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NORTH COUNTRY NOTEBOOK

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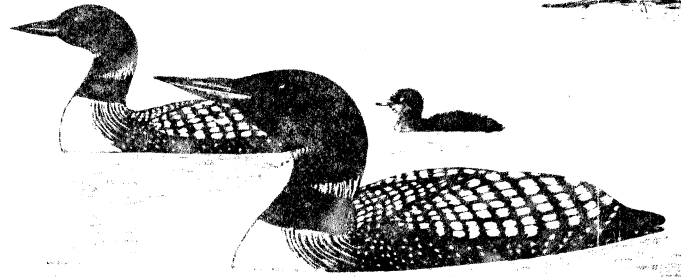


One of the most dramatic stories to touch Wisconsin has been the invasion of the Great Lakes by the lamprey eel — an invasion that destroyed the multi-million dollar lake trout fishery. The story goes on even now in the deep inland seas — only the ending remains to be written for the trout are virtually gone. The state and federal governments are pouring millions of dollars into the battle to conquer the lamprey — “the snakes from the sea,” as a commercial fisherman once described them to us. The lampreys are not native to the Great Lakes. They came from the far off Atlantic Ocean. Experts now theorize that the natural barrier of Niagara Falls kept them out of the lakes until the completion of the Welland Canal in the early 1900's. Then over the years they moved into and through the lakes until they reached Superior. And now there are fears, reasonable we think, that the lampreys could penetrate the entire Great Lakes Drainage Basin.

The lamprey is a parasite. It attaches itself to a fish by a sucker-like mouth, rasps a hole into the flesh and literally bleeds the fish to death. It is simple, efficient and deadly. Nature has fashioned the lamprey into a truly remarkable lethal organism. It has circular rows of raspy teeth inside the sucker mouth — that's the business end that fastens to the fish — and to keep the fish's blood from clotting it injects an anti-coagulant, which scientists now call lamphedrin, into the wound. Experts feel that the lamprey's swimming abilities enable it to catch anything in fresh water and as far as is known, adult lampreys have no natural enemies in fresh water, certainly no enemies capable of holding them in check. The great schools of huge soft-scaled lake trout were made to order for the lampreys. They went through the trout populations like a plague. The commercial lake trout catch in Lake Michigan dropped from two and one half million pounds in one season to exactly zero.

Dr. James W. Moffett, Chief of Great Lakes Fisheries Investigations for the U. S. Fish and Wild Life Service, in testifying before a House Appropriations Subcommittee this past summer put it this way, “The lamprey has reduced to ten percent of its original size, the lake trout population of Lake Superior. And there aren't any trout left in Lake Michigan or Lake Huron.”

In Wisconsin the State Conservation Commission this summer closed commercial lake trout fishing in Lake Superior for one year with a provision for a review of the situation at the end of a year. Commercial fishermen on Wisconsin's north shore agreed on the need for closing the season and did not fight it. Commercial fishermen on Wisconsin's east shore — what few there are — haven't fished lake trout for years. The Smith Brothers, who operate two tugs out of Port Washington, while bigger than most fishermen, haul in catches that are representative of Lake Michigan today. They consist in the main of chubs, herring, perch and alewife, the latter another migrant from the Atlantic generally regarded as a “trash” fish and sold for fertilizer. It is interesting that the Smiths, who operate the famed Fish Shanty Restaurant in Port Washington, still have lake trout on the menu but it comes from Canada and the Smiths buy it through a broker. The lake trout was the premium fish of the Great Lakes and, as was stated earlier, the keystone of a multi-million dollar industry. We still remember lifting potnets years ago with the LeClair



family out of Two Rivers. Two tons of gleaming unscarred lake trout was not an unusual morning lift. The LeClairs have been sold out for years now and are scattered across this land in occupations far removed from the clean beaches of their home. If the lamprey had shown a propensity for “trash” fish the fishermen might have well regarded it as a blessing but nature is impersonal and the lamprey attacked the trout, sealing its doom and that of the LeClairs.

The federal government hopes to eradicate the lamprey one day although Dr. Moffett says that total eradication begins to look less than possible. To control the lamprey the federal government has already spent over six and one half million dollars. The money has gone for research, for electric weirs, for selective poisons and it is gratifying to know that a poison has been developed which is so selective that it seeks out lampreys in the stream like a homing missile.

The House Appropriations Subcommittee asked Dr. Moffett if a yearly expenditure of six million dollars would rid the Great Lakes of lampreys in six years. Dr. Moffett estimated that the lampreys would be reduced to the point where a trout fishery could be carried on by 1970.

The essential difficulty is that when the lampreys are in the open lake, that is to say as adults killing fish, there is no controlling them at all. Only when lampreys swarm into streams and tributaries to spawn are they vulnerable. Thus the idea is to kill them with electricity or poison before they can spawn and start a new generation. When you consider the hundreds and hundreds of streams, creeks and tributaries feeding the Great Lakes, you realize the magnitude of the control problem and why Dr. Moffett puts any fishery eight years hence.

The life span of the lamprey is estimated to be from six to eight years, the first two years of which are spent in the stream bottom of the birth place in a larval stage, after which an abrupt physical change takes place and the adult lamprey takes to open lake life hunting out host fish.

An interesting biological note should be inserted here. Like the salmon, the lamprey is subject to a mysterious life and death cycle. Once adult lampreys spawn they simply wait for death. They do not eat, the life drive seems to leave them. The French writer Phillipe Dirole writes that the male actually disembowels the female in a last savage frenzy and then waits for his death alone. In any event, once they start the new generation the lampreys do die. And nature, impersonal as always, carries them downstream and back into the Great Inland Sea.