



Dan Germain  
Forestport, NY

# FISH STORIES

*—catching a state-record fish*

By Chris VanMaaren

Call it skill, luck, good karma, or a combination of all three, but for Dan Germain of Forestport, NY, it was the thrill of a lifetime when he landed his state-record brook trout—a whopping 22-inch, 5-pound, 8-ounce fish—from South Lake in Herkimer County on June 15<sup>th</sup> last year. While he'd been studying and fishing the lake for some time, hoping to catch a trophy fish, Dan will be the first to tell you that it takes perseverance when fishing for the big ones.

I met Dan the day he brought his fish to be verified. As a DEC regional biologist who specializes in brook trout management, I needed to confirm that the fish was indeed a brookie and not a splake (a cross between a brook trout and lake trout). So while I carefully examined the fish's digestive tract to make sure, Dan told me his story.

Dan began fishing South Lake nearly 20 years ago, just after DEC started stocking brook trout there. He knew that such a large, coldwater lake (with

a surface area of nearly 500 acres and maximum depth of 60 feet) had the potential to produce some lunker fish. Living nearby gave him the ability to fish the lake often, and he eventually became efficient at catching brook trout while other anglers struggled.

During our conversation, Dan shared some of his secrets for successfully catching large fish. And while I won't pass along all his tricks, here are a few tips on how anglers might increase their chances of catching trophy fish.



Julia Ketner, age 7, with her trophy chain pickerel.

## Tip #1—Know Your Target Species

If you want to catch an exceptional specimen of your favorite fish, then you can't rely on common knowledge. Do some research and reconnaissance to find out as much as you can. You can start with sporting magazines, but keep in mind that a lot of what gets published is still common advice that's been given over the years.

Dan suggests you find the answers to some key questions:

➤ *When does the species spawn and where do the fish congregate (stage) prior*

*to spawning?* Typically the biggest fish of a species are the females just prior to spawning. Understanding the timing and staging areas of spawning fish will allow you to locate big females prior to when the fishing season closes to protect them during spawning.

➤ *Do the larger specimens of your target species feed on something different than the main population?* Most fish, big or small, feed on whatever is most available, so know what prey species are available and when. Keep in mind, however, that a big fish may have gotten big because it feeds differently than other fish and thus has not been susceptible to the typical angling tactics.

➤ *What stimulates your fish's feeding?* Some fish key to smell, others key to color and motion. Could there be something else that triggers them to feed?

➤ *Is there a temperature or dissolved oxygen concentration that the fish prefers?* If so, locate and fish those areas.

## Tip #2—Pick a Water Body and Learn its Every Detail

Not all waters contain big fish, so you need to find those waters that have the right conditions to potentially grow a state record. While there are a myriad of factors to consider, there are three fundamental components a natural system needs to grow big fish: a good food supply free from excessive competition with other species; limited harvest of big fish; and basic genetics that enable a fish to live long and grow big.

For example, if brook trout are what you are looking for, then you might want to look for a large lake with a deep-water section as well as plenty of shallow warmer water to aid in developing a forage base (food supply). The deep-water section should mix seasonally (turnover) so that oxygen gets mixed throughout the depths, and the lake should have few competing fish species. Also, ideally the strain of brook trout that lives there would be one that lives longer, such as our New York

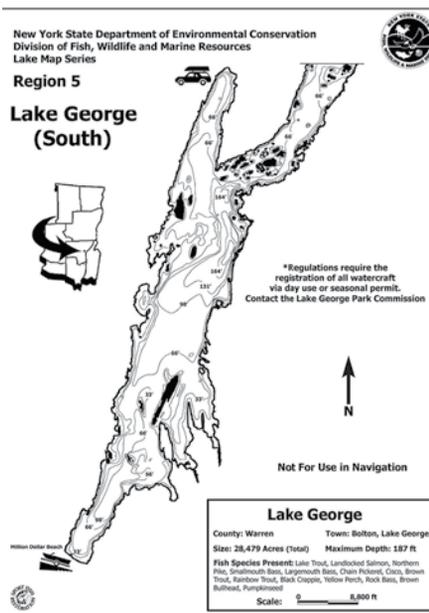


James Clayton

Choosing the right lure, bait or fly may help you catch a trophy fish.

heritage strains or a Canadian strain, and there would be some control mechanism to keep them from overpopulating (e.g., regulated angling harvest, a well-measured stocking rate, or some sort of natural predation). Finally, the water needs to be a place where you can catch fish. I know this seems obvious, but fish can be nearly impossible to catch when there is an abundance of structure or when there is so much forage that it becomes very difficult to get them to take a hook. So, as you can see from this example, many waters would not have the proper conditions to contain a catchable state record.

Once you locate the water you want to fish, you should map out its habitats and determine the depths where fish congregate. Modern fish/depth-finding sonar devices can be valuable tools in identifying hot spots, but I would caution not to rely too heavily on them. Lake contour maps like those found on the DEC website ([www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/9920.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/9920.html)) are great tools to mapping out prime habitat. In the end, the best method of learning a water is to do what Dan did: spend a great deal of time exploring its every corner and studying how it changes through the year.



Example of a contour map.



### Tip #3—Protect the Water

Once you have found a water to fish, it's important that you help keep the water system healthy. As a first step, be sure to follow the regulations listed in the *NY Fishing Regulations Guide*—season closures, size and creel limits, and prohibitions on the use of baitfish are all designed to protect the resource and optimize fishing quality. You should also protect waters by washing your boat and gear to get rid of any plant or animal hitchhikers, thereby helping to prevent the spread of invasive species. Finally, you can minimize the stress on fish you plan to release by using barbless hooks, and when possible, unhooking fish while they are still in the water.

### Tip #4—Mix it Up

The final bit of advice is to mix it up and try new tactics. Perhaps try some techniques that you might normally use when fishing for a different species. This can be especially appropriate in waters where you are not targeting the largest fish species living there. For example, lake trout could be the largest fish species in a lake where you are fishing for smallmouth bass, and

it would not be uncommon for the larger smallmouths to share the same water and target the same prey. By trying techniques to catch lake trout, you might catch that lunker bass you sought.

So next time you're out fishing, try some of Dan's tips. You may just hook a big fish. And if you are lucky enough to land that lunker, be sure to enter it into DEC's Angler Achievement Awards Program, because you never know, it just might be a state record.

To find out more about the Angler Achievement Awards Program, check out DEC's website at [www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/7727.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/7727.html).

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**Editor's note:** Just recently, William Altman caught a new state-record brook trout, surpassing Dan Germain's record by 6 ounces. Altman caught the 5-pound, 14-ounce brookie in the West Canada Wilderness Area in Hamilton County on May 5<sup>th</sup>. It's the seventh time in eight years that a new state-record brookie has been caught.