

NH's Wild Landlocked Salmon Fishery

In today's world of put and take fisheries a wild fishery is rare for Landlocked Salmon but there are some nice ones in NH and also in Maine. I have had some good experiences fishing wild Landlocks over the past years, and if your fishing style includes targeting landlock salmon plan some time on the wild NH lakes.

Let me set the scene for a wilderness fishery looks and feels like. You might say how could an active, somewhat developed area like Pittsburg NH be considered wild. Pittsburg is a town that sees a lot of visitors throughout the year, has plenty of good accommodations, good services, and good access to the lakes. The lakes in Pittsburg are part of the headwaters for the CT river and most surrounding land areas are in the Connecticut Lakes Nature Preserve or the Connecticut Lakes Wildlife Management Areas. However, of importance to us fishermen are the lands along the shores of the lake which are owned and managed by Great River Hydro LLC except for the Francis Lake which is surrounded by landowner Murphy Dam. I researched and found this owner information on the map application called OnXHunt. More later on what this ownership/control means to us fishermen.

When you think of a wilderness area you generally think of land forests mountains etc. but for the purpose of understanding our wild landlock fishery think of the water. More importantly think underwater. This water is fed by natural streams and springs. Colored like the tannin-colored inflow it makes for a water column rich in phytoplankton, smelt, nymphs and other bait that build strong healthy fish. Very little disturbance occurs on the surface and not much predation takes place. No pollutants flowing in either. No sprouting of invasive species and no litter. Few if any cabins along the shores. Great spawning habitat. Rewarding wilderness.

Today the CT lakes and Lake Francis are wild fisheries for landlock salmon. The salmon I caught this year were all wild fish. I classify wild fish as fish that were spawned hatched and grew in these lakes and

therefore can be called native fish. This fishery is doing well at this point. The last time these lakes were stocked with Landlocks was in 2014- 2015, I didn't pin down the exact date or numbers, but I did confer with the NH F&G biologist for region one, Andrew Schafermeyer.

Andy had this to say, "Lake Francis as well as First and Second Connecticut were stocked with Landlocked Salmon in May of 2021. Prior to this year, there had been a period of several years where they were not.....There was a period of time where targets (both numbers and size) were not being met and we had to prioritize which waterbodies got stocked.

Several factors including the availability of spawning habitat and natural reproduction allowed us to conclude that the Connecticut Lakes would be able to best withstand a few years without stocking. We were correct and, in the absence of stocking, a viable salmon fishery remained.

This year, most of our salmon production took place at the Nashua Federal Fish Hatchery (USFWS) and the numbers and size were appropriate to stock all of our salmon lakes including those in Pittsburg. For now, we are going to keep the stocking rate as-is and hope that the balance between stocked fish, wild fish, smelt numbers, and angler pressure all conform into a successful sport fishery.

I love it! Andy is right that these lakes are a successful sport fishery and that a viable fishery for Landlocked salmon, without stocking, not only remained but prospered! While the stocked salmon presence will increase in coming years, providing more angler action, there will still be an abundant natural spawning in place. These "wild" fish present a unique challenge to the fishermen as they fight with much vigor, have unique coloring and are very tasty indeed. You can tell when you have a wild salmon on the line. They all fight like big fish.

I am writing this month about a wild Salmon fishery to bring your attention to these jewels we have up north with hopes that we can have a positive impact over the years. Because this year, with the lower water levels in the CT lakes the fish habitat is going to be threatened. As I said the land around the lakes is owned by Great River Hydro LLC and I think the water flow is controlled by them. Because of low water levels, particularly at the generating station at Moore Dam they are planning to drain First and Second Lake down to just a river flow. UGH. Maybe Francis lake as well. How will Salmon access spawning streams? I have to believe that this will hurt the fishery, but I can't say for sure. What I can say for sure is that the using of pristine water from a pristine environment to create power does not fit well with me. I have 12 grandchildren and 8 Children (counting spouses) that see Pittsburg NH as a refuge from the everyday struggles of life in the 21st century. Most of them have been going to Pittsburg since they were babies, and they all fish these waters. Fishing has helped make them what they are today, and they are in part defined by time on the water in a boat trolling for salmon. This must be maintained for generations to come.

At this point I could say we should all get together and fight for this fishery but my experience in other waters around the country with these challenges shows these grass root efforts to be a slow and drawn-out battle. I think we should try another approach.

Chris Sununu, our governor is a friend and strong advocate for NH fishing. Set your red/blue politics aside and focus on his efforts for supporting our fishing in NH. Just recently he posted a video on his Facebook Page showing him standing in the Powder Mill Hatchery and talking about updating the facilities. Have you ever seen any leader of our state doing anything like this? I had breakfast with Chris last year and gave him a CeeDee Featherwing Streamer to

maybe jog his memory once in a while. Support the governors' efforts and let him know Pittsburg NH Lakes and this treasured water is important for the Salmon fishery. I have no doubt you will get his attention. Maybe he can help how water flow is managed. Let's not allow Great River Hydro LLC power generation to ruin this fishery. Fish it, Feel it, and support it. It is worth it.

BTW if you want to make a trip to Francis Lake this fall turn off the River road to the bridge over the CT river. You may be lucky and see Landlocked Salmon on their spawning run. A couple years ago I witnessed the river full of very big Landlocked Salmon and saw one landed about 5lbs. I have included a couple pictures here of Wild Landlocks caught this year on the CT Lakes and as a side note this will be my last article on Landlocked Salmon fishing this year but will be back with more good stories and fish pictures in the winter of '22.