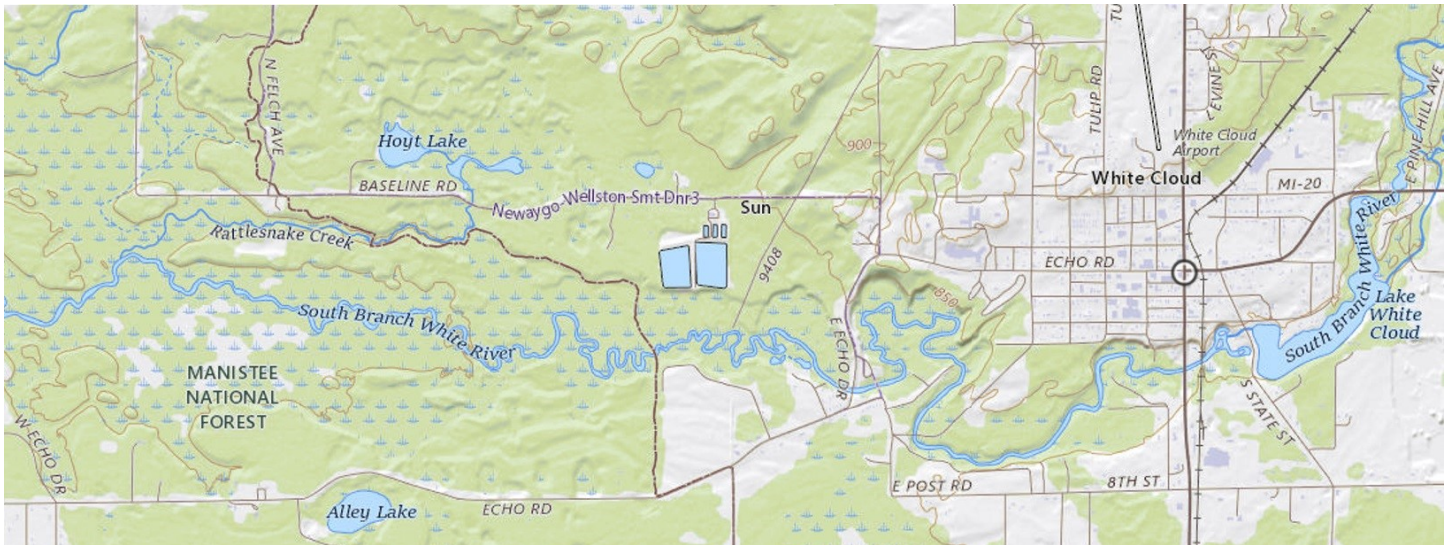


WHITE RIVER FISHING CONDITIONS: Round Table Discussion



On April 27, 2023, Mark Heying, along with several interested guests, joined our monthly board meeting, taking questions from our Chair Ray Schinler for the better part of an hour. Mark is a dedicated dry fly fisher and writer who has contributed to *Near North Now*, a Newaygo County based web publication.



Ray's lead off question: **What parts of the watershed do you fish?**

Mark replied he kayak-fishes the South Branch of the White from below White Cloud Dam down to Rattlesnake Creek.

There are two obvious launch sites. The White Cloud Rotary Park is just below the White Cloud Dam, off S. State Street east of M37. Next, a little less than two miles downstream is Flowing Wells Park, off E. Echo Drive. The White Cloud Blue Water Trail connects these two parks. Volunteer cleanup and restoration efforts earned it a Michigan Water Trail designation in 2017.

From here to Rattlesnake Creek there are about six more miles of river to kayak (River Mile points 68 to 62, starting at Lake Michigan = 0). Between these two points there is a drop of about 24 feet. As the crow flies, its only 2.4 miles, which works out for a stream-valley slope of 10 feet per mile or 0.19%. The slope down the meandering channel is considerably less at about 0.08%.

These values are typical of what Mark sees making his way down the river. A predominately groundwater-fed alluvial river coursing its way through a fairly flat pitted outwash plain in a valley between moraine ridges north and south. In the 1990s, DNR found that between Echo Road (River Mile 68) and Bingham Road (River Mile 58.5) the stable summer flow rate (i.e., no surface runoff from rain) increased as you went downstream by about 15%. As the artesian well at Flowing Wells Park suggests, the ground is anxious to discharge its water.

Mark confirms the river averages about 25 feet wide and 24 inches deep, has a predominately sandy bottom made up of runs within overhanging banks. He adds for other potential anglers, don't overlook several wader-topping holes on the outside of the bends.

If it's solitude you're after, this float's for you. Shortly after going under the Echo Drive bridge, civilization begins to disappear as the river flows into Manistee National Forest. Buffered out of view and free of

operational essence are the lagoons of the White Cloud Pump Station to the north. Likewise for the interconnected reclaimed wastewater irrigation field on the south.

Mark likes the fact there is limited access, a few fire roads ending at the river. He will chat with the occasional hiker using the foot bridge over the White, the crossing at almost the midpoint of the 4,800-mile [North Country Trail](#). As to other life forms passing through, Mark responded to one of our board members who lives along this stretch, “My bear count remains at zero.”

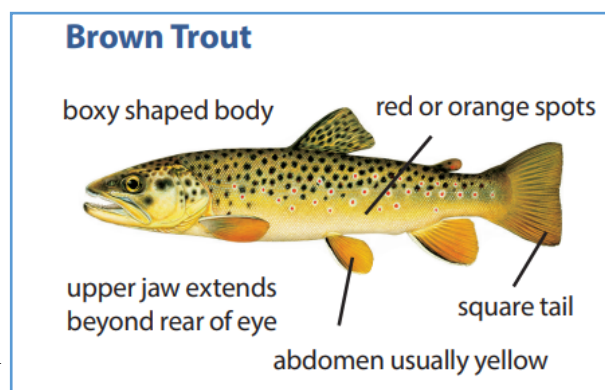
Above the banks, the riparian landscape is post-lumbering forested wetlands of mucky low-oxygen hydric soils a foot or two deep. Don’t forget your mosquito repellent. You will find predominately conifers, such as second-generation white pines mixed with hardwoods, reaching 20 feet tall or taller. Beneath is a understory typical of a cedar-swamp with younger trees and shrubs. The herbaceous floor covering is filled with an array of Michigan’s favorites. Think skunk cabbage, trilliums, mayapples and trout lilies. Correlating hatches to when they bloom is the true mark of your scientific angler.

What species do you target?

“Brown Trout, and get the occasional Chub.” Next Mark quickly qualified his answer, “The water gets too warm for Brookies and the seldom seen Rainbows above the Hesperia dam.”

What is your assessment of the current state of the fishery?

Speaking to this specific stretch Mark responds, “Not a great fishery.” He elaborates, year over year there has been “no major change.”



Several years back Mark was among the dozen or so gung-ho White River Kayak Coalition volunteers who took on opening passage over the 30-miles down to Hesperia Dam. The group’s efforts stayed well within DNR approved protocols on the width of cross-fallen tree openings. Before winter of 2022 was the last time Mark made a the run down his familiar stretch, “There’s now one new massive tree down requiring portage.”

Both Ray and Mark are seasoned anglers, so knowledgeable the regs never came up. But your not-so writer had to troll through the 2023 [Michigan Fishing Guide](#) to page 43, Inland Trout & Salmon Stream Regulations, then check the online [maps](#). We are looking at a Green Class 1 Trout Stream, open from the last Saturday in April through September 30. To be a keeper, Browns need to be 8 inches, Rainbows and Steelhead 10 inches. Good for you if you were among those who already knew this, but don’t forget to get

From [Near North Now](#)

Newaygo County’s Forgotten River Series on the White River by Charles Chandler and Mark Heying

10/15/2018 Part one: The voyage of discovery [Newaygo County Public Opinion - Near North Now](#) ◦Celebrating the White River Kayak Coalition’s project completion of passage from White Cloud to Hesperia.

01/30/2019 Part two: [The White River: Newaygo County’s Forgotten River Part II - Near North Now](#) ◦How White River Kayak Coalition follows DNR guidance in cutting open the passage.

04/25/2019 Part three: The State of the Fisheries and Water Quality [Newaygo County Public Opinion - Near North Now](#) ◦“Simply put, expert studies show that the White Cloud and Hesperia Dams take the heart out of the White River fishery.”

06/23/2019 Part four: Why White Cloud and Hesperia Can’t Afford the Dams [Newaygo County Public Opinion - Near North Now](#) ◦Making the economic case for the potential of the White River by taking a visit north to the Pere Marquette River and seeing what it provides the citizens of Lake County and its county seat Baldwin.

your license.

As to tackle, Mark “sticks with basic” dry flies, even though he sees few “heavy hatches.” He explains there’s too much wood mass below surface to negotiate sinking lines and nymphs. “With patience and multiple casts,” he reassures us, “the fish are there.” Even so, manage your expectations. The five-fish daily limit and only three 15” or larger, Mark chalks up as “aspirational.”

How long into the season does the trout fishery hold up into the summer?

It’s like the old joke, the fishing’s not too good, but fortunately the season’s not too long. Please take a look at the articles Mark and Charles Chandler wrote on the river for *Near North Now* (find links above). In Part 3 they go deep into dam history, both White Cloud and Hesperia. If you’re up for some scholarship, follow their referenced link to DNR fisheries biologist Richard P. O’Neal’s 2012 [report](#). In it O’Neal estimates 8 feet of water over the sediment in the White Cloud Impoundment. Eight years later, DNR fisheries biologist Mark A. Tonello reports in his 2020 [Status of the Fishery Resource Report](#) it’s filled in so there is only a 6-foot water depth. During our discussion in 2023 our guest guessed it’s now just four feet.

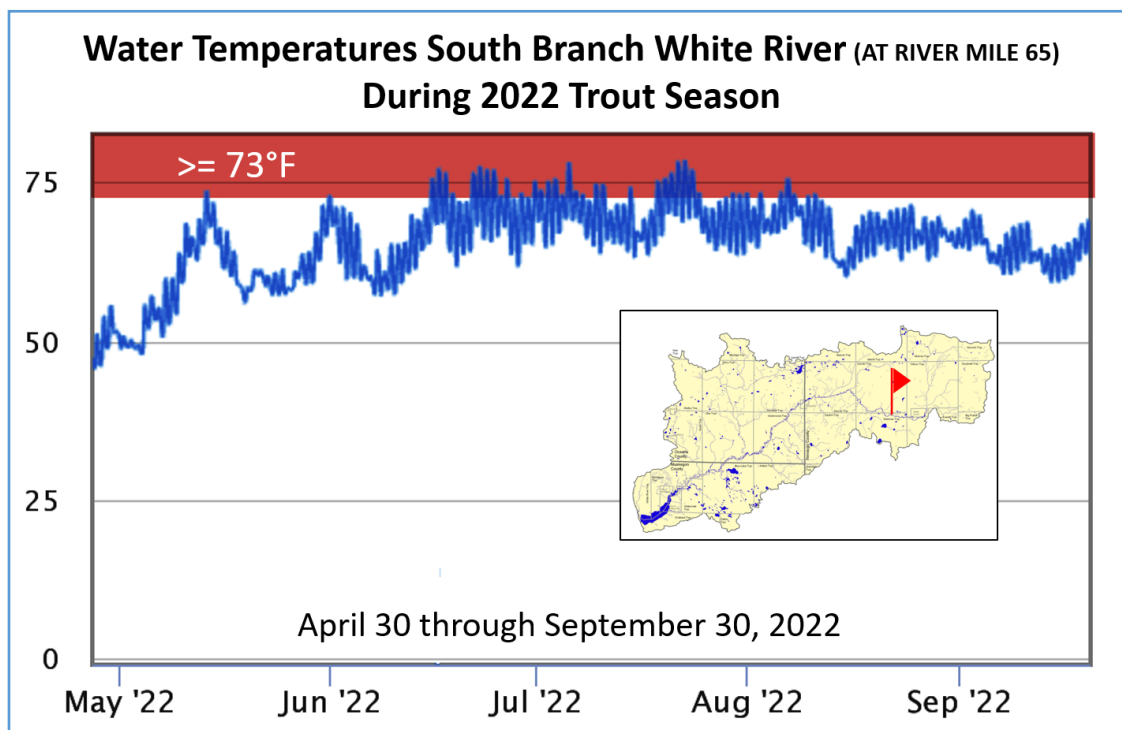
Tonello wrote that as far back as 1955, W. H. Tody (a decade or more before he succeeded H. A. Tanner as DNR chief of fisheries) was concerned about the thermal impact from the White Cloud impoundment. Again flagged in the summers of 1995 and 1996 when O’Neal and company did a full EKG on the upper watershed, including temperature recordings in several locations. At Echo Bridge in July 1996, a day-time high reached 76°F. It was over 70°F a dozen more times.

In early 2022 Trout Unlimited with ongoing support from WRWP installed an [EnviroDIY](#) recording station in the White River near the mouth of Rattlesnake Creek. Based on its reporting, the climbing temperature trend continues. Mark Heying sums it up, “It’s not uncommon to see some dead fish.” Any surviving trout keep to the deepest holes and hide out during the day.

Have you heard of “Hoot Owl Hours”?

To Ray’s delight he found that Mark was both aware of the concept and supports it.

Stress on trout is very much a function of water temperature. Even studies on “catch-and-release” practices found fish returned to a warm stream may not fully recover and could die. Though not (yet) adopted in



Michigan, the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks have set angling restrictions and fishing closure criteria, commonly known as “Hoot Owl Hours.”

With predominately Brown Trout, the White River below White Cloud is analogues to Montana’s “nonnative salmonid streams.” Out there when the day-time high water temperature hits 73°F for three consecutive days, Montana closes fishing from 2 PM till midnight. (For streams with their beloved Cutthroats the threshold temperature is 66°F, for Bull Trout just 60°F). They provide a handy [map](#) for anglers.

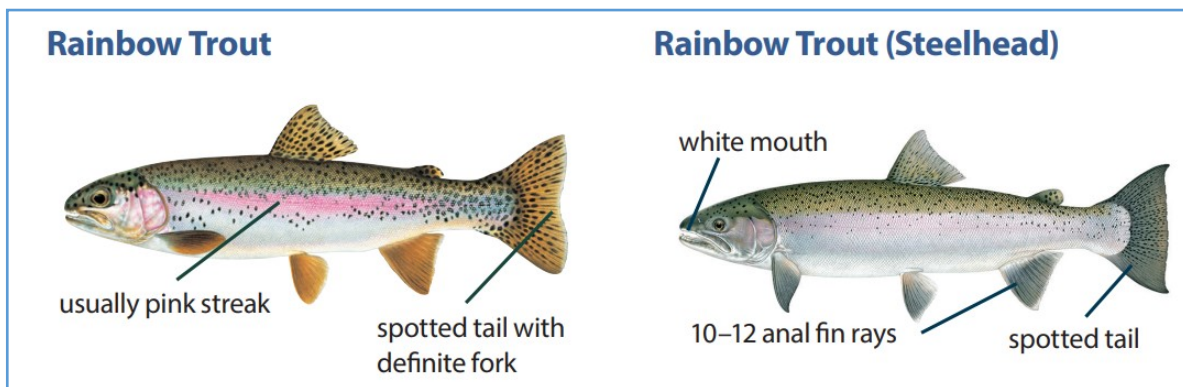
If this same criteria were followed here in Michigan, and assuming the in-stream temperatures are accurate, seems fairly sure several miles of the White River would have been closed afternoons during our 2022’s trout season.

From *Near North Now*, **Newaygo’s Forgotten River, part two**

Compared to the Pere Marquette and Muskegon Rivers, the White River is clearly undervalued, misunderstood, is somewhat ignored, and with few friends. It is a relatively slow flowing river, often times shallow, and winds its way quietly along the wooded river bottoms. It is a kayaker’s river, with many narrow passageways, too narrow for riverboats, and too shallow for motors. It will never be a ‘party river’, but rather one which provides a very contemplative experience to those with the patience to enjoy it.

What do you think about the reduced Steelhead bag limit on certain rivers but not the White? Have you seen an increase in fishing pressure since the bag limit change?

In these two questions Ray is looking for evidence that the special limits first imposed during the spring of 2022 are having unintended consequences. The appointed Michigan Natural Resource Commission approved reducing the Rainbow Trout, in essence Steelhead, bag limit from three per day down to one from March 15 to May 1, but only on six rivers that flow into Lake Michigan. There are numerous other Michigan rivers that end at Lake Michigan, plus all the state’s rivers along Lakes Superior and Huron, where the day limit stays unchanged at three.



Anglers who catch their one-fish day limit on one of these six rivers, in particular the Muskegon and Pere Marquette Rivers, are permitted to catch two more the same day on the White River, so conveniently located in between.

The casual reader should realize that a couple of our (most dedicated) board members and the majority of our guest audience for the Round Table are confirmed White River Steelheaders. Their primary concern, which you might think would be added pressure on the Steelhead population in the White, is actually the potential of cross-river contamination. Didymo (rock snot) and New Zealand mudsnails, two confounding invasives found in the two adjacent rivers, could too easily be introduced into the White River watershed, hitching a ride on waders, nets and the gear of traveling anglers who fail to decontaminate when jumping from river to river.

Any Steelhead discussion can go on for days. For starters it involves fish genetics, homing behavior,

watershed geography, fisheries history, sport-fishing economics, natural resource management practices, and of course people and politics. If you're new to the topic, plan on attending any and all pre-conference introductory sessions. On the night of our Round Table we got no clear answer to Ray's questions, however the wealth of assembled experience yielded one clear recommendation: all involved – kayakers, anglers, on up to the top of the agencies – need to do more to stop aquatic invasive species. AIS! You know it's a big problem when it has its own acronym.



New Zealand mudsnails

Didymo (rock snot)

How best to managing the middle stretch—Hesperia to White Cloud?

Our discussion of Steelhead eventually/inevitably takes us downstream to that other dam. Here returning lake-run Steelhead, along with Coho and Chinook, reach the Hesperia roadblock. There is agreement on the part of both technocrats and die-hards with ready waders in the bed of their pickups. Few of these anadromous species make it over the Hesperia Dam, most having either already gone looking for spawning riffles up the North Branch or will give up (if not harvested) at the Oceana–Newaygo county line, only to retreat to less desirable waters in between. By the way, our guests were interested to learn that a couple of WRWP stalwarts have begun conducting redd surveys in the North Branch.

Between the dams at Hesperia and White Cloud is an isolated fishery that the DNR has struggled to make self sustaining since 1936. During these 85 years, easily a million and a half Brown Trout have been planted. In earlier years 22,000 Brook Trout and over 30,000 Rainbows were tried as well. Possibly it was Mark Heying who recalled that in recent years volunteers also have offered to float this stretch in hopes of seeding four to five potential spots as far downstream as Stone Road. Ray reported that in 2022 the state stocked this middle stretch with 30,000 more sub-legal sized Browns.

All said and done, there has been limited success in the middle stretch. Fisheries biologist Mark Tonello's most recent shock sampling in these waters found some natural reproduction of mainly Browns.

What the Michigan DNR has to say on the matter:

From Richard P. O'Neal's 2012 [report](#): In the section "Analysis and Discussion" O'Neal lays out the case for dam removal very succinctly: "The White Cloud and Hesperia Impoundments have significant negative effects on the production of coldwater fish and other aquatic life in 54.4 miles (69%) of the best habitat through water quality degradation (thermal) or prevention of seasonal fish migrations from Lake Michigan. Water quality degradation from water temperature warming is affecting fish production in 37.9 miles of the river from White Cloud Impoundment to Cleveland Road. Lake Michigan fish are prevented from migrating to 47.7 miles of stream from Hesperia Dam upstream to Elm Avenue in the headwaters. This represents significant, broad scale ecosystem effects that are degrading the overall health of aquatic communities within the watershed as well as Lake Michigan.

From Mark A. Tonello's 2020 [report](#): "White Cloud Dam effectively separates the middle and upper sections of the White River. White Cloud Dam was originally constructed as a logging dam in 1872. The dam has failed or been breached numerous times since then. It was severely damaged in the flood of 1986 and re-built in 1990. It most recently overtopped in 2017, sustaining damage and requiring repairs (Tonello 2020). White Cloud Dam has a profound impact on the White River. It acts as a fish passage barrier, and as a sediment transport barrier (O'Neal 2012). The 42-acre impoundment formed by the dam warms the White River dramatically in the summer. A recent fisheries survey on Lake White Cloud found that the pond is essentially filling in with sediment, with most of it shallower than 6 feet. The fisheries survey also found a poor fish community with few fish that would be considered desirable by anglers (Tonello 2020).

When *Near North Now* ran Part 3 of Newaygo County's Forgotten River, spring of 2019, there was one public comment contending that elimination of the dams would diminish the habitat for Brown and Brook Trout. In the DNR reports reference above, neither author supports this position.

In wrapping up, Ray had a final question for Mark, **What should the White River Watershed Partnership be doing?**

Without hesitation and with absolute certainty, “Take the dam out at White Cloud!” He went on, “People don’t understand it, the relationship to temperature. Even property owners on the river don’t get it.”

Within the month following our April 27th Round Table on Fishing Conditions, one eagle-eyed member of the WRWP board spotted the May 18th EGLE press release [Sixteen Michigan dams get safety upgrade funding through \\$15.3M risk reduction program](#). Look what it reports on the White Cloud dam.

White Cloud, \$222,712. To the City of White Cloud for repairs to the high-hazard, poor-condition White Cloud Dam. The city proposes to complete concrete and metal work that addresses inadequate spillway capacity issues. The city will also complete a dam disposition feasibility study to inform the city on the potential future of the dam.

WRWP thanks Mark Heying for being a part of our program on April 27, 2023 and sharing his thoughts and commitment to our watershed.

Compiled by John Stivers, secretary, WRWP

Image credits:

Topo map from web site of USGS <https://www.usgs.gov/programs/national-geopatial-program/topographic-maps>

Fish images from the Michigan DNR online Fishing Guide for 2023 <https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/things-to-do/fishing/fishing-regulations>

New Zealand mudsnails from Michigan United Conservation Clubs <https://mucc.org/invasive-species-new-zealand-mud-snail/>

Didymo from <https://www.michigan.gov/invasives/id-report/plants/aquatic/didymo-rock-snot>



White River Watershed Partnership is a 501c3 Michigan non-profit membership corporation whose mission is

*to protect the unique characteristics and the
natural resources of the White River Watershed by promoting
education, conservation, restoration and preservation activities.*