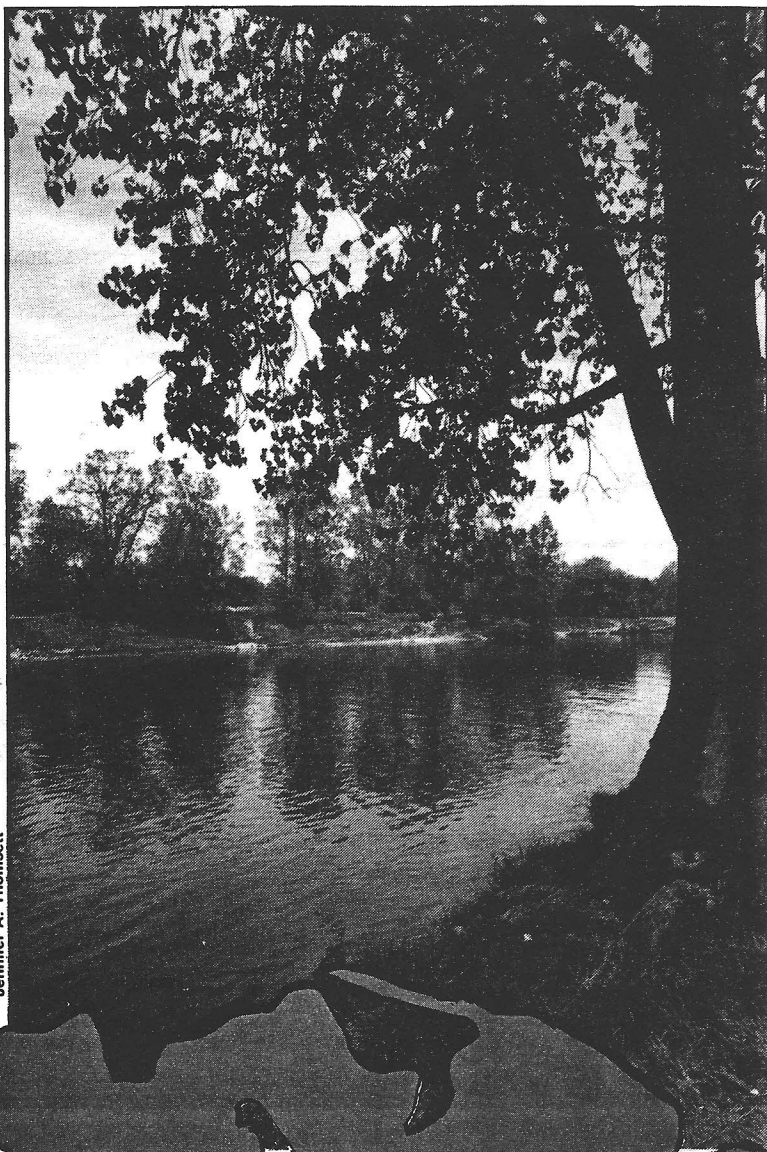


# Rebirth of Belleville Lake

By John Morris, Jr.



Jennifer A. Thomsett

Many important inventions and discoveries are made by accident. Often, these "accidents" produce better outcomes than the original idea. One such accident is waiting to happen.

For nearly 30 years Belleville Lake, an impoundment of the Huron River in western Wayne County, silently screamed for help.

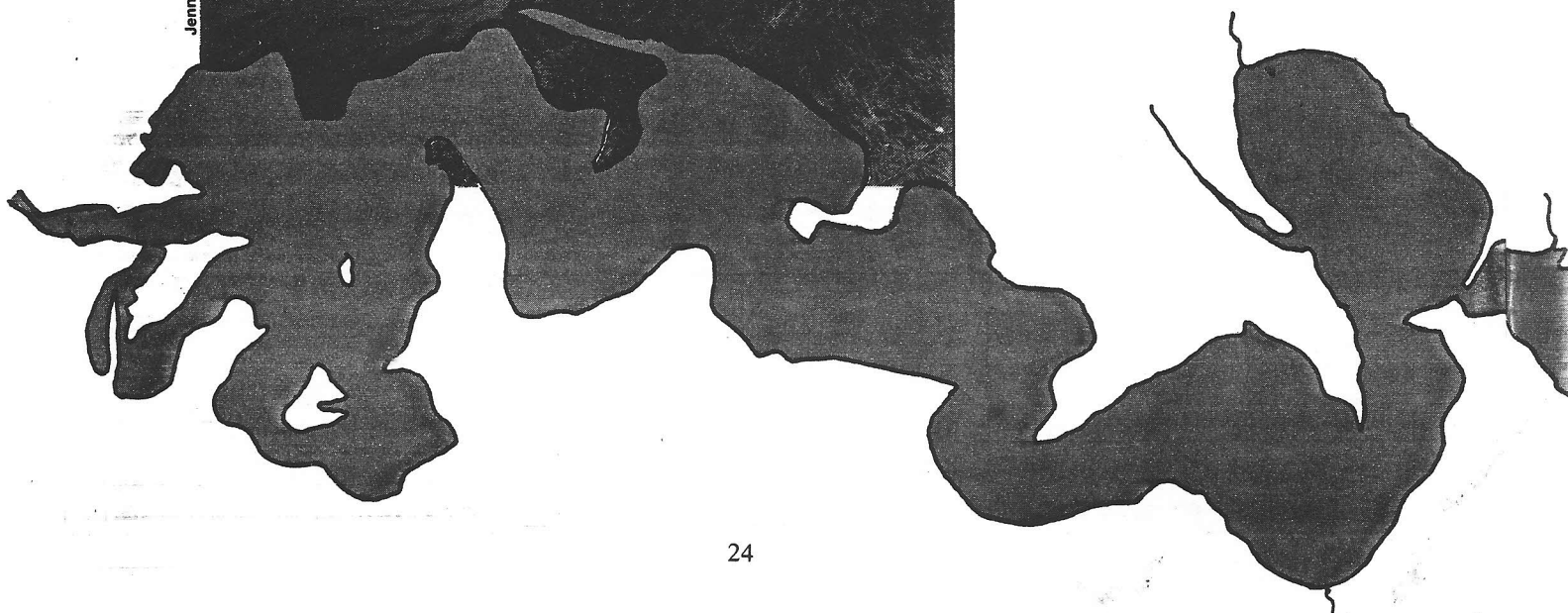
A 1938 fisheries survey found that a variety and balance of game fish existed in the lake and natural reproduction appeared to be adequate. It was recommended that no further stocking be done. The planting of 2,550 largemouth bass in 1945 marked the last stocking in Edison Lake, as it was then called.

However, the 1945 Institute for Fisheries Research report also indicated that a drastic reduction in carp populations would greatly improve sport fishing in the lake, but it would be a difficult task.

Earlier attempts in the 1930s to remove the species with seine nets had proven unsuccessful. A commercial fisherman set pound nets and gave up after a few trial weeks. A spearing season opened in 1950 and a permit was issued in 1951 to another commercial fisherman for the use of a new "California-type" hoop net on an experimental basis. Results were poor.

In her master's thesis on water resources management for the University of Michigan, Anne Christine Hutchinson wrote that Belleville Lake, as are most eutrophic lakes, is extremely productive in that it can support a fairly dense fish population. Eutrophic refers to the natural aging process of lakes. It is characterized by sediment disposition, high nutrient concentrations, and high productivity. Under eutrophic conditions of low dissolved oxygen and high nutrient concentrations, few game fish are at their competitive best. Carp are able to adapt to these conditions and out-compete the other species.

In May of 1973 Ford Lake, immediately upstream from Belleville Lake, was treated



with rotenone as part of a chemical reclamation project on the Huron River system by the Department of Natural Resources. Rotenone is a fish toxicant that prohibits transport of oxygen through the gills, suffocating the fish. The chemical does not attack tissue and is harmless to humans.

Heavy rains fell during the treatment process, and the impoundment nearly reached a flood crest level. Twelve hours before the substance was neutralized a decision was made by the director of the Joint Ypsilanti Recreation Operation to open a dam gate at the Ford Motor Company plant, releasing the treated Ford Lake waters into Belleville Lake. More than 300,000 pounds of carp were accidentally killed in Belleville Lake.

"The effect the carp had on the ecosystem of the lake was total devastation," said DNR fisheries biologist Ronald J. Spittler. "The water quality was poor—brown and unsightly—and the lake contained no vegetation. It was a big settling basin.

"The lake held the potential to produce on a per-acre basis some of the best fishing in the state. It contains good fish habitat, has both shallow and deep water with good spawning areas, good structure, lots of nutrients, and plenty of food."

At a scheduled public meeting the

reclamation of Belleville Lake was approved for October of 1973.

With coordinated adjustments between the Edison Dam at French Landing and the five dams upstream, drawdown on the lake began in mid-September and was to have taken four weeks.

When shoulder settling was discovered along the roadways of two bridges, the project was cancelled.

Three days later, at another public meeting, more than 850 area citizens asked the DNR to continue the project after hearing of the success on Ford Lake. It was determined that the lake could be safely lowered 10 feet, and an organized dead fish clean-up program was planned for the anticipated large kill of rough fish.

Six boats, working from two base stations, distributed the toxicant. Each boat carried two 55-gallon drums and directed the applicant into the propwash. A helicopter was used, for the first time in a major lake treatment, to apply the chemical to otherwise inaccessible areas. It was found to be invaluable as a spotter and coordinator.

Dead fish began to appear on the surface only a few hours after the chemical was applied. The kill totaled more than 850,000 pounds of fish; 95 percent by weight were carp. The cleanup, called one of the finest

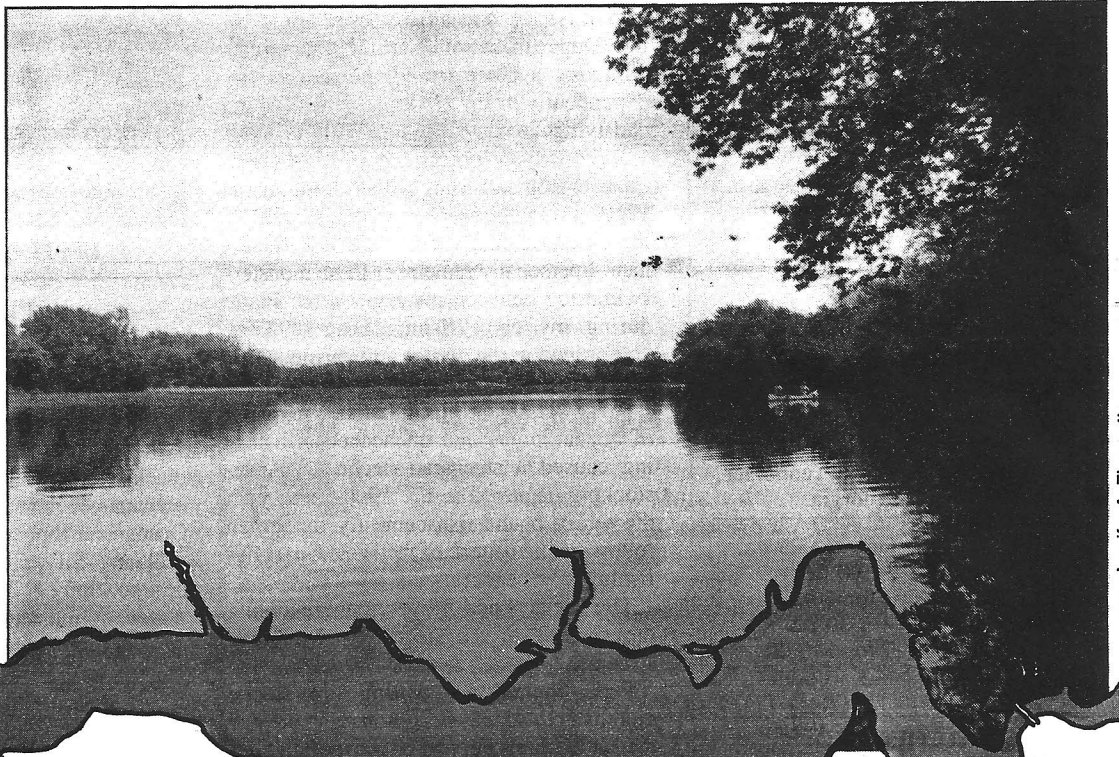
examples of public-government joint efforts in the state, took nearly two weeks.

An innovated use of a lift net proved to be the most efficient method of fish removal. Spittler, in his 1978 Fisheries Division technical report, described the method: "An empty net was placed, spread out, in each boat and filled with up to 1,000 pounds of fish. Returning to the work station, crews quickly attached hooks to the four corners of the net. It was then lifted by boom to a waiting dump truck. Once poised over the truck bed, a rope was pulled, untying the gathered center portion of the net, and all contents emptied into the truck. With the knot retied, the net was quickly placed back into the boat, ready for another load."

Where the net was unsuccessful underwater, it was proven effective above the surface.

The lake was detoxified and refilled one week after treatment, and an extensive restocking program began immediately after detoxification. To provide an interim fishery, more than 100,000 rainbow trout were planted, and 52,000 fathead minnows were stocked to establish a forage base. More than 78,000 largemouth bass, 78,000 bluegills, 2,700 walleyes, 1,750 bluegill-green sunfish hybrids, and 24 adult tiger muskellunge hybrids completed the

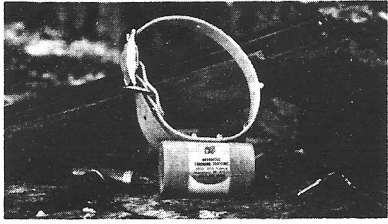
Located between Ann Arbor and Detroit, with easy access off I-94, Belleville Lake provides an important fishery to the thousands of potential metropolitan anglers. The lake's reclamation project has been called the most successful on record in Michigan.



BELLEVILLE LAKE

Jennifer A. Thomsett

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1973 plantings.

Nineteen seventy-four marked an important year in the stocking program, with more than 2.8 million walleye fry, 2.3 million northern pike, 100,000 channel catfish, and 63,000 largemouth bass planted. More than 20,000 rainbow trout, 4,200 smallmouth bass, 3,100 black crappies, 1,800 bluegills, 300 pumpkinseed sunfish, and 146 adult white bass were also reintroduced into the lake.

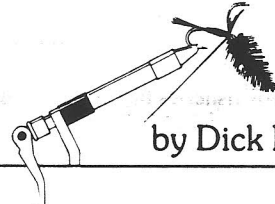
DNR surveys indicated that the stocked fish not only survived well but experienced phenomenal growth rates of over two times the state average. Largemouth bass reached a 10.5-inch average in their second year of growth. The state average

largemouth bass reached 10.6 inches in four years. Walleyes in the lake reached 17.9 inches after three years, well above the 13.3 state average.

"High nutrient levels in the lake contributed to these growth rates," said Spittler. "The nutrient loading prior to the reclamation attributed to the standing crop estimated at 1,000 pounds of fish per acre. This figure has never been noted in any reservoir."

Walleyes, native to the Huron River system, were common in Belleville Lake. More than 7 million have been planted in the lake since 1973. In 1976 a survey by the Institute for Fisheries Research concluded that more than 10,000 walleyes

**Michigan  
Fly Box**



by Dick Pomeroy

**Little Manistee**

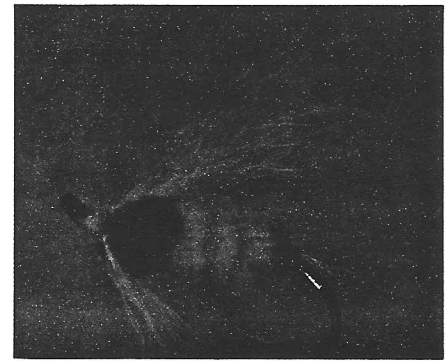
The brothers David and George Richey are well known early steelhead fishers. David is now writing for the *Detroit News*, while George continues to tie flies and guide in the Honor area. Dave Borgeson, also of Honor, was a fisheries biologist for the Department of Natural Resources. Although a close friend, he worked independently from George in his fishing and tying.

Dave Richey points out in his "Great Lakes Steelhead Flies" that although the 1920s through the 1940s saw many steelies in some streams, there were few fishermen. I personally remember these monsters swimming between my legs on the Platte during my early fishing years. "They do not feed in the winter and spring run," was the usual comment.

Richey also points out that an "invasion of sea lampreys and unchecked gill netting caused a steelhead decline." A restocking occurred in the 1960s, and with the return of the fish came fly fishermen following the pattern of the West Coast fly-fishing steelheaders.

The Richeys and Borgeson were among the earliest in the northwest Michigan streams.

Fall, winter, and spring are steelie months in this area. Borgeson, who created the Little Manistee, named most of his flies from the streams he loved to fish. Hence, the Betsie River Special, Red P.M. Special, Little Manistee, and Platte River Special ("Fly Box" February 1988). Winnans's Wiggler was another favorite as presented in April 1989. Chuck Yonker of Holland sent in this month's fly, so the Orvis gift certificate has gone his way.



**LITTLE MANISTEE**

**RECIPE**

*Hook*—36890 black, upturned eye or equivalent; size 4 to 6.

*Thread*—Red monocord or flymaster.

*Tail*—Hot orange kip.

*Body*—Rear 2/3, pink chenille; front 1/3, black chenille.

*Wing*—1/2 hot orange kip; 1/2 yellow kip. Orange on top.

*Other*—Silver tinsel tag; throat hot orange kip.

*Head*—Finish with red thread.

**FISHING TIPS**

Dave Richey, of course, fishes the bottom and very slowly. The hit is usually soft and easily missed. Use a weighted fly if necessary.

Richey says this is an excellent fly for steelheads under most conditions. Don't forget the various egg patterns, however, as they many times are more productive.

**FURTHER READING**

"Great Lakes Steelhead Flies," David Richey.

**MICHIGAN OUT-OF-DOORS**



migrated upstream that year to spawn. Statistics from 1976-78 indicated that Belleville Lake had a better walleye population and fishery on a per-acre-basis than the famed Lake Gogebic in the Upper Peninsula.

Tagged walleyes, up to 28 inches long, were recaptured up to nine years after their release. Another tagged walleye from the lake was caught over 80 miles away in the St. Clair River near Walpole Island.

"More stocking may improve the fishery," Spittler said, "but I'm not sure. It is one of the best inland walleye lakes in the state. People who know how to fish for walleyes catch them."

Sandy Gillespie, owner of Sandy's Marina at French Landing, agrees. "Knowledgeable fishermen leave my docks early in the morning and have their limits by 10 or 11 o'clock, and some of those walleyes are big," he said.

Not just the walleyes run big in the lake. An eight-pound, eight-ounce largemouth bass was taken in 1982. Although recent studies indicate that numbers of legal-sized largemouths are reduced from prior years, Spittler isn't concerned.

"A reversed trend was found with the smallmouth bass out-competing the largemouths for food and habitat," he said. "A good year-class of largemouths was found in 1988 and will provide good numbers of legal-sized bass in 1990 and 1991." Numerous bass clubs use the lake for tournaments and return all bass caught.

Since the planting of more than 56,000 hybrid tiger muskellunge in 1977, yearly plantings of around 2,500 occurred until 1981 when odd-year plantings started. Limited catches of these muskies are being taken, but they are there.

Although a few northerns are being taken, the northern pike fishery in the lake has been a disappointment. "Northern pike need shallow water after ice-out," said Spittler. "Due to the lowering of the lake during the winter, the habitat for natural reproduction was limited. The lake level will now remain consistent throughout the year, and future restocking of the species is possible."

Channel catfish provide a pleasant surprise for shore anglers. A good population exists with 19-pound, eight-ounce and 17-pound, 12-ounce monsters having been taken.

Bluegills average three-quarters of a pound and run 2.4 inches larger than the state average. Black crappies are predominant and frequently caught and run over a half-inch larger than the state average.

"Yes, the carp are out there, but so what?" says Spittler. "A complete eradication of the species was not obtained, but neither was it expected. Water quality is better, and suitable vegetation has returned. Another fishery exists now and the JANUARY 1990

numbers of carp are being held in check by the competition."

As the third heaviest-fished inland lake in the state, Belleville can sustain the good fishery. "Because of its size—six and a half miles long and nearly 1,300 acres—high productivity, and good to excellent natural reproduction, it can withstand the pressure," according to Spittler.

With the increased threat of organic and inorganic chemicals found in certain types of game fish, Spittler said that the fish in Belleville Lake have been tested three times and not one fish was found to be contaminated: "The fish in the lake are absolutely safe to eat."

The DNR maintains a public access site on the lake, with other access sites being privately owned. A nominal parking fee is charged. Several good areas for shore fishing can be found. Ice fishing on the lake is not recommended because swift currents create thin-ice conditions.

Money has been allocated by the DNR for the construction of a 400-foot fishing boardwalk on the lake. The project will cost between \$200,000 and \$300,000 and is scheduled for completion by the 1990 fishing season. To improve fish habitat in the area, permits have been issued to the Detroit BASS Club for the submersion of brush pilings for fish shelters.

The need had existed to improve fishing near large populated areas in the state. Located between Ann Arbor and Detroit, with easy access to the lake off I-94, Belleville Lake provides an important fishery to the thousands of potential metropolitan anglers. The reclamation project has been called the most successful on record in the state.

So whether you are after stringers of fish for the frying pan, a Master Angler Award, or you just seek the therapy a fishing rod offers, Belleville Lake beckons. □



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