Risinger). Tracy is an occasional fisherperson in the JET farm team. Tracy has battled big Chinook Salmon on the Muskegon but prefers the more constant action of “tiddlers” (small panfish) when she fishes.

John Risinger. John is a Cancer Biologist in the Department of Obstetrics, Gynecology & Reproductive Biology at Michigan State University whose lab focuses on gynecologic oncology research. John is a lifelong angler who likes catching just about any species of fish whether in fresh or salt water. John’s brother once said John can catch a fish from an empty bathtub. John is also part of team JET.

Fishing is a year round experience in West Michigan. Something can be caught anytime of the year. Even in the dead of the coldest winter (like we had this year!!) or on the hottest summer day, something is likely to be biting. It is the four seasons that drives our fishing calendar for what fish we target and by which fishing methods we use. West Michigan is blessed with both outstanding cold-water (trout, salmon, whitefish etc.) and warm-water (bass, yellow perch, walleye, pike, bluegills, catfish etc.) fisheries. In fact, Lake Michigan serves as sort of an inland ocean in that introduced west coast anadromous species like salmon (coho and chinook) and steelhead (anadromous rainbow trout) live the majority of
their life in the big lake then venture up our rivers and their tributaries to spawn, more on this later when we talk about some of our rivers like the Grand.

Let’s start in the **winter**. The winter of 2013/14 is already guaranteed to go down in the history books as one of the coldest and snowiest on record. As I write this in the beginning of March it is at number two all time with 112 inches (Almost 10 feet!). Despite this we are still fishing and it is still likely to snow some more. In fact we have numerous fishing options for this time of year--both on frozen and in liquid water. Let’s first talk about ice fishing and Reeds Lake located in East Grand Rapids. It is a fair sized lake (283 acres) ringed with expensive homes but don’t let its urban location fool you into thinking there are no fish here. There are healthy populations of most warm water species including largemouth bass, crappies, perch and bluegills. There is quite a lot of interest in ice fishing for the crappies and yellow perch on Reeds and other local inland lakes.

However, I wanted to showcase some of Sue’s efforts on Reeds Lake when it comes to pike spearing. Yes, pike spearing! Sue this year accompanied her friend Dave on some pike spearing adventures. Dave sets up a light tight shanty and cuts a large rectangular hole in the ice within the shanties confines. The light tight shanty allows one to see into the water easily and those sitting inside are kept warm by a portable propane heater. A large fish decoy on a line is jigged in the hole to hopefully entice a pike to swim in a take a close look at a potentially tasty meal. It is this time when the real action must take place. First, it is critical that any pike be longer than the minimum 24 inches so a quick determination must be made to ensure only legal fish are taken—you obviously can’t release a speared pike. Once a pike enters the frame of the ice hole the angler must spear it using a combination of stealth and accuracy. The spear (actually something that King Neptune might have) is thrust with the goal to hit the pike just behind the head. This past winter Sue spent many mornings in the warm shanty waiting for pike to examine the decoy and she and Dave were able to connect on a few really nice pike this winter.
Our local lakes provide more traditional ice fishing opportunities as well as spearing. Local lakes in the Grand Rapids area, including Reeds, Wabasis, Murray, Lincoln among many, all provide easy access and action for pike, yellow perch, bluegills and crappies. Muskegon and White lakes, which are drowned river mouth lakes within a short drive from Grand Rapids give the added attraction for walleyes. There are also walleye in Lincoln lake.

Murray lake is a five minute drive from JET farm and one of the lakes we ice fish. Murray is best known as a destination for Muskellunge anglers and harbors a very healthy population of these largest members of the pike family. Every year a few muskies are caught through the ice using big suckers as bait. Murray itself is a very deep lake that also has the distinction of having a population of lake herring. Lake herring are actually members of the whitefish family and not herring at all. These fish are also known as tullibees or ciscoes and are a native fish of Michigan. At one time ciscoes were the predominant fish in the great lakes before the accidental and intentional introduction of other fish species with which they were unable to compete. In current times most of the original species of ciscoes in the great lakes are extirpated. In Murray the ciscoes average about 8 to 10 inches long and provide good forage for the muskies and other gamefish. A few anglers target these ciscoes as they are excellent to eat especially when smoked. However when we ice fish Murray lake we are usually targeting the panfish.

We try to locate some relatively shallow areas in the 6-15 feet depth range that still have surviving weed beds. These weed beds attract the bluegills, crappies and perch we are targeting. I start out by drilling a few holes in this depth range in areas that traditionally have the weeds. Modern ice fishing is high tech! Most anglers take portable fish finders that provide depth and mark fish as they move through the area under the hole in the ice. These electronic units are so sensitive they can track your bait underwater—even tiny 1/64th ounce jigs—and allow the angler to see as fish approach their bait. Current trends even have the addition of underwater camera viewing to watch the action around your bait. These units are part of the fun of ice fishing as there is action down there even when nothing is actually taking your bait.

We use small ultralight ice fishing tackle and line testing as little as 1lb to catch the bluegills on tiny tungsten jigs tipped with a maggot or waxworm. I catch most of our yellow perch on a simple rig of a size 6 hook a small split-shot weight and an emerald shiner for bait. I like to actively jig for the bluegills and then have the rod set—up for fishing the emerald shiners on a fish minder called the ice rigger which basically is a device that holds the rod and trips a flag when something takes off with the shiner. This way I increase my chances at fish and I can target two different species at the same time. Many anglers also target pike through the ice as this species remains active through the winter. Usually they use a tip up to fish a large minnow or small sucker. Like my ice rigger the tip-up will spring a flag when a fish takes off with the bait. When there is good thick ice and it is not too cold some of our local lakes like Reeds have hundreds of people out enjoying the ice—some are fishing some are watching for tip up flags and some just hanging out.
Here are some pictures of some panfish we have caught through the ice at Murray lake including a nice fat pumpkinseed (top) and an egg laden yellow perch caught on an emerald shiner.

Emma with a largemouth bass she caught at another local lake.

Winter fishing for steelhead is the other main option for us in Grand Rapids. As previously mentioned, the introduction of salmon and steelhead trout in the Great Lakes provides a unique fishery. Warm-water rivers like the Grand cannot support coldwater fish like salmon and trout in the summer months, however they become spawning rivers for these
fish - in the fall for the salmon and in winter and spring for the steelhead. In addition, to these spawners some other coldwater fish like lake trout and big lake-living brown trout will often follow these fish up the rivers looking to gorge on their eggs. Some steelhead will move into the Grand starting in the fall and there are fish present all winter before the main run in the early spring. The steelhead population in the big lake is supported by a combination of natural reproduction and by stocking of fingerlings by the State of Michigan.

Alewife herring are one of the principal forage prey species for steelhead and almost exclusively for the salmon. Recently the populations of Alewife herring (itself an introduced species) have been reported to be decreasing in overall numbers. As a result of the forage base decline the State of Michigan has responded by stocking far fewer salmon. One positive result of there being fewer of these large predator fish is that the average salmon size has dramatically increased. For steelhead it also means more forage and the steelhead which might have been 5 to 8 lbs a few years ago are now also much larger and even a few in the 20 lbs class were caught in the past year.

Steelhead fishing is very popular in West Michigan and some rivers receive a lot of attention when the main run of fish are in the rivers. There are many ways to catch these fish and anglers pursue them using both fly fishing and spinning tackle. Fly fishers use a variety of flies including streamer and egg sucking leech patterns. Spin fisherman use a variety of natural and artificial baits. One popular natural bait method is to use a slip float and a spawn sac or wax worm as bait. Artificial lures run the gamut of mimicking anything that these trout normally eat so diving plugs, spinners, spoons and jigs are all popular.

This winter Sue has really hit the downtown Grand River steelhead fishing scene hard and has caught quite a few beautiful steelhead including several well over 10 lbs. She could often be found fishing at one of the popular spots known by the locals as the Sixth Street Dam, or “The Wall”. This dam in the middle of downtown Grand Rapids was originally built for flood control but from an angler's perspective serves to delay and concentrate migrating fish as they travel upstream. The fish can eventually get past the dam using a fish ladder, which also serves as a point of interest for non-anglers as fish can often be seen moving through the steps.
Sue with a really nice Grand River steelhead caught this winter. The Sixth Street Dam is right behind her.

Long Awaited Spring:

Spring is one of the best times to fish and most all of our species can be targeted. It is a real challenge to decide what to fish for this time of year. Let’s start with the inland ponds and lakes. As inland lakes and ponds warm, many fish will head to shallow areas to spawn and are at this time often the most accessible to anglers. When the ice is off the lakes I first start to think about Crappies.

Crappies are one of the tastiest panfish and it is in spring when I am best at catching them. When we get some warm days these are some of the first fish species that head to the shallows where they seek dark bottom areas close to shallow water bullrushes, cattails, reeds or other cover as these areas warm up the quickest and provide needed cover, food and good spawning locations. It is great fun to stalk the bank and sight fish for these fish this time of year. I use ultralight spinning tackle and 4lbs test line to present small jigs to catch these fish. Crappies are generally not that hard to catch once you have located them this time of year, so basically anything representing a small minnow will be effective. I find the small jig effective and it avoids having to use live bait. Closely following the Crappies into the shallows are the other sunfish family members including the bluegill and bass. Bass season is closed to protect them during the spawning season. However there is no closed season for Bluegills.
Bluegill fishing the spring spawn can be spectacular. The key to catching these fish is to locate their saucer sized nests fanned out by the males. Large male bluegills (bulls) guard the nest during this time and it is the best time to locate these adult fish. These nests are often tightly packed so many large bluegills can be found concentrated at one time. On a warm calm sunny late spring day you can actually smell these bluegill beds. A little bit like a sweet fishy cucumber odor- in a good way. These fish are easily caught with flies, worms, and small jigs. Crappies and Bluegill are prolific spawners and harvesting some of these super tasty fish for eating has little effect on the overall population and in some lakes also helps to prevent stunting of fish due to overpopulation.

**Last Saturday in April:** This is a special day. It is the day in Michigan when most of the inland streams and rivers open for trout season. Some of the larger rivers are open year round particularly those with anadromous species like steelhead and salmon. However for those of us on JET farm it represents the first opportunity to literally fish in our back yard.

We can step out our back door load up a few fishing supplies on our golf cart and head down to the Bear Creek which runs through the middle of JET farm. Bear Creek is a wonderful, cold-water stream that runs across Cannon township and empties into the Grand River in Plainfield township. Bear Creek itself is similar to many small and medium tributaries of the Grand in that it supports a healthy population of trout. Because it mostly flows through private property the vast majority of Bear Creek is not accessible to the fishing public resulting in a trout population that is especially strong and not over
harvested. The portion of Bear Creek on our farm is fast-flowing and alternates through a
typical mix of riffles, runs and pools the deepest of which is 4-6 feet depending on time of
year. When the water is high in the spring Bear Creeks resident trout are easy to fool and it
is not uncommon for Emma and me to catch more than a dozen good sized 9 to 12 inch
tROUT in a 1 or 2 hour outing. Most of these trout are brown trout but there is an occasional
rainbow trout as well. Currently our biggest trout from Bear Creek is just under 17 inches.
These are all naturally reproducing fish that have sustained their populations since
stocking of the creek by the State of Michigan last occurred in 1965 almost 50 years ago.

**Too Many Choices:** Spring brings our fishing into high gear and there are many good
options. I mentioned the inland lake panfish bite and the outstanding spring steelhead
runs. I did not mention the walleye fishery in the Grand, which is another outstanding
fishery that provides action for most of the year and is particularly good right up to its brief
spawning season closure. There are also catfish! The Grand River is a great river for
catching lots of channel catfish that can be plentiful and good sized as well as for catching
the less common but sometimes huge flathead catfish. Fishing for these is good from spring
to fall. The Grand River in spring is really an interesting spectacle! Not only are the
steelhead in the river and stacked up behind the sixth street dam (walking distance from
the Convention Center and on the 5K fun run course) so are the suckers.

Suckers! The Grand is home to several species of these native fish. These fish are common
and migrate in big numbers to spawn in the riffles of our major rivers and streams during
the spring season. The area just down from the Sixth Street dam is packed with these fish
during their spawning run and some anglers specifically target these fish for sport fishing
entertainment or to eat.

Although these fish are bottom feeders and do indeed have a sucker-mouth adapted for
foraging the bottom, they are actually quite intolerant of polluted or unclean waters and
thrive in clear moving stream environments. Unlike introduced Eurasian carp-- a common
Michigan bottom-feeder able to live in silted, turbid and polluted waters--these native river
suckers cannot and a healthy population is indicative of a good flowing water ecosystem.
So the commonly held idea that our native river suckers are unclean trash fish is not
supported by the facts but rather by people’s lack of knowledge.

These fish are very easy to catch using a worm fished on the bottom during the spring run.
They are great fighters as they are used to battling the strong river currents of their
environment. A few hours fishing for these in the Grand or other local rivers can be great
fun this time of year.

**Summer:** As late spring transitions into summer, so do the ways we fish for some of our
favorite species. All those concentrated and accessible larger bluegills and crappie have
moved out to deeper water weeds beds making them harder to locate in big numbers
although small bluegills are easy to fish all year. Catching these is still on many anglers’
agendas but summer really shines for our bass fishing.
When bass season opens we see hundreds of anglers start in pursuit of America’s number one sportfish. Our area in West Michigan has plenty of exceptional bass fishing. Our local inland lakes all hold good populations of these fish, particularly largemouth bass. And since most bass fishing is catch-and-release, there are some good-sized largemouths swimming in these lakes.

When it comes to smallmouth bass fishing it is again hard to beat the Grand River. The Grand has a very healthy population of these fish and as the water levels recede from spring highs, during summertime the fish become concentrated in predictable locations and can be readily caught using typical smallmouth techniques. In the Grand, I have had a lot of success catching these fish with tubes and simple jigs rigged with a 2 to 3 inch gulp minnows, which effectively mimic the invasive goby (the tube) and minnow (the gulp minnow jig) population in the Grand.

When these baits are tossed close to deadfalls, river obstructions, current breaks and holes downstream of riffles, you will catch these bass. Outside of town toward the East where the Grand becomes increasingly shallower, many anglers wade out targeting bass in the summer. Many of the same bass hideouts also harbor the channel cats and walleyes, so multiple species may be caught in the same outings with the same baits. The Thornapple and Flat rivers join the Grand east of town in Ada and Lowell and are both very easy rivers to wade into with multiple warm-water species and good bass fishing.

The Grand and local lakes also support good populations of pike. These fish have always been an incidental catch for me but some anglers target these fish and enjoy good success. On a typical day fishing a lake like Wabasis and targeting largemouths, I will also catch a few yellow perch, some crappies, a few small pike and perhaps a bowfin—all as incidental catches on my bass baits.
A summertime Pike

Trout fishing is still open but those easy-to-fool spring trout are now becoming increasingly tough to catch. Clear water and low water levels lead to easily spooked fish making it a real challenge to catch these fish. This is a good time to fly fish as many good insect hatches happen and fishing for brown trout on a summer evening can be productive.

Although the salmon and steelhead are not in Grand Rapids, they are in Lake Michigan. This is good time to get a few friends together to book a charter boat to troll for Salmon and Steelhead. I did this this last summer. We booked a charter out of Grand Haven, which is less than an hour west of town, and our group caught a nice mess of these fish.
**Fall:** Fall fishing often means Salmon in West Michigan. This is when the Coho and Chinook salmon come into our rivers looking to spawn. In our area, that occurs in the White, Muskegon and Grand rivers. The Sixth Street dam is again the focus of local Grand Rapids anglers since fish get concentrated below the dam as they search for a way upstream. During the peak of the salmon runs, there are many anglers lining the shore below the dam. In addition, you will usually see quite a few boats in the river as well.

Many anglers opt for fishing the smaller Muskegon or White rivers, which are short drives away. Some opt for the world class salmon fisheries in the Pere Marquette and Manistee rivers a bit further north. Whatever the river, there have been huge fish caught in the last year--with numerous 30+lbs Chinooks being taken. Until you hook into one, it is really difficult to explain the power of these fish--particularly if hooked on sporting tackle.

I prefer fishing the smaller rivers as I can really see the life drama of these fish. Watching their spawning spectacle is almost superior to the actual fishing. Watching female fish on the spawning beds (called the redd) is fascinating. The females (hens) approach the redd followed by several males. The males have now grown a kype or pronounced hook shape to their jaw. This is an adaptation for fighting. The males will sometimes fight at this point for the privilege of spreading their milt on the hen’s eggs as they are expelled.

However, big fighting males may stray from the female, allowing other opportunistic males to spread their milt. These are sometimes immature or less robust fish that sneak in. Some anglers specifically fish the spawning redds using imitation yarn eggs. This approach is believed to be successful because competing males will eat other male’s eggs. The evolutionary adaption would mean that only their lineage is passed on. Whatever the reason these salmon still will attack fish-imitating lures, spawn, or imitation eggs.

Following the spawn the rivers become littered with post-spawn fish in their death throws--another fascinating part of their saga. These once large powerful fish swim aimlessly, eaten-up with fungus and digesting their own flesh, before they finally expire.

While the focus might be on the Salmon, all the other fish are still out there waiting for winter and trying to fatten up. Fall can therefore be a great time to target our warm-water species or catch a few stream trout before we have to go fishing on frozen water.
John and a nice hen salmon before releasing her to finish spawning.

A nice male Chinook adapted to fight
We hope we have given you a snapshot of some of the great fishing that can be experienced in our part of the world. We will plan on up-dating this blog with some content from our spring and early summer fishing experiences prior to the SSR meeting – but bring your fishing gear and remember the Grand River is just outside your hotel and flows right past the convention center.

If you have any questions about fishing in West Michigan our experts - John (John.Risinger@hc.msu.edu) or Sue (Susan.Ferguson@hc.msu.edu) will be happy to provide you with advice or any number of fishing stories!!!