

Streams teeming with rainbow smelt

The day was crisp and cool, but pleasantly fresh. It really felt like spring. I approached the brook, one of many coming off a larger river, looking for telltale signs.

The first were seagulls flying overhead. They wheeled in the air like vultures tracking a dying beast, but what was attracting the gulls was anything but dying.

Under the fracas in the air, I looked for movement in the water. I walked along the stream until it turned black in a back eddy. Little splashes spattered above the black splotch.

Brook trout, perhaps? No, it was moving as one, like a submerged oil slick. I gripped my net and waded in.

What was in in this brook near the Northumberland Shore can be found in rivers and brooks all over Nova Scotia in the springtime. The moving black splotch was a school of spawning Rainbow Smelt. It is a timeless ritual as important to other fish species as it is to the smelt themselves.

Smelt are an extremely important food for many sportfish in Nova Scotia, and at this time of year it would be wise to use fly patterns and lures (where legal) that imitate them.

Most Rainbow Smelt spend the fall and winter in shallow coastal waters and estuaries, where they grow and prepare for spawning after the spring thaw.

Some smelt remain in fresh water year-round, and spawn in tributary streams or in some cases along the coastline of lakes.

They are small fish, most being between 10 and 20 centimetres.

In the winter, smelt can be caught ice fishing, a popular sport in some areas. When smelt are spawning in the spring, the most effective way to catch them is by dip netting.

As I waded into the stream there was an immediate reaction



JOE FITZGERALD CHASING PISCES

from the smelt.

Inexperienced at this type of fishing, I slapped the net down clumsily and split the school in half. The net made an embarrassing sound, like a belly flop at the Olympics.

The seagulls seemed to be shaking their heads at me as I lifted an empty net and looked at the clear water. Trying to catch smelt in broad daylight like this was futile.

Now that I had my spot marked, I left, and returned at dusk. Spawning smelt get on the move after dark, and I positioned

myself strategically above the pool where I had found them.

Once I saw the tiny splashes approaching, instead of slapping the net down, I reached out and gently submerged it, sweeping it almost along the bottom in a downstream arc. When it came out of the water it had two small smelt flopping around in it.

They were dark green on the back, but their sides shimmered with a

pink, purple and blue iridescence in the twilight. They also had fearsome-looking teeth. I marveled and released them.

Again, I gently swept the net along the bottom, but this time lifted it quickly. The net emerged filled with smelt.

Satisfied with my prowess as a dip netter, I dunked the quivering mass and let them continue their frantic run.

Joe Fitzgerald is a freelance writer living in Halifax.

RAINBOW SMELT FACTS

- Rainbow smelt spawn in the spring, typically after the lakes and rivers thaw out. There is a widely held belief that the last snowstorm in spring, known as the "smelt snow" will trigger the annual spawning run.
- Freshly caught smelt smell like cucumbers. This may be the origin of their name. The smell wears off after smelt are frozen or preserved.
- Smelt can only be dip netted Monday to Thursday in Nova Scotia from April 1 until June 15, with not more than 30 maximum possession by dip net.



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