

PRINT THIS · CLOSE WINDOW

SHARE

11/16/09 | 8 comments

State monitors trout in Schoodic Lake

By Diana Bowley
BDN Staff



BANGOR DAILY NEWS PHOTO BY DIANA BOWLEY

Biologist Richard Dill (center) picks up a lake trout that has been measured and weighed during a trap-netting session in late October at Schoodic Lake and prepares to hand it to biologist Nels Kramer to be released back into the wild. **Buy Photo**



BROWNVILLE, Maine — “Boy, aren’t those sweet!” Mark Damren said of the eggs he was stripping from a sexually mature lake trout that had been trap-netted from Schoodic Lake in late October.

As Damren carefully massaged the anesthetized fish’s belly, its translucent orange eggs popped out into a tub he had placed on a picnic table on the lake’s shore.

Once the last egg was released, Trapper Lemay, his assistant, quickly put the sleeping fish back into a bucket of water and placed another fish in Damren’s hand. This time a male lake trout was milked of its sperm, which went directly into the eggs. A swish of

Damren’s hand in the tub to commingle the sperm and eggs, and the batch was placed into a special container. The egg and sperm process was continued by Damren for most of the early afternoon with much success.

“Good job, guys,” Damren turned and shouted to Richard Dill, Nels Kramer and Brian Campbell, Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife biologists who were seated in a small boat with Raven, Dill’s black Labrador, near the shore. The biologists had provided the fish for Damren’s project.

Damren and Lemay, both of Governor Hill Hatchery in Augusta, made the trek through a maze of Schoodic Lake camp roads to obtain the genetically good eggs of the lake trout population for brood stock. Damren believes the eggs will surpass the quality of lake trout eggs taken in previous years from other locations. The pair were piggybacking their efforts with a trap-netting project conducted by the Enfield-based biologists.

For Damren, the trap-netting allowed him his first access to the lake trout from Schoodic. Those fish he targeted were released back into the water after a brief recovery time and the fertilized eggs were taken to the hatchery, where they will be raised and later released into other lake trout waters.

More important, the trap-netting project at Schoodic Lake, a 7,168-acre, deep lake favored for its trophy fish, helps biologists monitor the condition of the fish to ensure that the trophy fishing experience continues for anglers.

“We’ve been monitoring Schoodic very closely for a number of years,” Kramer said. “It’s just basically to keep tabs to make sure that the smelt

population is robust, and we trap-net for the size and condition of lake trout.”

Because Schoodic is a high-priority lake, its management is fairly intensive, according to Kramer. Looking back over 20 years, Kramer said there have been challenges, but the primary one has been forage. When he began with the department 28 years ago, Schoodic was very smelt-deficient; thus the fish were not as robust and large as they could have been.

Setting out to improve the lake population, he said, biologists transferred smelt eggs to the lake, temporarily suspended salmon stocking and made regulation changes. Those moves contributed to an uptick in the smelt population and an improvement in the health and condition of the fish in the lake over the years.

In 1992, 7-year-old lake trout averaged 13½ inches; in 1996 they averaged 17 inches; and in 2008 they averaged 18 inches. The average today for lake trout is about 18 inches, Kramer said.

The salmon and brook trout population appears to be in good condition from the species found in the nets. The lake is stocked with 250 salmon each year. “The salmon actually look better than they did last year, and we’re encouraged by that — the salmon population seems to be growing well,” Kramer said.

The biologists believe the trend with lake trout, however, may have peaked and that there may be too many mouths in the lake for the forage. “It’s like setting the table for 12 people and every night 24 show up, and after a while people are going to start getting lean,” Kramer said. “We’re aware of how quickly these situations can change; that’s why we’re proactive.”

Although some large fish were taken from the trap nets to weigh and measure last month, Dill said it appeared the lake trout are getting smaller in length and weight and are not as robust, even though their average length is the same as last year.

“We just don’t like the trend that we’re seeing that the fish are getting smaller,” Dill said. Smaller lake trout tend to stockpile because anglers aren’t really interested in keeping a smaller legal lake trout when they have the possibility of catching a 25-inch fish, he noted. The biologists don’t want to see a repeat of the conditions in the 1980s, when there was not enough forage.

“We’re going to try to jump in a little early this time and remove some fish in the lake so there are less mouths to feed and more smelts to go around,” Dill said. “We don’t want to be in the situation where emergency action has to be taken to open up the fishery.”

More liberal regulations that take effect April 1, 2010, will allow anglers to take three lake trout more than 14 inches in length, only one of which may be over 23 inches, according to Kramer. That measure conserves larger lake trout for other anglers. In addition, a population of lake trout weighing 8-12 pounds acts as a control to keep the small lake trout in check because they will prey on smaller fish.

The current lake trout regulation is two fish more than 18 inches in length, only one of which may be over 23 inches.

“This is preventative maintenance; we’re trying to get ahead of things here before it gets out of control and we end up with a really bad stockpile of fish,” Dill said. “We’re trying to meet the desires of the angling community. We

know we can produce a fishery with better-size fish to encourage anglers. We see it as smart management of the lake.”