



Labor of Love

Fish stocking in New York.

By Eileen Stegemann

I remember the first time I helped stock fish. It was a bright, sunny day, unseasonably warm for late March in northern New York, and we had just driven to a lake in the middle of nowhere only to be greeted by a relatively large group of enthusiastic helpers and on-lookers. As expected, many of them were anglers, but quite a few were not. It turns out that fish stocking is cause for celebration, something many in the crowd had been anticipating for weeks.

An angler myself, I was excited to assist in adding fish to the local fish population. But I was fresh out of college and brand new to DEC, so when I spotted the crowd I felt a bit intimidated by the fact that most of the people here knew a lot more than I did about what we were going to do. In fact, a number of them had been helping DEC with stocking for nearly 20 years, making me all the more self-conscious of my “newbie” status as a fish and wildlife technician. But that didn’t matter. There was a great sense of camaraderie and excitement, and I was instantly put at ease.

As I carried buckets of fish down to the water’s edge—the stocking truck couldn’t get close enough for the hose to reach the water and so fish had to be hand-carried—I struck up conversations with my fellow stocking buddies. Some had been fishing the lake for many years and filled me in

on the status of the local fish populations, while others regaled me with stories of fish caught and fish lost. Still others simply said how much they enjoyed being part of putting fish in the lake. What struck me most was the knowledge and dedication shared by everyone I spoke with.

James Clayton



Sometimes fish have to be hand-carried from the stocking truck and then carefully poured into a stream or lake.



Susan L. Shafer

Stocking fish can be hard work—especially when you’re carrying pails full of fish and water down a somewhat steep embankment. At 23 years old, I was amazed at the stamina of some of the more “mature” helpers, and even more impressed by the people who did this for a living. The phrase I heard over and over again was, “it’s a labor of love.”

The following fall I went to the then newly built Salmon River Hatchery to take photos. My assignment was to document and familiarize myself with the hatchery operation, especially the spawning process. The adjacent river and hatchery raceway were literally choked with huge salmon all making their way upstream in a spawning run. I’d never seen such huge fish up close (many were more than two feet long), and it was fascinating to watch hatchery staff handle the large fish with apparent ease. They

New York State Conservationist, April 2011

collected eggs, mixed them with milt (fish sperm), and then kept them for what would be a future crop of fish.

When my work took me to Rome Hatchery, I got a closer look at the fish-raising process. As I toured the facility, I gained a greater appreciation for the scope and precision of the work. There were many troughs containing screened baskets full of trout eggs. Staff explained that these were incubators where



Susan L. Shafer

Hatchery staff collect and mix together eggs (left) and milt, or sperm (right), from adult fish to produce what will be a future crop of fish.



Susan L. Shafer



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New York's Fish Hatcheries

DEC operates 12 fish hatcheries across the state. All are open to the public from spring through fall, and several are open year-round.

Each hatchery specializes in raising one or more species of fish, including brook trout, brown trout, rainbow trout, lake trout, steelhead, chinook salmon, coho salmon, landlocked salmon, walleye, muskellunge, tiger muskellunge, lake sturgeon, paddlefish and round whitefish.

Together, DEC's hatcheries annually produce more than 200 million fish, weighing nearly 1,000,000 pounds.

Most fish are taken to stocking sites on specially equipped trucks. DEC stocking trucks annually log more than half a million miles. Some remote waters are stocked by airplane or helicopter.

To ensure the best survival of stocked fish, various life stages are stocked at different times of the year: fingerlings (young fish three to five inches long) are generally stocked in the fall; yearlings (older fish six to nine inches long) are stocked in the spring.

Check out DEC's website at www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/7742.html to see hatchery locations, available visiting times, and fish species present. For a list of stocked waters, check out www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/7739.html.

Huge salmon and trout make their way upstream and into the Salmon River Hatchery during their annual spawning runs.



fertilized eggs were kept aerated and carefully monitored as they developed and hatched. Workers used siphon hoses to remove any dead eggs. Outside there were young fish in cement raceways; many congregated near the end where an automatic feeder released fish food pellets. It reminded me of my fish tank at home, but on a much larger scale.

There's a lot to see and experience at a fish hatchery...

As I toured the facility, I also felt a connection to the history involved. Scanning some old photos displayed on the wall, hatchery staff proudly explained that the state has been raising and stocking fish since the early 1870s (Rome Hatchery itself was built in 1932). I marveled at the old images of horse-drawn wagons carrying large metal milk jugs filled with fish, and DEC staff with these same milk jugs strapped to their backs on their way into a pond. Now *there* was a dedicated bunch, I thought.

Looking back, I recall how much I enjoyed that day. There's a lot to see and experience at a fish hatchery, from ponds loaded with small or large fish, to large aquariums full of local fish.

DEC photo



In the early days, hardy personnel would carry fish in large containers strapped to their backs for stocking remote waters.

DEC operates 12 fish hatcheries across the state (see map below), so there's bound to be one near you. Several have impressive visitors' centers, and all make an excellent destination as a class trip or family outing.

I would encourage everyone to visit a fish hatchery and witness the operation for themselves. It's a wonderful experience and the great memories you make

stay with you. For me, it's been nearly 30 years since that first day I went stocking, but I still fondly remember it like it was last week.

Assistant editor for *Conservationist*, **Eileen Stegemann** counts fishing as one of her favorite leisure activities.



Neil Satterly

