

RAINBOW TROUT- (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*)



Common Names: Rainbow trout, rainbow, bow, steelhead trout, steelhead, Kamloops trout, silver trout

Lake Michigan Sport Catch in Wisconsin: 40,000-60,000 per year

Preferred Temperature Range: 53-57 °F, 12-14 °C

Predators for Adults – Sea Lamprey, humans
for Juveniles – Larger carnivorous fish, mergansers

Length: 16-30 inches

Weight: 2-16 pounds **State Record:** 8/19/73; 24 pounds, 4 ounces from Lake Michigan

**Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources
Bureau of Fisheries Management**

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Identification: Rainbow trout from Lake Michigan have an elongated and slightly compressed body, a squared tail with spots, 12 or less rays in the anal fin, and the inside of the mouth white. There are generally small spots on the top of the head and back above the lateral line, including the dorsal and adipose fins. Body color is variable, with the back being darker, ranging from steel blue to green to almost brown; the cheek and sides are silvery, occasionally with a pink to red lateral stripe; and the bottom or belly is silvery white.

Distribution: Native to the Pacific coast of North America from northern Mexico north to

the Bering Sea and inland to the Rocky Mountains. Since the late 1800s, they have been introduced across North America. Other locations where populations have been established include New Zealand, Australia, South America, Africa, southern Asia, Japan and Europe. In the Wisconsin waters of Lake Michigan, rainbow trout are common along the entire shore from Marinette to Kenosha.

Rainbow trout from the Great Lakes are commonly referred to as “steelhead.” This is the name given to Pacific coast rainbow trout that migrate as juveniles from tributaries to the sea and return to the streams as adults to spawn.

The name “steelhead” refers to the steel-blue color normally found on the head of the ocean-run rainbow trout. Steelhead have adapted quite well to life in the Great Lakes, growing fast and large in our “inland seas.” Lake run rainbow trout are an extremely popular gamefish, aggressively taking baits and fighting hard at the surface, often leaping clear out of the water.

Rainbow trout were introduced into Lake Michigan as early as 1880 and stocked most years thereafter until 1915. Stocking rainbow trout into Lake Michigan commenced again in the 1960s as part of the Great Lakes rehabilitation effort. Wisconsin began stocking rainbow trout into Lake Michigan in 1963 and has continued to do so to the present. Wisconsin now stocks approximately 500,000 rainbow trout into Lake Michigan each year.

Annual stocking of rainbow trout is necessary because poor natural spawning habitat results in little successful natural reproduction. Wisconsin currently maintains three strains of rainbow trout in the state hatchery system. Each of these strains migrates for spawning at a different time of the year. Skamania strain migrate in July and August and spawn the following January and February. Chambers Creek strain migrate from October through March and spawn in March. Ganaraska River strain migrate in late March and early April; spawning occurs in late April. Adult broodstock of all three strains are collected in the Kewaunee and Root rivers, transported to Kettle Moraine Springs State Fish Hatchery, and raised to yearling size for stocking in streams along the Lake Michigan shoreline.

Once in Lake Michigan, rainbow trout feed on small fish, insects, and crayfish. They wander extensively, moving along the shore up to 50 miles from their place of stocking, with some fish traveling much further (up to 600 miles is recorded!) They mature in 2 to 4 years and return to their location of stocking to spawn. The male steelhead develops a hooked lower jaw or “kype” during spawning season, similar to other trout and salmon. Unlike the salmon, though, steelhead do not die after spawning.

They return to the lake to recover from the rigors of spawning and to resume growth. Rainbow trout may repeat the spawning run each year for the rest of their lives.

Steelhead are caught in streams from March through May and from July through December during times of high water discharges. By far the most popular bait for stream fishing is a “spawn bag,” which is fish spawn (eggs) tied in a small ball using veil material. Other productive baits used in the streams are spoons, spinners, flatfish, and flies fished close to the bottom. The most popular streams for steelhead fishing include the Kewaunee, Root, Oconto, Manitowoc, Menominee, Milwaukee, East Twin, Peshtigo, Ahnapee, and West Twin rivers. Smaller steelhead streams include the Pigeon, Little, Pike, Menomonee, and Kinnickinnic rivers; Stony, Oak, Heins, Sauk, Whitefish Bay, Fischer, Silver, and Reibolts creeks. In addition to stream fishing, pier and shore fishing also contribute significantly to the rainbow trout catch in the spring, summer, and fall. Spawn, night crawlers, spoons, and flies are often productive baits at these locations. During mid-summer, some steelhead are caught while trolling, with the best catches often occurring far from shore on spoons or plugs near the surface. Between October and May, an excellent rainbow fishery exists in the cooling water discharges of power plants. Spawn, spoons, spinners, jigs, and minnows are most frequently used in these areas.

The rainbow trout stocking program is supported through monies collected by sales of fishing licenses and the Great Lakes Salmon and Trout Stamp. Future plans are to continue stocking approximately 500,000 rainbow trout each year into the Wisconsin waters of Lake Michigan. Emphasis will continue to be placed on stocking different strains of rainbow trout to extend the season of spawning runs available to anglers. This strategy will maintain the diverse fishing opportunities presented by this widely enjoyed gamefish—the steelhead.