

Coaster brookies gaining advocates



Coaster brook trout, such as this one caught with a fly rod near Grand Marais, are generally indistinguishable from standard eastern brook trout but behave differently. The rare fish are native to Lake Superior.

Upstart group wants awareness; Indian band wants self-sustaining population

By Dave Orrick
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IF YOU GO >

What: Tom Helgeson's Great Waters Fly Fishing Expo

When: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sunday, March 24

Where: National Sports Center, Blaine

Online: GreatWatersFlyFishingExpo.com

For brook trout, "coasters" are bulls, capable of growing well over 20 inches with shoulders like linebackers.

The Minnesota state record brookie, which thudded the scales at nearly 6.5 pounds in 2000, was likely a coaster.

But among the gangs of beefy trout and salmon that roam the waters of Lake Superior — steelhead, Chinook, browns, coho and lakers — coasters are diminutive, both in size and their popular support.

A few folks are out to change that.

"They're a beautiful, unique fish, and there aren't that many of them anymore," said Scott Thorpe, a fly-fishing guide from Minneapolis who serves as president of the Greater Lake Superior Foundation (TheGreaterLakeSuperiorFoundation.org). It's an upstart charity with small pockets but big hopes for the coaster. "Our goal is to help fund research into this fish that we really don't know that much about."

The coaster brookie is a type of brook trout that lives along coastlines and tributaries of the Atlantic Ocean and Lake Superior. (So far, efforts to define the coaster as a distinct species have failed.)

Thorpe's pitch for the coaster brookie will be among the many presentations this weekend at Tom Helgeson's Great Waters Fly Fishing Expo at the National Sports Center in Blaine. The event runs through Sunday, March 24. Thorpe will be talking coasters at 3 p.m. Sunday. Unlike the more-common

eastern brook trout, coasters spend much of their life in the big lake and migrate upstream in rivers to spawn. In that sense, coasters are like steelhead, which are rainbow trout that migrate much like salmon to spawn.

But steelhead, which, like all rainbow trout, are actually salmon, aren't native to the Great Lakes. Nor are brown trout, Chinook salmon or coho salmon. In the native fishery of Lake Superior, two true trout — or char — existed: Lake trout lurked in the depths offshore and coasters owned the shoreline.

Once plentiful in Superior and in Lakes Michigan and Huron, coasters were in sharp decline in Superior by the mid-1900s and gone from Michigan and Huron because of overfishing and habitat degradation. The only known robust American populations were around Isle Royale and in the Salmon Trout River in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Another population existed near Nipigon, Ontario.

Since the late 1990s, the Grand Portage band of Lake Superior Chippewa has been trying to establish a self-

sustaining population in three Lake Superior tributaries near Grand Portage, with some signs of success. In 2007, the band increased its efforts, building the Grand Portage Native Fish Hatchery.

In recent years, biologists have reported promising signs, said Seth Moore, the Grand Portage band's director of biology and environment. The stocked fish are surviving to adulthood and returning to streams to spawn in the fall, as coasters should.

"In our streams, we were able to detect the presence of naturally reproducing brook trout," Moore said, cautioning that it hasn't been established that such breeders weren't already there as remnants. "I can't confidently say we have helped establish a self-sustaining population, but we do have evidence of natural reproduction, and that's big success."

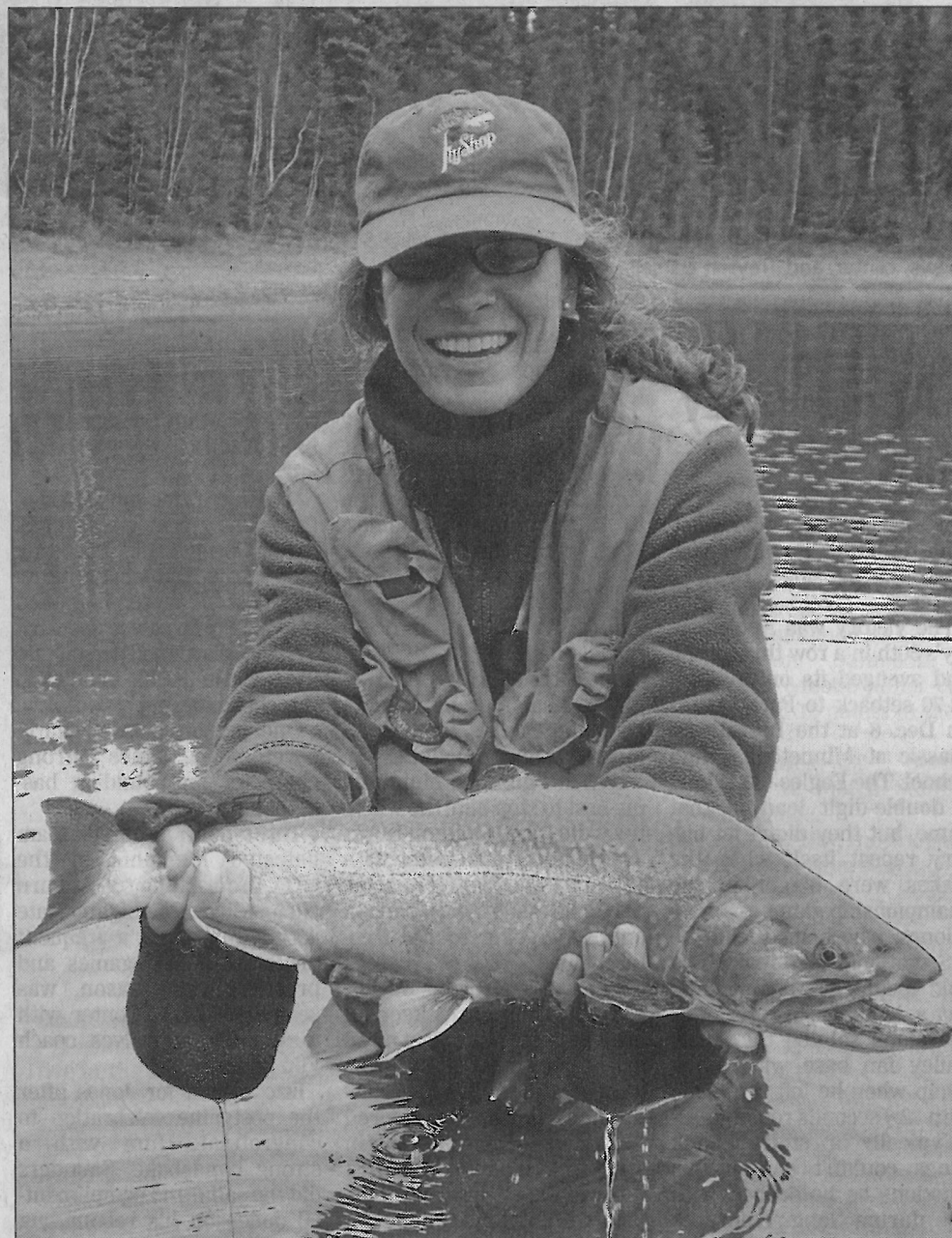
The band's goals are modest: 20 spawning pairs in each of three tributaries.

"Then we pull the plug on stocking," Moore said. That's believed to be enough to have a self-sustaining population, although hardly a viable fishery for angling.

Thorpe said coasters can be found along the North Shore of Lake Superior as far south as Baptism River, but he said nowhere in Minnesota waters are the fish plentiful enough to target with a rod and reel.

"I get the oddball here and there," he said. "It's really about a unique fish that no one seems to be advocating for."

Dave Orrick can be reached at 651-228-5512. Follow him at twitter.com/OutdoorsNow.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ANDY BURDA, GREATER LAKE SUPERIOR FOUNDATION
Maria Manion of Minneapolis shows off a coaster brook trout caught along the Lake Superior shore near Nipigon, Ontario. The fish, native to Lake Superior, aren't generally common enough in Minnesota waters for anglers to specifically target them. The Greater Lake Superior Foundation, of which Manion is a board member, hopes to raise awareness of coasters and raise funds to research them.