

Barbara sent me a request to add her latest book, "The Dynamic Great Lakes" to the LINKS page of LakeOntarioSailing.com. I gladly accepted her request, and solicited any short stories that she may have written. The return e-mail contained this unpublished observations of a steelhead watcher in April

How Many April Greens?

Written by Barbara Spring

In April, it's not necessary to fish for steelhead trout on Michigan's Little Manistee River. Some people, myself for one, like to watch the river flow, the grass grow, and to witness the ancient ritual of return the anadromous rainbow trout perform each year. When the rainbow trout moves out into the Great Lakes, it grows large and steely on mayflies and smaller fish, and when it returns to the stream where it hatched from its egg, it takes on the characteristic pink rainbow and dappled greens to better conceal it in the river.

Unlike some types of salmon that may die after spawning, the steelhead lives to return and spawn year after year guided by their uncanny senses. Their particular place of birth is imprinted in their bodies and nothing short of death can keep them from returning to it. Their senses, especially their senses of taste and smell and extra senses located in lateral lines, lines that run along both sides of their body from the tail to the head, guide them to their traditional place for spawning. Beneath their lateral lines are a system of pores, canals and sense organs linked to the brain. With their lateral lines, fish are able to detect unseen enemies or prey. They sense currents, obstacles with the lateral line's sixth sense, in an intermediate area between hearing and touch; it allows the fish to remember low frequency vibrations and pressure waves built up as the fish passes rocks or other fish. Experiments have shown that fish use their keen sense of smell to help them home in on their traditional spawning grounds imprinted in their memories.

Great strength, speed and endurance make trout and their close relatives the salmon, the champions of fish. Their strength propels them over dams and through swift currents.

One could do worse than be a steelhead watcher in April.

New sweet grass, a grayed green, pikes out of matted river bend grass while the clear, golden river rushes sorting rounded stones, polishing grains of fallen timber, dimpling right and left. A steelhead arcs over the riffle less green than the newborn moss while the sun warms my back through the raggy wool sweater I

thought ugly at first. Many things seem ugly at first: babies, newts, birch bark that peels off like old wallpaper in empty farm houses. The river with its histories of hails and aggregations of rains and snows speaks ceaselessly while undercutting its banks. A few caught steelhead lie tethered to the bank by their jawbones—by their gills and jawbones--to a willow. The willows in their tender first fuzz move in April's breath from the west.

I watch a steelie come up from the depths to follow a fly with its inevitable hook. I watch others fishing with red spawn bags...little bundles of eggs tied into salmon colored nylon net.

I wander downstream to observe fishermen and fisherwomen guarding each spawn bed as jealously as male trout. I jump across hummocks and carefully cross a little tributary to the Manistee on a slippery log. I'd like to see a black bear with her cubs eating the new pikes of grass, turning over rotten logs, standing in the stream cuffing fish toward her cubs.

After a long white Michigan winter, the April greens dance before my eyes: the yellow-green of arbor vitae and dark greens of white pine with silver sun sliding on each breeze blown needle and the green sound of a tree frog singing in the forest. For relief of green, a purple finch with citrus colored birds--yellow pine grosbeaks with lime colored bills.

The cattails are not green yet. They stand fuzzy-headed on one wet leg. The swans build their nests of reedy material like this, not green, but later green springs up round them like bliss as they bend their necks and ruffle their cream-rich wing feathers.

The bubbles of foam that flow around the half submerged log are white on the dark amber water. The river is curly. It turns and rolls in complicated patterns--now this way--now that--now shallow--now deep filling in here with silt, trenching out gullies and leaving stones in sorted piles in various safety deposit boxes underwater, to later be deposited in other underwater vaults.

Then all around me are the ancient, cool dragon greens of lichens--a little celebration of scales on dead wood. A dead steelhead lies in the silt, still and white as the moon except for the eye--curiously alive as I write sitting under a wormy apple tree.

As I watch, slick coral eggs in their stony nests are growing embryos.