**Showcasing the DNR: Generations of Michigan steelhead fishing**

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**Michigan Department of Natural Resources**

On a frosty winter morning, two anglers are on their way up to the first fishing hole on their favorite steelhead river.

As the father and son gear up, the only sounds they hear are the water running and the snow crunching beneath their feet.

Over the next 10 minutes, these woods will awaken with the sounds of chickadees and other birds. As the sun cuts through the clouds, it melts frost off the branches, dripping into the river’s slow, churning waters.

Anticipation gathers within the minds of the two men, with a looming battle of epic sport about to occur.

The son looks at his dad, who nods back. They know within the first three casts they are going to have a fish on the line.

The first cast passes the bait through the water with no takers. Any minute now …

“Right about there,” the father mumbles as he casts.

Almost immediately, the float on the line drops and the water erupts. Out comes a shiny, chrome steelhead, fighting with all its might, trying to shake the hook.

This time of year, steelhead battles are creating magical memories like this across the Great Lakes State.

Michigan provides access to half of all the fresh water in the United States, thanks to four of the five the Great Lakes, more than 11,000 inland lakes, and 36,000 miles of navigable rivers and streams.

This enormous volume of water, and the state’s world-class fisheries it supports, provide fishing opportunities of all kinds in every season.

During late fall and early winter months, steelhead river fishing becomes a prized pastime for anglers seeking a unique challenge.

Steelhead is a name given to migratory rainbow trout that are born in rivers but spend most of their lives in the ocean or the Great Lakes. Steelhead are not native to Michigan.

These beautiful fish, first brought to Michigan waters from the west coast in the 1885, are known fighters that provide great table fare – a combination making them a popular sport fish in Michigan.

Hayden Gosen, a fourth-generation steelhead angler from Sanford, in Midland County, caught his first steelhead on the Pere Marquette River at a young age, with guidance from his father, Craig Gosen.

The Pere Marquette, Muskegon and Hersey were the first three rivers in Michigan to have steelhead stocked in the late 1800s.

“I actually caught my very first steelhead on my own when I was 5 years old,” Hayden said. “The passion, the thrill, the adventure, the chase of catching a wild steelhead that's traveled all the way from the Great Lakes up into these rivers ... I never know what the next cast is going to bring and that's the adventure I'm always chasing.”

Steelhead river fishing has provided a generational influence that has fueled the Gosen family’s interest and enjoyment of Michigan’s natural resources for more than 70 years.

Craig was born and grew up in Spaulding Township and learned the sport of steelhead fishing from his grandmother, Mary Vleet, during visits with family on the East Branch of the AuGres River in Iosco County.

“I started going to the East Branch of the AuGres River and got my first steelhead when I was 7 and I was hooked on it at an early age,” Craig said.

When Hayden was old enough to fish, Craig mentored him and passed on his knowledge of the sport through many fishing trips. The two have bonded and spent a lifetime together chasing steelhead.

“He’s taught me everything I know,” said Hayden, who today lives in metropolitan Detroit. “There is no way I would be an avid angler if he wouldn’t have taught me everything he knows, and if his grandparents wouldn’t have taught him what they knew.”

Hayden recalls that before he could even walk, Craig would tow him in his little red wagon down the banks of the AuGres.

“Steelhead fishing to me, it’s a passion. I have a love for it,” Hayden said. “That passion was instilled at a young age. For years, until I could catch fish on my own consistently, I was my dad’s ‘net man,’ his right-hand man.”

Like most sportfishing adventurers, the Gosens find significant meaning and connection in participating. Little things, like taking a break and enjoying a sandwich together while sitting on the riverbank, help create lasting memories.

Fishing together is special for the Gosens.

“The bond between a father and a son sharing the same passion together – now that’s priceless,” Hayden said.

“I enjoy the challenge, the thrill, the fight of catching a steelhead. It's gonna be that next memory that I'll remember for the rest of my life. That's what keeps me going, what will that next cast bring me?"

The Michigan Department of Natural Resources manages the state’s steelhead populations through numerous fisheries management activities, including fish stocking and regulations.

The [Wolf Lake State Fish Hatchery](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79136_79236_80247_80504_82189---,00.html), established in 1927 near Kalamazoo, and the [Thompson State Fish Hatchery](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79136_79236_80247_80504_82191---,00.html), opened near Manistique in 1922, rear Michigan’s steelhead that are stocked in public waters.

“Michigan’s steelhead planting program has really expanded fishing opportunities to countless rivers around the state,” said Craig, who now lives in Sandford. “I think it’s an excellent program.”

Steelhead travel from the Great Lakes and spend their winters upstream, finishing their stay spawning during spring months. Michigan geography offers a plethora of winter steelhead fishing opportunities found in all regions of the state.

During the winter season, Lake Michigan’s rivers are among the prime places to find steelhead. Popular destinations include the Betsie, Muskegon, Grand, Kalamazoo and St. Joseph rivers. Some additional rivers elsewhere in Michigan offering steelhead runs include the Cheboygan, Clinton and Huron Rivers – which feed Lake Huron – and the Chocolay River, which flows to Lake Superior.

“There’s endless opportunities to steelhead fish in Michigan,” Craig said.

In recent years, the DNR has promoted steelhead fishing through various projects, including a steelhead hatchery video produced at the Wolf Lake State Fish Hatchery. The video featured Hayden and Craig Gosen as anglers.

In winter 2020, a second DNR video expanded this effort highlighting winter steelhead fishing, capturing a Sunday scene of Hayden’s family fishing on the Pere Marquette River. This video highlights Hayden’s journey to locate, hook, fight and land steelhead, surrounded by the snowy banks of a wintery Michigan river.

Anglers interested in trying steelhead fishing can visit [Michigan.gov/Fishing](http://www.Michigan.gov/Fishing) to learn more about getting started. A Michigan fishing license is required to pursue steelhead. Fishing regulations are published in the DNR’s Fishing Digest, available at [Michigan.gov/DNRDigests](http://www.Michigan.gov/DNRDigests).

Charter and guide services offer steelhead opportunities around the state. These captains and guides are valuable stewards passing on the sport to future generations.

“Enjoy the surroundings and get outside,” Craig said. “The state has tremendous resources to participate in and view. With steelhead fishing, either walking the bank or floating the river, you get to enjoy that all at the same time.”

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