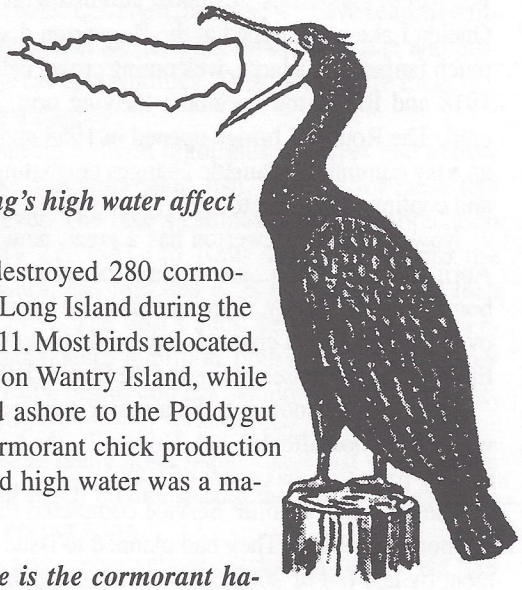
The Oneida Lake Bulletin

Spring/Summer 2001

Oneida Lake's Cormorants... More Questions, More Answers

by Jack Henke



One year ago, the *Bulletin* printed a question-answer article that explained details about our lake's cormorant problem.

More questions have arisen. Using the same format, we will try to address them.

The Cornell Field Station has provided us with data for this article. The opinions expressed in the article are the OLA's.

Q ***How many fish did cormorants eat last year?***

The birds consumed about 67,100 walleyes, 290,300 perch, and 122,900 other fish such as sunfish, smallmouth bass, emerald shiners, and rock bass.

Q ***How much can a cormorant eat in one day?***

Adults ingest around a pound of fish every day. Chicks consume about three-quarters of a pound.

Q ***Do you know the weight of the fish that cormorants removed from Oneida Lake during the past few years?***

In 1998, the birds took 99,207 pounds of our lake's fish. In 1999, they ate 93,926 pounds and, last year, they dined on 104,498 pounds. All totaled, that amounts to nearly 150 tons of Oneida Lake fish that cormorants destroyed in a short time period.

Q ***How big were these fish?***

Not very. Few were adult fish – what we'd call "keepers." Cormorants prefer smaller ones – they're easier to swallow. Take, for example, the 67,100 walleyes the birds got last year. About 35,000 of these were yearling fish and 25,000 were two year olds. These walleyes would range from about 7-13 inches long.

Q ***Would these walleyes have lived to become adults?***

More than likely. After a walleye reaches 7-8 inches in length, cormorants are its primary enemy. Very few other fish bother it. Thus, you can see that the birds ate 60,000 walleyes that would probably have grown to adult size.

When you consider that our lake's estimated walleye population last year was only 223,000, a loss of 60,000 fish becomes very significant.

Q ***Did last spring's high water affect cormorants?***

Flooding destroyed 280 cormorant nests on Long Island during the week of May 11. Most birds relocated. Some nested on Wantry Island, while others moved ashore to the Poddygut Bay area. Cormorant chick production was down and high water was a major cause.

Q ***How effective is the cormorant harassment program?***

It reduces the birds' fish take by about a third. Note this example. Let's say that Cornell predicts that the walleyes born in Oneida Lake last year will, under ideal conditions, eventually contribute 100,000 adult fish to the lake.

If cormorants' predatation is totally unchecked, the birds will eat about 67,000 (two-thirds) of those 100,000 walleyes. Even with the harassment program, the birds will take about 33,000 (one third).

Q ***Will the 18 inch size limit help restore walleye populations?***

When you couple this restriction with cormorant harassment, you get a situation that should build up the population to over 280,000 by 2003. Without the 18 inch limit, the walleye population will probably decline. Let's hope that everyone respects this new regulation.

Imagine, however, the effects of the 18 inch limit coupled with cormorant removal from Oneida Lake. Walleye numbers should jump.

Q ***Is there long-term hope for our lake's walleyes?***

Yes. Cornell Field Station's annual report contained, for the second year in a row, this statement: "Because zooplankton production has not declined (in Oneida Lake) and invertebrates have increased, there is currently no reason to believe that walleyes cannot be restored to historic levels."

Remember - cormorants are protected - don't harass them.

President's Message

Exciting events have occurred in the Brewerton area for decades. In 1909 the Sagamore, 122 feet of glamorous steamboat jammed with several hundred passengers, puffed around Oneida Lake and stopped at the Brewerton docks. The vessel's arrival was heralded with much fanfare and a large, welcoming crowd celebrated the day. The Barge Canal opened in 1918 and Brewerton became a thriving port, often filled with tugs, barges, and related craft. The Route 81 bridge opened in 1958 and, suddenly, Brewerton to Syracuse became an easy commute. Dramatic changes emanating from this linkage transformed the village and continue to alter it today.

Now, in 2001, Brewerton has a great, new public fishing access site. Opening day is April 24th, at 10 a.m., just in time for spring bullheading and panfishing. Attend the ribbon-cutting ceremony, if you can. The site is handicapped-accessible. It boasts a neat bridge over the circulation channel and ample parking. The Departments of Transportation and Environmental Conservation, and the Oneida Lake Association, all contributed to this project.

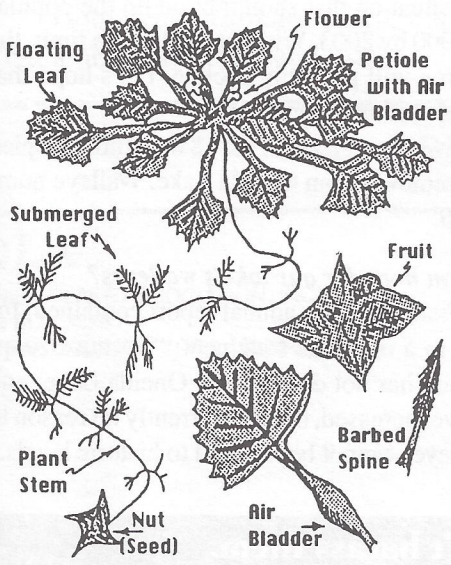
Cormorants continue to be a major concern of Oneida Lake sportspersons. The birds will return soon after ice-out. Hopefully, the harassment program will limit the number of nesting pairs to a maximum of 100.

The Fish and Wildlife Service completed their scoping sessions, which dealt with the cormorant problem. They had planned to issue a preliminary environmental impact statement by late fall of 2000. This did not happen. Now, other timetables have been set. The OLA hopes that this statement will be published soon, so that the remainder of the process of developing a nationwide cormorant population control program can proceed.

We will continue to pressure the appropriate authorities with our concerns. Effective cormorant control is a top OLA priority.

The threat of water chestnut proliferation remains. In 1999, the first year that this invasive, exotic plant was observed in the lake (near Brewerton), the OLA arranged for two "cuttings." The Association will continue, with the help of Oswego County Soil and Water Conservation Service, to monitor the water chestnut situation. We have arranged for at least one harvest in 2001.

The rest is up to you. All users of our lake must do their part. If you discover some of these plants, remove them by pulling the entire plant out by its roots. Then compost the plant, or let it dry in the sun, well away from the water. In some cases, it may be necessary to mobilize a task force to manually clear an area. When you can, get involved. Help your lake.



Water Chestnut

If you discover a large patch of chestnuts, notify the OLA at 315-668-9276 or the Oswego County Soil and Water Conservation Service at 315-592-9663. The Service will have a booth at our annual meeting on April 25.

I look forward to seeing you at the meeting.

William Shriever
President - Oneida Lake Association

The Oneida Lake Association Inc.

Founded in 1945

The Bulletin is published by the Oneida Lake Association, Inc., that its members may be informed regarding the activities of the Association. The Oneida Lake Association, Inc., was organized in 1945 to restore and preserve the natural resources of Oneida Lake and its environs.

New OLA Questionnaire

The OLA will be distributing a brief questionnaire at our annual meeting on April 25 at Cicero-North Syracuse High School. This survey inquires about your recreational interests, the lake issues that concern you, and your e-mail data. The forms take only a few moments to complete. We hope that you will take this time at the meeting and help your OLA serve you better.

The OLA in the New Millennium

by Chuck Abate

When, several decades ago, Bob Dylan wrote, "These times, they are a-changin,'" he surely had no idea of the tremendous impact that technology would play in the lives of average Americans. In fact, personal computers did not even exist when Dylan sang about changing times. Today, it is almost unimaginable that we could get through a normal work day without our PC's, answering machines, voice mail, faxes, e-mail, and the Internet.

What is true for the average American is doubly true for the Oneida Lake Association. When the OLA began it was, essentially, a group of anglers dedicated to the protection of Oneida Lake and its environs. Although the OLA remains an organization composed primarily of individuals who value and utilize the lake's plentiful recreational resources, the Association's Board of Directors has become aware of the need to keep pace with 21st century technology if we are to remain as productive and efficient an advocate as possible.

The Board has long attempted to recruit a well-balanced group of directors, with skills ranging from fishing, biology, aquaculture, business, research-writing, law, and politics. Recently, the Board added "computer technology" to that list. Consequently, the Board recognized the need to make effective use of high-tech equipment. Within the past two years, for example, the OLA Board has implemented the following:

- an award-winning OLA website (web.a-znet.com/ola), which has drawn over 11,000 visitors in the past two years.
- a fax/voice-mail machine (315-668-9276), enabling OLA members to express their concerns, recommendations, and kudos directly to the Board.
- a desktop computer, printer, scanner, and digital camera, that allow us to communicate more effectively with our membership and with government officials. This system also lets us better manage our membership database, and to publicize our events and activities through hard-copy and electronic means.

In the near future, the Board plans to:

- establish a periodic Oneida Lake e-mail newsletter to keep our membership informed of issues of immediate interest. These issues include those that are difficult to address in a timely manner with either our website or the *Bulletin*. Breaking news about the Fish and Wildlife Service's cormorant report or data about our fishing derby could be included here.
- implement, if interest warrants it, a secure website page for our people to renew their memberships immediately and electronically, by using a credit card.
- revamp and overhaul computerized membership and mailing lists, in order to minimize mailing errors and streamline operations.

The OLA Board recognizes its indebtedness to all of you - the membership - for the support you give us, and for the love of Oneida Lake that we share. The Directors continually work, to the best of their ability, for the lake's well-being. To whatever extent that commitment requires utilizing emerging 21st century technology, the OLA is prepared to change, for the betterment of all.

Editorial

This paper includes the customary spring articles – writings about lake issues, Association activities, and the like. Different, however, are two feature stories – one about white perch and the other about bass. Different, because we have seldom written about them. These fish are thriving in Oneida Lake and provide anglers with great opportunities. Thus, we feature them.

And therein lies a tragedy.

Normally, our spring bulletin highlights walleyes and yellow perch, Oneida Lake's premier sport fish. Angling for these fish has changed, however. The lake's estimated walleye population for 2000 was only 223,000 and New York State, with the Association's blessing, has imposed a "3 fish per day, 18 inch minimum length" limit. The lake's adult yellow perch numbers hover between 900,000 and 1.4 million, both figures being below historic levels. Already, discussion has centered on reducing harvest restrictions from the current 50 perch per day to 25 fish.

Granted, there were many good fishing days last year, but the overall walleye and perch picture during the past few years has been anything but encouraging.

Young walleyes and young yellow perch aren't surviving like they once did. Zebra mussels have made the lake's waters clearer and this makes young fish more vulnerable. Zebra mussels are probably here to stay. If water clarity is a major cause of lower walleye and perch survival rates, it is a cause that lies beyond our control.

Thousands of young walleyes and yellow perch, however, survive the clear water gauntlet and the predatory fish that thrive there. They survive – only to become food for the lake's double crested cormorants. The birds have, in some years, eaten over 100,000 walleyes and over 500,000 perch. Total walleye and perch losses in Oneida Lake for the past decade run into the millions.

Cornell's projections clearly show that, if cormorants were removed, Oneida Lake's walleye and perch numbers would grow substantially. The birds are obviously a major cause of our lake's depleted sport fish populations. But, unlike water clarity, cormmorants are a cause that we can control.

The Federal Government's Bureau of Fish and Wildlife will soon be making a crucial decision regarding the cormorant issue. A Bureau committee will issue an Environmental Impact Statement that may recommend a course of action.

The Association urges the Bureau to endorse appropriate cormorant population reductions in any area of the country where the birds have engendered ecological and economic harm. We believe that the birds' removal will restore fish populations to their proper levels which will, in turn, boost the nation's economy.

Oneida Lake was formerly known as one of the premier walleye and yellow perch lakes in the United States. Cormorants have played a major role in eliminating that distinction.

It's time that Bureau of Fish and Wildlife realizes that this feathered pestilence must be controlled.

The OLA Fishing Corner

Walleyes Were There...Were You?

by Captain Tony Buffa

Just when many thought the fishing was about as bad as it could ever get, Oneida Lake's walleye angling took a turn for the better throughout the "Y2K" season. I never expected walleye fishing to be so good, particularly during May, June, and July of 2000.

Was this an aberration...the "last hurrah" before the collapse? Were the walleyes on a mission of self-destruction? Or, did we become master anglers, so gifted at our craft that walleyes found our presentations irresistible?

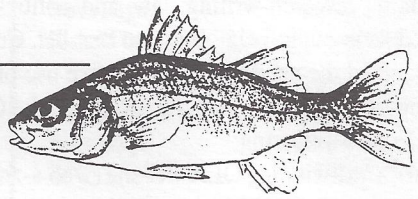
I don't think so. Speculate if you will but, in my unscientific opinion, I contend that the science of predicting our lake's walleye populations, a method that was so effective during the 70's and 80's, is invalid today. Improved water clarity and increased weed density are two significant changes that were of minimal, or no, significance two decades ago. Researchers are only now adjusting their sampling techniques and statistical formulas to include these new variables.

But don't expect miracles overnight. This collection of new information will be the beginning of a database that could provide a reliable standard for predicting future walleye populations.

The question becomes – "Who knows Oneida Lake's true walleye population?" Perhaps there are more fish than were predicted. Perhaps there aren't. An answer is forthcoming.

In the meantime, I suggest the following. Urge the DEC to stock as many walleye fingerlings as possible in Oneida Lake. Do this by attending the annual meeting. Show them what OLA solidarity means.

Don't give up on the lake that has treated you so well over the years. Adjust your expectations. Remain vigilant. Obey the new walleye regulations and support the OLA as we try, together, to restore and improve a beautifully rich fishery.



"Whites" – the Other Oneida Lake Perch

by John Forney et al.

White perch are extremely common in Oneida Lake. They school in large numbers, bite aggressively, fight like holy terrors, are subject to no size or creel limits, and taste great. Not a bad resume - especially for a fish which, surprisingly, many anglers disdain.

White perch are the lake's only panfish that can live in fresh or salt water. They first appeared in Central New York in the late 1940's, invading through the Barge Canal system.

Oneida Lake's white perch population has fluctuated widely over the past fifty years. The fish's initial population boom in the 1950's was followed by a decline in the 60's. Several successful hatches in the late 1970's and early 1980's propelled numbers to a record by 1985. Just as it appeared that white perch might surpass yellow perch in abundance, their population collapsed. Dead white perch littered the lake's surface in the springs of 1987 and 1988, but the exact cause of their mortality was never determined. One theory held that unusually hot spring temperatures triggered stress in the fish during spawning. Another said that a pathogen infected and killed the perch.

In subsequent years, white perch numbers gradually increased. Successful hatches occurred in 1995, 1997, and 1998. The population is now poised to reach a new peak and it is again approaching the lake's yellow perch total.

Whites feed mostly on zooplankton, midge larvae, and fresh water shrimp, and compete with yellow perch for these items. Abundance of whites in the past have not, however, had a measurable effect on yellow perch growth.

White perch spawn from late May through August, mostly on the lake's shoals. Some spawning occurs in the lower realms of Chittenango, Fish, and Oneida Creeks. A single female may emit from 30,000 to 300,000 eggs, depending on her size. These eggs hatch in 3-5 days. Larvae grow rapidly and young perch reach a length of 2.5 to 4 inches by fall.

How do you catch white perch? The fish love garden worms, bits of nightcrawlers, and small twister jigs (white and yellow are effective colors). Light and medium action rods work best and lend a sporting touch to white perch angling. Four and six pound test lines, tipped with #6 hooks and split shots, are fine. Once you locate a school, be ready for some incredibly fast action.

Where can you find Oneida Lake's whites? After ice-out, Oneida Creek's mouth and the Barge Canal at Sylvan Beach are proven hot spots. Cornell biologists have netted many whites on the lake's shoals in July and August and recommend that anglers try virtually any shoal that has about 8 to 15 feet depths. The biologists have been particularly successful netting the Dakin Shoals area. Yellow perch anglers often find huge schools of whites feeding off Sylvan and Verona Beaches in August and early September.

White perch fillets are delicious, but require finesseful preparation. When skinning the fillet, keep your knife blade angled slightly above the skin. It should never touch the skin. This technique removes most of the fish's darker, less tasty flesh. Also, you'll find a strip of fat along the filet's upper (dorsal) side. Remove it - it tears off easily. Cook the fillets as you would walleyes or yellow perch and be prepared for a gourmet delight.

Annual Meeting at Cicero-North Syracuse High School - April 25, 2001

by Tony Buffa

On Wednesday, April 25, the Cicero-North Syracuse High School Auditorium will host the OLA's 56th annual meeting. Doors open at 6 p.m. Early attendance is encouraged so that you can enjoy our numerous exhibits.

You can register for the Cicero Lions' Club's Walleye Derby at the meeting. Bonus money prizes for derby winners who are OLA members will be given – for the 10th straight year! Association membership renewals and new sign-ups begin at 6:15 p.m. You don't have to belong to the OLA, however, to attend the meeting.

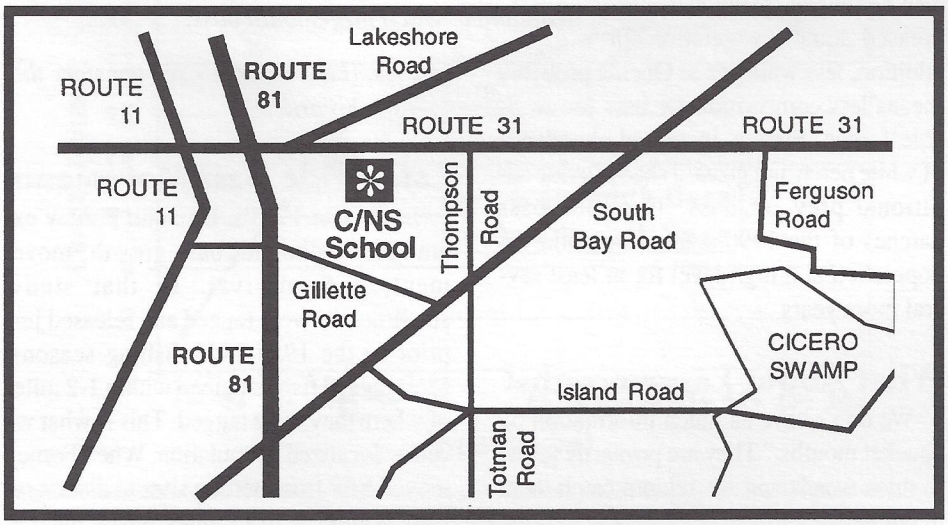
This year's event will begin with a short business session at 7 p.m. Our theme is *Oneida Lake - Fingerlings and Enforcement.* Officials from the DEC and Cornell's Shackelton Point Field Station will update topics such as our fishery's status, spawning data from the hatchery, and the cormorant harassment program's results.

DEC personnel will inform us about the details of more regular enforcement of Oneida Lake's new walleye restrictions. In conjunction with this point, they will address the issue of stocking walleye fingerlings in our lake. This is one plan for attacking the problem of a declining adult walleye population. This year's meeting is a *must* to attend for all who are interested in the future of Oneida Lake's invaluable walleye fishery.

The Association will award its prestigious "Conservationist of the Year" award at the meeting.

The assembly will close with a distribution of door prizes and drawings for three Lowrance GlobalMap 100 GPS units. One winner will be chosen from our membership at large, and the other two from persons who attend the meeting.

We encourage you to join us for an evening of information and OLA solidarity. Please – mark your calendars – April 25 – CNS – 6 p.m. – OLA!



Directions to C-NS High School

Route 31, Cicero

From the Thruway

Take the Thruway to Route 81. Take Route 81 north to the Cicero exit. Turn right onto Route 31. The school is about 1/2 mile away on the right.

From the East

Simply get to Route 31. Follow it west. The high school will be on the left just before you enter Cicero village.

From the West

Get to Route 31, to Cicero village, continue east under Route 81's overpass, and the high school will be on the right, about 1/2 mile away.

Nominating Petitions

Under the OLA bylaws, members may nominate officers and directors. A petition, that is to be signed by at least fifty (50) OLA members in good standing, must state the name of a member or members the petitioners wish to nominate as officer or director. The petition must be served on any present OLA officer no later than three (3) days before the Annual Meeting. It will be mandatory that the names on any such petition be placed on the OLA Nominating Committee list with the persons nominated by the committee, all in alphabetical order, for election at the Annual Meeting.

The OLA Secretary will make the membership list available for inspection by an OLA active member on request.

The slate of officers nominated for 2001 are: President - Thomas Pierce, Vice President - Bill Shriever, Vice President - Kurt Snyder, Vice President - Charles Engel, Secretary - Thomas Giufre, Assistant Secretary - Robert Gang, and Treasurer - Edward Olmstead.

The directors nominated for terms beginning this year are Steve Rogers, Richard Percival, Parker J. Stone, Marshall O. Naumann, and David Reed.

Oneida Lake's Booming Bass Populations

Largemouth and Smallmouth Numbers Soar

by Thomas Brooking, J. Randy Jackson, and Anthony VanDeValk, Cornell Field Station

Introduction

Many walleye and perch anglers have discovered the excitement of hearing their reels' drags scream when a smallmouth bass hooks up and streaks for mid-lake. Often, the fish rockets from the water in a body-shaking leap, creating the ultimate Oneida Lake anglers' adrenaline rush. Smallmouths inhabit the lake's rocky shoals and also live in shoreline areas that have both rocks and weeds. Their largemouth cousins prefer dense, weedy locales, often with softer bottoms. Bays and marinas provide ideal habitat for the latter bass. Large numbers of both bass thrive in our lake, creating superb angling opportunities.

In recent years, when walleye and perch numbers have tumbled, bass have become a more popular quarry. Smallmouths, or "bronze-backs" in the vernacular, and largemouths, are Oneida's third most pursued species. Data recorded by the Cornell Creel Survey of 1997-98 and by the Angler Diary Program from 1994-99, clearly show this.

Smallmouths Abound

We estimated smallmouth bass abundance from the catch of adult bass in our gillnets. The Field Station has used these standard nets since 1958. We set the nets at 15 sites around the lake during the summer. The smallmouth bass catch in our nets has increased substantially since the mid-1980's. The number of smallmouths we netted in 2000 was nearly three times the amount we captured in 1985!

This increase agrees with a similar rise in the number of young smallmouths that hatched in late spring. We catch the young each summer in our trawl nets. These nets are towed, along the bottom, at 10 sites every week. You may have seen our large, red trawling boat with "Cornell" printed on the side. The catch of young bass has jumped since the mid-1980's. For example, the 1994 hatch was 3.8 times larger than the largest hatch recorded from 1958 to 1990! This is excellent news for bass anglers and indicates that the smallmouth population is thriving. Changes during the last decade, such as the zebra mussel invasion and reduced phosphorus levels, have not negatively affected bass.

We can only speculate on why smallmouth numbers have increased. Bass are a "sight feeding predator" and Oneida's clearer water helps them find prey. Historically, smallmouths are known for inhabiting clear, pristine lakes. Smallmouths may also be helped by the lake's increased aquatic vegetation. In addition, less walleyes in Oneida probably means less competition for bass for available forage. Finally, increased abundance of white perch and gizzard shad provide additional prey for bass. The good bass hatches of the 1990's should sustain the population at a high level for at least several more years.

Carly Bloom, an intern at Cornell University, gets acquainted with a largemouth bass.

What About Largemouths?

We don't have as much information on "bucket mouths." They are primarily found in thick weeds and we seldom catch them in our nets.

We remedied our data drought by attending several bass club fishing tournaments during August of 2000. We collected age and growth data on a few of the largemouth bass. We checked 70 largemouths at the South Shore Boat Launch and 46 at the Oneida Shores County Park. Fish were weighed and measured. Scale samples, used to age fish, were also collected.

Anglers caught a lot of big bass. Out of the 116 largemouths we checked, 44 weighed over 3 pounds. Four of these tipped the scales at over 5 pounds! There are obviously some lunker largemouths living in Oneida. *(Editor's note - see the story that follows this article).*

Lake-Wide Bass Movements

In the late 1950's, Dr. John Forney examined smallmouth bass growth, movement, and survival. In that study, smallmouths were tagged and released just prior to the 1954-1958 fishing seasons. Most tagged fish remained within 1-2 miles of where they were tagged. This is what we call a "localized" population. When Forney moved bass from netting sites to distant release points (up to 15 miles away), the majority of the fish returned to their home areas. Little movement of fish occurred between bass tagged at Constantia and Shackelton Shoals, although these places are separated by only 3 miles. Forney also found that from 5-21% of the lake's bass were caught by anglers yearly. Later, he discovered that most young bass fingerlings were produced in years with the warmest June air temperatures. Bass growth was greatest in years that boasted good hatches of yellow perch.

(Continued on next page)

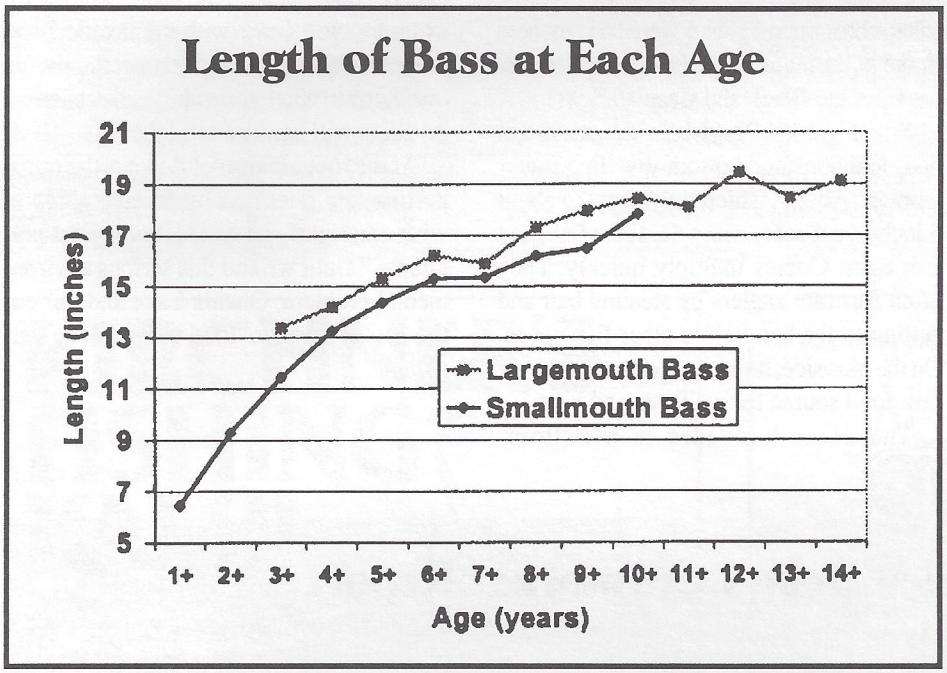
How Fast Do Bass Grow?

A fish's age can be determined by examining scales under a microscope. Many fish have growth rings on their scales, similar to rings in a tree, though not as clear. We can determine how many winters a fish has lived through by counting these rings.

The chart below shows how long the average Oneida Lake smallmouth and largemouth bass are after each growing season. For example, a 2 1/2 year old smallmouth is, generally, about 9 inches long. A largemouth that is 18 1/2 inches long is probably 11 1/2 years old! Smallmouths grow a little slower than largemouths. Any smallmouth from Oneida that exceeds 16 inches is at least 8 years old.

Many Oneida Lake bass live more than 10 years and the largest ones live more than 14! Smallmouths are growing faster now than they did in the past. Fingerling bass are larger at the end of their first summer, and the growth rate of young adults has increased in the past 5-10 years, compared to bass that lived from the 1950's to the 1980's.

These changes are probably due to some of the larger changes in the lake. Again, increases in water clarity, abundance of weeds, and more available forage probably benefit bass.



A Bass's Preferred Menu

Stomach analyses of adult smallmouth bass revealed that the most commonly ingested items were crayfish (47% of diet items), small fish and minnows (41%), and aquatic insects (13%). Fingerling smallmouths eat mostly insects, plankton, and some minnows. Adult largemouth bass consume primarily smaller fish. They dine on whatever forage species is most readily available. They are opportunistic feeders, however, and also gorge on insects, invertebrates, amphibians, and even bite-size mammals.

Where Are the Bass?

Try any stone-bottomed area of the lake for smallmouths and the shallow, weedy, mud-floored bays for largemouths. Marinas and their adjoining waters are also good largemouth spots. Shallow, rocky reefs, surrounded by deeper water, are particularly good areas for smallmouths.

The bait and tackle shops near the lake are libraries of fishing knowledge and can hook anglers up with the latest in lures, baits, and tackle options that appeal to Oneida Lake's booming bass population.

Yes, the Bass Are Big

by Evelyn Minsterman

Editor's note - We received this story at about the same time that the Cornell bass article arrived. The coincidence could not have been better.

July 8, 2000, was a beautiful, sunny Saturday morning, one of those days when fishing takes priority.

I was fishing off our dock, just killing time until my husband got ready to take a ride to get some bait. We were almost out of worms and, after a few minutes, all I had left on my hook was a slivered remnant of a nightcrawler.

Instead of rebaiting, I walked to the other end of the dock and made a cast. The water there is, maximum, three feet deep. I was using an older Shakespeare outfit and had a bobber on my line to drift the worm off the bottom.

As soon as the bobber settled, it disappeared, moving steadily away from our dock. I set the hook and held fast to the largest fish I had ever hooked! All I could think of was, "What do I do now?" I knew that I couldn't walk the fish to the other end of the dock, where the net was propped up. It would wrap my line around the dock's poles. I even thought of jumping in and playing the fish in the water!

Fortunately, my husband walked out of our house to tell me about a telephone call. I screamed, "Get a net!" He dashed down to the water and, in his haste, nearly fell off the dock.

By then, some neighbors had gathered to watch the show. People speculated about what the fish was. My husband thought it had to be a carp. One neighbor said that only a sheepshead could fight that way. Then, the fish broke water and reality set in.

It was a largemouth bass. It was 22 inches long, had a 14 inch girth, and weighed 10 pounds 2 ounces. Later, I learned that the fish was a *big* largemouth for any lake.

Oneida Lake's "Invasional Meltdown"

by Edward L. Mills, Cornell Biological Field Station

"Invasional meltdown," despite its cosmic implications, is a simple phrase that refers to food web and habitat changes caused by organisms that have come from other locales and "invaded" an ecosystem. "Meltdown" refers to changes and "invasional" to the new organisms. After one animal enters an environment, it's often easier for others to follow, paving the way for even more alterations.

Zebra mussels sparked Oneida Lake's "invasional meltdown" when they arrived in the early 1990's. The most obvious mussel-linked habitat change is the lake's increased water clarity. Light penetrates to much greater depths in the formerly turbid Oneida and this has triggered more changes. Aquatic plants now flourish at greater depths and the amount of plants in the lake has increased.

In addition, clearer water conditions now allow predators easier access to their prey. Cormorants, for example, undoubtedly have more success feeding on larger walleyes and perch. An increased mortality of walleye and perch larvae (newly hatched fish) may be linked to improved water clarity. These little fish, that live in the lake's deeper, off-shore areas, no longer enjoy the protection that algae-rich, greenish water affords. Adult walleyes, white perch, and even buckeye minnows prey on the larvae. In contrast, fish that live in the lake's weed-choked shallows, such as smallmouth and largemouth bass have experienced population increases because the aquatic vegetation protects their young.

Zebra mussels have created prime habitat for two other invaders that are, so to speak, knocking on Oneida Lake's door. The first is the "round gobie," whose most recent sighting was in the Barge Canal near Rochester. This occurred in October, 2000. Like zebras, round gobies were brought here in the ballast tanks of ocean-going freighters from the Black and Caspian Seas.

Small gobies flourish in aquatic plant beds and consume bottom-dwelling invertebrates. Adults, which only grow to about 5 inches, eat zebra mussels, some fish, and fish eggs. Gobies multiply quickly. They often frustrate anglers by stealing bait and getting to the bait before other fish arrive. On the plus side, however, gobies will likely be a food source for walleyes and bass.

The second invader is a bottom-dwelling invertebrate that resembles our freshwater shrimp. This aquatic creature, which also originated in Eurasian waters, has recently been found in southern and eastern Lake Ontario. It feeds on zebra mussels' wastes and aggressively out-competes native shallow water shrimp populations. Expect this invader to enter Oneida Lake shortly.

Oneida Lake's invasional meltdown is here. Zebra mussels and the changes they engendered are facts of the lake's biology. New organisms are poised to enter Oneida. We must realize that what we call "co-evolved organisms" (parasites of gobies, for example) will come with the invaders and will contribute to ecological uncertainty. No one knows what secondary effects these invaders will have on our lake.

At the root of this meltdown is the transporting and releasing by foreign ships of what can rightly be called "biological pollutants." Until we end this serious environmental problem, Oneida Lake and our entire nation's waters' food webs will be vulnerable.

Fish and Wildlife Service Delays Cormorant Report

by Jack Henke

We wrote in last summer's Bulletin that the Bureau of Fish and Wildlife would publish its official Environmental Impact Statement ("EIS," in the Bureau's terms) on double crested cormorants late last fall.

We were wrong. That report has, to our dismay and disappointment, been delayed. The new timetable for producing an EIS goes like this.

On April 2, 2001, a committee will meet in Washington to discuss cormorant control alternatives and write an EIS. These alternatives range from keeping the status quo to allowing hunting seasons. The committee will recommend a "preferred alternative" in the EIS.

A draft of the EIS will be submitted to the Assistant Director of the Migratory Birds and State Programs Office. Once approved there, the draft is sent to the Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Copies of the Environmental Impact Statement will be made available. There will then be a 60 - 90 day "comment period" during which time the Bureau will hold a series of reaction-gathering hearings around the nation. One hearing will convene in Upstate New York.

After recording input at these hearings, the committee on cormorants will reconvene and, possibly, revise the EIS. The report will again be submitted to the Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service for final approval.

The earliest possible date for any change in the Bureau's current policy is the winter of 2002.

Oneida Fish Cultural Station Report

by Richard Colesante and Mark Babenzien

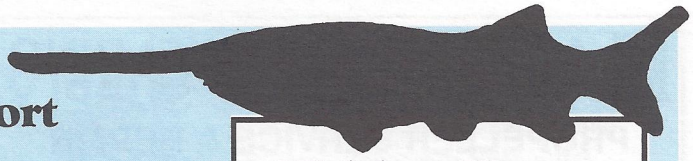
Preparation has been intense at the station – our trap nets are repaired and ready. All we need is for spring to arrive. We are looking forward to a good walleye run in 2001.

Last year's run was great. Lots of walleyes swam into the Constantia area. We netted around 30,000 fish and they were in superb condition. We had no trouble stripping the required amount of eggs from the females.

In 1999, however, the opposite occurred. Unusual spring conditions contributed to a limited egg take from a reduced number of netted walleyes. Our hatchery functions best during what folks call a "normal" spring, with a late March to early April ice out, coupled with gradually moderating temperatures. We have, though, learned to deal with just about anything that mother nature delivers.

Our stocking program has four goals this year. We want to raise and release 150 to 200 million walleye fry, primarily in Oneida Lake. In addition, we hope to nurture 200 to 300,000 advanced walleye fingerlings (about 2 to 3 inches long). In our fish restoration agenda, we would like to produce 5,000 lake sturgeon and 500 paddlefish.

Our hatchery will be busy in April. The aquariums will be filled with a sampling of Oneida Lake's great variety of fish. You'll view some unusual specimens here! A knowledgeable, friendly staff and hatchery tour guides will answer your questions and show you our fine facility.



Visiting Hours

8a.m.-3:30 p.m. every day from April 1 until September 30

This is the optimum month for a visit. Watch the Syracuse newspapers for updates on our activities.

We culture walleyes, paddlefish, and sturgeon during the summer. We feed them brine shrimp and formulated diets. The techniques used to rear these fish are uniquely interesting. Our visiting hours are from 8:00 a.m. until 3:30 p.m., every day, from April 1 until September 30.

We hope to see you at the Station!

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