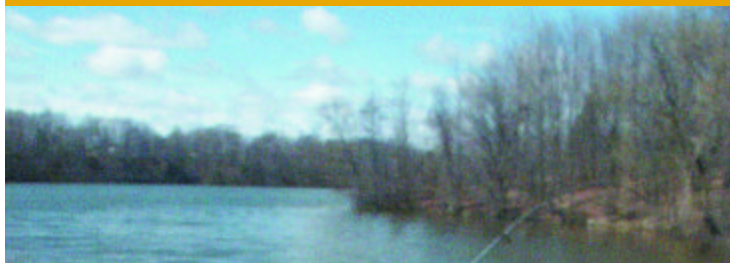


*Livonia impoundment
on the Rouge River
offers edible fish again.*

BY BILL SEMION



A lake Reborn

Newburgh Lake in Livonia once was among the most polluted waters in southeast Michigan. The impoundment on the Middle Rouge River was filled with all sorts of nasty chemicals, including PCBs.

No one fished there. If they had, they wouldn't want to eat what they'd caught.

What a difference a few years and about \$15 million in federal and Wayne County expenditures can make.

Now, the 105-acre lake, next to which Henry Ford built a water-powered mini-factory in his largely failed "cottage industry" initiative, may be one of the best environmental cleanup stories of the new century. For the first time since 1989, fish from the lake are considered safe to eat in moderation.

Newburgh Lake was literally swept clean from the bottom up in the Rouge River National Wet Weather Demonstration Project.

"Prior to the cleanup there was a no-consumption advisory for all fish from the lake," said Jeff Braunscheidel, a fisheries biologist at the Michigan Department of Natural Resources office in Livonia. "And just this year, the new advisory from the Michigan

Department of Community Health has totally removed the lake's special advisory for panfish, meaning bluegill, sunfish, and perch. And, it's relaxed restrictions for bass, catfish, and carp."

The only panfish advisory that still applies to Newburgh, he said, is the same general advisory that women and children should eat no more than one meal of panfish a week from any Michigan inland lake because of mercury levels.

For other fish, the only consumption advisories for women and children specific to Newburgh are that they eat no more than one meal of catfish per month, six meals of carp per year, and one meal of bass per week.

"We're also anticipating that in a few more years, the young fish we planted that are clean will have grown to legal size, so the regulations might get relaxed even further after we take more samples," Braunscheidel added.

The tiered approach to the advisory, he says, is in place because a few contaminated fish remained even though the lake was drained and soils were scraped from its bottom in 1998.

"We also still have sediments coming down from upstream, and we still have some general pollutants, such as animal waste—including from the ample lakeside goose population—pesticides, lawn fertilizer nutrients," Braunscheidel said. "Mercury is a problem over the entire state because it is airborne, but we no longer have the PCBs. You can't call it a totally clean lake, but it is definitely a lot cleaner."

About 30,000 pounds of fish went with the more than 550,000 tons of contaminated soil removed from the lake. Newburgh was then recontoured, killed again, and refilled before being restocked with 10,000 bluegills, 16,000 largemouth bass, 12,000 catfish, 20,000 walleye, 200 spawner pumpkinseed sunfish, 600 crappie, 13,000 northern pike, and 30,000 fast-growing hybrid sunfish.

The stocked fish that survived are now of catchable size, and anglers have been catching them from shore, canoes, and other portable craft. With no improved boat launch yet, most successful anglers fish from the banks and two fishing piers—one at the Newburgh Pointe comfort station and another at the lake's west end. Good shore access is available along Hines Drive.

"You can also rent paddleboats and canoes and you can carry a canoe in. There is no swimming," Braunscheidel said. "I don't know if I'd want to go out in a belly tube yet. We still don't recommend any body contact with the water due to the storm water flowing in. There's a big storm sewer on the lake and there's some concern with bacteria as well as other pollutants."

In the future, he hopes to see a small boat launch reopened on the lake, but that's up to Wayne County Parks, which oversees the overall Rouge riverscape. "We'd also like to see further reductions in advisories to the extent that water quality will allow," he said.

The stocked fish are doing very well.

"We surveyed it two years later to see how they were going," Braunscheidel said. "The catfish are doing phenomenally and should provide an excellent fishery this

year. In 2002, we caught them up to two feet long. That's really good growth, but it's also normal for an impoundment to have very good growth rates initially after you clean it out."

DNR survey nets didn't capture many largemouth bass, but that's normal, Braunscheidel noted.

"The anglers last season were catching a lot of bass in the 12- to 16-inch range, and some larger ones as well, and lots of six- to eight-inch panfish, mainly bluegill and sunfish," he said.

"And, we've had excellent pike growth due to good forage base in the river. We've caught pike up to 30 inches and they're growing like crazy."

Walleye haven't shown up in surveys so their survival can't be verified yet.

"Overall, it's very much of a success in terms of reno-

Accessing the Lake

Newburgh Lake is in Middle Rouge Parkway, a 16-mile continuous park stretching from Northville to Dearborn following the Middle Rouge River. The lake is best reached from I-96 by exiting at Newburgh Road and heading south to Hines Drive, which parallels the lake on the north side.

The first fishing pier is reachable from Sumac Pointe picnic area through a park gravel road west of Hines and Newburgh Road. The second pier is at the Newburgh Pointe Comfort Station a mile or so west.

Anglers can also walk onto a former island now connected to the mainland, fish along most of the lakeshore, or park at the west end where the river empties into the lake. Canoes must be launched at Newburgh Pointe, east of the comfort station.

For more information, call the Department of Natural Resources Livonia Office, ph. 734/953-0241, or Wayne County Parks, ph. 734/261-1990, or visit www.waynecountyparks.com.

vating the fishery and making it once more a usable resource," the biologist said. "The other stresses that are still present are characteristic of the entire river system and not particular to that lake."

Next step in housecleaning, Braunscheidel said, is looking at the rest of the Middle Rouge system. More money will be needed to address water flow volume, including storm runoff, and water quality.

"A lot of communities are working on reducing sewage discharges, treating stormwater, and controlling the rate at which it comes in," he added.

Until then, he says, area residents will just have to settle for a lake that only a few years ago was too dangerous even to touch returned to a usable resource. Families once again can sit by the riverbank or lakeside on a lazy summer day, throw in a line, and keep what they catch.

And that's more than just a good start. ■

Travis Fraser, visiting from Medford, Oregon, used a plastic minnow on a small jig to hook this smallmouth bass and others on Newburgh Lake. Earlier, he caught and landed a 29-inch northern pike from a fishing pier there. Michael Stallard of Detroit fishes in the background.

Photo by the author

