

FISHING HOLE

KNIFE RIVER

BY JOE SHEAD

WHY GO: The Knife River in St. Louis and Lake counties has more steelhead spawning habitat than any other North Shore river. It also holds brook trout and serves as a nursery for brown trout. In the fall, you can find spawning salmon.

ACCESS: There are numerous angler access points along the Knife River, including Stanley Road: Easement upstream and downstream of the road. Valley Road: Easements downstream of the road. Airport Road: Easement downstream of the road. UT 34: Access at the 90-degree bend in the road. Easement downstream. Westover Road: Easement downstream of right turn in road; state lands along the northern part of the road. Old Drummond Road: State lands downstream of the road. Drummond Grade: Several road crossings. North Shore Scenic Highway: Aquatic Management Area upstream; parking lot north of road. Highway 61: Upstream (state land). Shilhon Road: Access along the trail parallel to the stream. Parking lot by trailhead. Easements upstream and downstream along this stretch of river. Hawkhill Road: Easement upstream of road along right bank.

VITALS: The Knife runs 23.8 miles, arising south of Stewart Lake and flowing to Lake Superior. The upper river runs through grassy wetlands, wetland forests and alder swamps. Further downstream the river runs through boulder and bedrock. Although there is no natural fish barrier, the designated barrier is located at Stanley Road. Two refuges are off-limits

to fishing. One is from the fish trap to Highway 61. The other is at Second Falls. Fishing seasons and bag limits differ above and below the barrier.

FISH SPECIES PRESENT: Steelhead, brook trout, brown trout, pink salmon, coho salmon, and chinook salmon.

STEELHEAD: “Steelhead is the main draw for the Knife,” said Nick Peterson, Lake Superior fisheries specialist. “The Knife is a super important river for the North Shore. It contains over half the access (spawning habitat) of the entire North Shore.” Although most anglers congregate below the highway to fish, steelhead travel far upriver to spawn. “We documented a fish that went 18 miles (upriver) in less than three days,” Peterson said. The DNR operates a fish trap below Highway 61. “All the adult steelhead—we put a tag in them and put them above the trap,” Peterson said. “Based on the ratio coming downstream we get an estimate that includes fish that go around the falls (around the trap). On average we catch about 429 unclipped steelhead per year.” Currently, the population is down. “Just within the last 10 years we’ve had three years with significant droughts and two massive flood events. That’s more extreme events than we’ve had in the last 20 combined.” In addition to wild fish, the DNR stocks 120,000 hatchery-reared fish spawned from wild steelhead. These fish have clipped adipose fins, meaning if they are 16 inches long, they may be kept. Fish are stocked in the Lester and French rivers, although some stray to the Knife.

BROOK TROUT: Brook trout can be found throughout the river when water temperatures are cool, but are relegated to the headwaters during summer. Currently, the Knife’s brookies are being studied. “We’re evaluating the movements and habitat use of brook trout in the Knife,” Peterson said. Brook trout are outfitted with pit tags. When they pass a station along the river, the time is recorded, allowing biologists to track a fish’s movements.

BROWN TROUT: Some brown trout are present. “Typically, toward the end of August there is a subset of brown trout that run up the river,” Peterson said. “We capture a number of juvenile browns that are leaving the Knife every year.”

SALMON: The Knife hosts runs of pink, coho, and chinook salmon, but primarily pinks. Pinks don’t venture far upriver and can be found near the mouth around mid-September. “We put some tags in some pinks,” Peterson said. “Pretty much all of them turned around and came right back to the river mouth.” Salmon anglers should hit the river during fall spawning runs.



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