**Showcasing the DNR: Bucket brigades bring trout to Tahquamenon River**

**By PATRICK HANCHIN**

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Bucket brigades, where firefighters pass buckets of water along a human chain, were an important method of fighting fires before hand-pumped fire engines were invented. While its usefulness for firefighting has long disappeared, the technique is still valuable in some situations, such as stocking brown trout in the Tahquamenon River.

The Michigan Department of Natural Resources normally stocks fish at boat launches, but the Tahquamenon River between the Upper and Lower falls is only accessible by a 116-step staircase from the walking path to the river’s edge. The best way to get 4,000 brown trout from the stocking truck to the river is by bucket brigade.

“The DNR has stocked brown trout in the Tahquamenon River at Tahquamenon Falls State Park in Chippewa County since 1956,” said Cory Kovacs, the DNR fisheries biologist at Newberry.

This unique section of river offers a remote fishing experience that is free of development. Although challenging and not done by many, one would not see a single cabin when floating from the Upper Falls to the Lower Falls. The area around the Lower Falls is also unique for fly fishing in that it is extremely wide and allows for long casts, similar to western rivers. Although trout catch rates may be higher on other Michigan rivers, a survey of anglers conducted in 2013 showed a high rate of satisfaction with the overall fishing experience in this section of river.

“While we don’t get a lot of angler reports, the ones we get are very positive,” Kovacs said. “In 2023 the DNR plans to further evaluate angler use by placing trail cameras at the Lower Falls area.”

In 2008, Tahquamenon Falls State Park’s interpreter, Theresa Neal, came up with the idea to engage local students from Whitefish Township Community School in Paradise with the fish stocking. Previously, fish were lugged up and down the stairs one bucket at a time by a few DNR fisheries technicians and state park staff.

“It was always a challenge to find enough employees available to help with the stocking effort,” Neal said. “One day it dawned on me that the local school requests a field trip every spring, so why not include them in this unique fish stocking experience.”

Whitefish Township School also has been raising salmon in its classroom for a number of years, so the field trip has evolved into a fish-themed event. Students release their salmon in the morning at the Rivermouth Campground, then go to the Upper Falls to release trout.

The trout are loaded, 10 to 20 at a time, in 5-gallon buckets about half full of water. The total effort ends up being around 300 buckets with a combined weight of around 6,000 pounds. In recent years, the brown trout stocked have averaged 7 to 8 inches in length.

It is impressive to watch the buckets being carried and passed from students who are genuinely enjoying the task and overall experience.

Peggy Imhoff is the science teacher at Whitefish Township Community School who Neal coordinates with each year to make the field trip a success.

“Our students look forward to the fish stocking event every year,” Imhoff said. “It is a time we all come together for a common goal and celebrate living things and helping our environment!”

The DNR produces tens of millions of fish for stocking each year across the state. To learn more about stocking records, see the DNR’s [Fish Stocking Database](https://www2.dnr.state.mi.us/fishstock/).

For more information on Tahquamenon Falls State Park, visit [Michigan.gov/TahquamenonFalls](https://www2.dnr.state.mi.us/parksandtrails/Details.aspx?type=SPRK&id=428).

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