

World Class Landlocked Salmon Fishery

With the results shared from this year's Winni Derby now is a good time to reflect on the Landlocked Salmon Fishery in Northern New England and especially NH.

First let me say the fishery is outstanding and the future is inspiring. These fish are healthy, strong and demonstrate their aggressive attack style when striking a trolled streamer. Whether you are fighting a 5 lb. trophy or a 16" two-year-old the exhilaration when they hit is almost the same. I still can't tell a 2.5 lb. fish from a 5 lb. fish when they hit and fight. They always seem bigger than they are.

This year's derby did not show a lot of salmon caught but those of us that frequent Winni did not expect huge numbers as we are aware that there were past issues at our F&G hatcheries due to things that are not easy if not impossible to control from time to time. But like always when faced with their never-ending challenges, the biologist and the team at NHF&G addressed these issues and have a new cooperative program in place with the Federal Fish hatchery in Nashua and the results are nothing less than awesome. I am getting ahead of myself, lets back up.

Maine, NH, Vermont, and NY are the states with the prime Landlocked Salmon Fisheries in the US with NH and Maine leading the way in numbers and quality of fish. Vermont has some good action on Champlain and NY is trying hard to get the finger lakes to produce more and better Landlocks and are looking to import more of the Sebago strain of salmon. Maine seems to be experimenting as they now have lakes they want anglers to take all the salmon they can. Before that it was take one. I put NH and Maine as pretty close but no doubt the edge goes to NH. And that is because of our stocking and hatchery program. That's right, in my opinion NH has the best landlocked fishery in the US. The main reasons...Lake Winnepesaukee, Big Squam Lake, Newfound Lake and the Connecticut lakes have very good salmon fisheries. My father used to say it is because the mineral content in these waters is so

conducive to the growth rate of cold-water species like salmon and rainbow smelt. “You can put a clothes pin on their lips, and they will still grow 4-5” a year” Chet would say.

Biologists manage their stocking programs based in part on the population of the rainbow smelt from year to year to balance the put, grow, and take fishery. While we all want big fish and lots of them all the time, experience teaches us that the smelt populations (preferred food for Landlocks) fluctuate year to year due to reasons beyond our control. This fluctuation impacts salmon size and quantity. For example, Winni does not have a lot of salmon right now but has a very strong smelt population. Big Squam has a good number of salmon but has a shrinking smelt population. So how do we as anglers help manage the fishery? First, we should consider methods and equipment we use to fish and next we should handle the netted salmon we catch and plan to release gently. Trolling with streamers is one of the safest and surest way to do the least amount of damage. In fact, after bringing the fish to the boat if you are not going to keep it give them some slack line and many times they will come off and swim away. Let me emphasize about the “take” part of a put and take fishery. In the heyday of trolling Winni most every angler took their two fish home. This helped manage the fishery. I think less of that happens today and that is not so good. Last week fishing Squam I took home two 16” fish to eat. Very good eating. Right now, biologists want anglers to take these 16-17” salmon at Squam to reduce the pressure on the smelt population. Makes sense. It also makes sense that if you have deep hooked a salmon or it is bleeding because you cannot get the hooks out easy then don’t release it. In short keep what you can use.

Back to the stocking program. The biologist in charge of the landlocked salmon rearing in Nashua is really in tune with raising our salmon. A few weeks ago, Adam and I visited the hatchery, and he explained his system. He has learned that these salmon are so aggressive, “the most aggressive fish I have raised” and they need more room to grow. This is from a biologist that raises 100,000 Atlantic Salmon a year calling our Landlocks the most aggressive. He has started grading and separating the

salmon by size to maximize growth. He has over 70,000 fry in a separate building and is very focused on making these fish his pet project. This week NHF&G stocked 24,000 landlocked in Winni that were 6-10" already. Amazing. They were growing so well a couple weeks earlier he had to stock 6,000 because tanks were getting too full. These fish are doing so good that the day after stocking people were catching them. Talk about aggressive fish. Hitting a trolled streamer, the second day in the lake! The coming years are going to be outstanding fishing as these fish mature and grow. And grow they do in our NH lakes. Our lakes support these special fish, and we can expect some great action for many years to come. I am as excited about the prospects of big Landlocks as I have been in 50 years trolling these lakes. About ten years ago we saw many 7-8 salmon caught even some 9's and I know of one over 10. There are even a few secret lakes that produce 10-11 lb. salmon every year. All from the outstanding F&G program we have had for years. And now with the new tool and the renewed focus they have in Nashua we can expect phenomenal catches and great action in the coming years.

So, there weren't a lot of salmon caught in the Winni Derby but there were enough. The fishing was outstanding, great weather, great time with all the boats fishing with the same focus. Sunrises over the lake like you could not believe. The fish we caught gave a great fight, we almost made it on the big board one day. In my opinion the Winni Derby contributes to this great fishery because it embellishes the reason we troll for salmon. It puts us on the water for three days in a row, full of hope and anticipation. Dreams of the big boy in the net.

And while a river may not run through it, my spirit does.