

COLDWATER TASK GROUP EXECUTIVE SUMMARY REPORT MARCH 2024

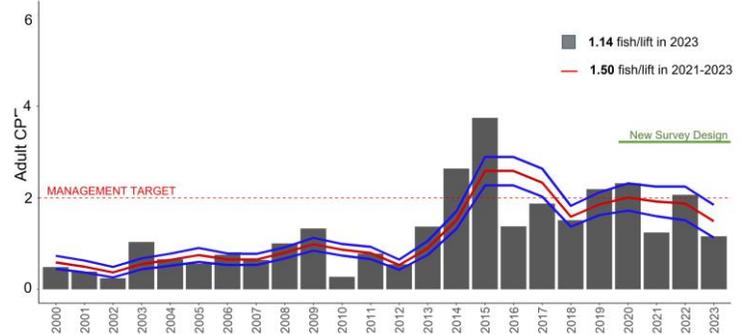


Introduction

This year's Lake Erie Committee (LEC) Coldwater Task Group (CWTG) has produced an Executive Summary Report encapsulating information from the CWTG annual report. Three charges were addressed by the CWTG during 2023-2024: (1) Report on the status of the cold-water fish community, (2) Participation in the Integrated Management of Sea Lamprey Process on Lake Erie, outline and prescribe the needs of the Lake Erie Sea Lamprey management program, and (3) Maintenance of an electronic database of Lake Erie salmonid stocking information. The complete report is available from the Great Lakes Fishery Commission's Lake Erie Committee Coldwater Task Group website at <http://www.glfc.org/lake-erie-committee.php> or upon request from an LEC or CWTG representative.

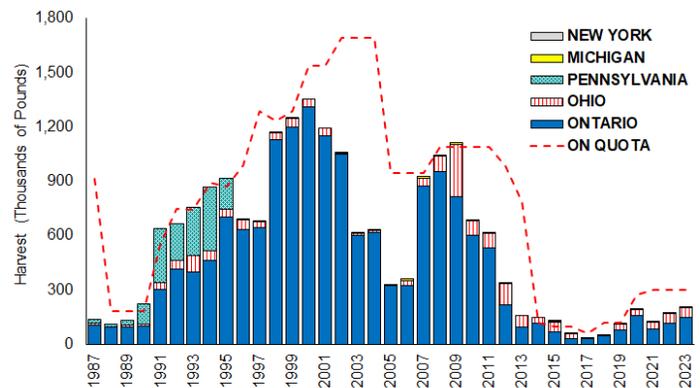
Lake Trout

A total of 274 lake trout were collected in the Coldwater Assessment Survey in 2023. Adult (age 5+) relative abundance in standard nets decreased to 1.1 fish per lift, below the target of 2.0 described in the 2021 Lake Trout Management Plan. There were 22 age classes and four strains captured in 2022. Lake trout ages 3, and 13 were the dominate cohorts. Ages 8, 11, 14, 15, 16 also contributed notably. Lake trout older than age-10 continue to increase in abundance and comprised 60% of the total catch. Finger Lakes and Lake Champlain strains comprised the majority of the population. The Partnership Survey caught 48 lake trout in 2023. The Partnership abundance in the east basin, 0.78 fish/lift increased from 2022 (0.37 fish/lift) and is above the time series mean (0.45 fish/lift).



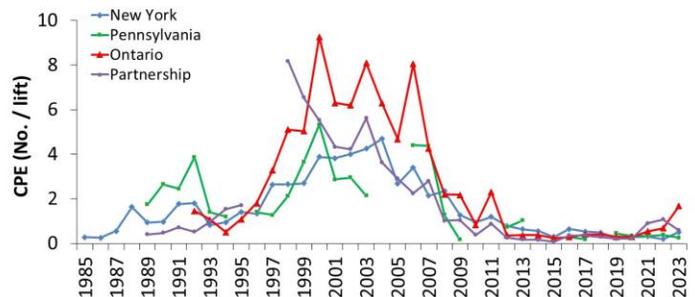
Lake Whitefish

Lake whitefish harvest in 2023 was 204,233 pounds, distributed between Ontario (73%), Ohio (27%), and Pennsylvania (<1%). Harvest increased 20% from 2022 and remains low compared to previous decades. Gill net fishery age composition ranged from ages 3 to 20 with ages 4, 5, and 8 representing the majority of the harvest. Relative to recent decades, lake whitefish survey and fishery status indicators in 2023 were moderate or better. Assessment surveys caught lake whitefish from ages 2 to 30, with age compositions that partially overlapped the 2023 gill net fishery. Bottom trawl and gill net survey indices forecast modest recruitment of age 3 lake whitefish in 2024 and 2025 with better recruitment expected in 2026.



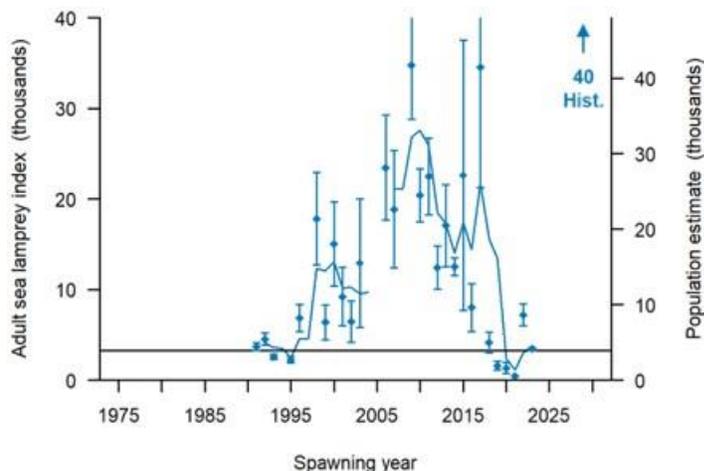
Burbot

Total commercial harvest of burbot in Lake Erie in 2023 was 3,416 pounds. All was incidental. Burbot abundance and biomass indices from annual assessment surveys remained at low levels, relative to the time series, however 2023 catch rates were elevated in some surveys. The burbot catch rate in the Interagency Coldwater Assessment Survey averaged 0.99 fish/lift, a decadal high while those in the Ontario Partnership Assessment Survey averaged 0.59 fish/lift. Burbot in the Coldwater Assessment Survey and Partnership ranged in age from 2 to 19 and the largest age class present was 4 year olds. Round goby was the dominant prey item in burbot diets.



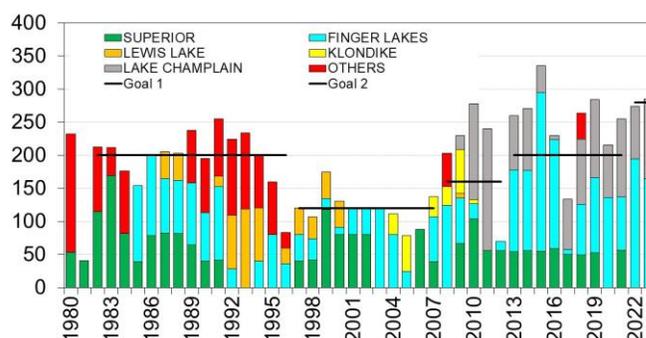
Sea Lamprey

The A1-A3 wounding rate on lake trout over 532 mm was 8.3 wounds per 100 fish in 2023. This is above the target rate of 5.0 wounds per 100 fish. Large lake trout continue to be the preferred targets for sea lamprey in Lake Erie. The Index of Adult Sea Lamprey Abundance (3,500) represents a decrease from last year however the three year average-index is above the target of 3,300. No lampricide treatments were completed in 2023 because larval assessments the previous season did not identify populations requiring immediate treatment. A new sea lamprey infestation was detected in the River Raisin.



Lake Erie Salmonid Stocking

A total of 2,172,324 yearling salmonids were stocked in Lake Erie in 2023, which was slightly below the long-term average (1990-2022). Lake trout stocking finally met the 280,000 goal, and two different strains were stocked in 2023. By species, there were 284,985 yearling lake trout stocked in the east basin of Lake Erie, 103,394 brown trout stocked in Pennsylvania waters, and 1,783,945 rainbow/steelhead trout stocked across all five State and Provincial jurisdictional waters.



Steelhead

The summary of steelhead stocking in Lake Erie by jurisdictional waters for 2023 is: Pennsylvania (1,028,892; 57.7%), Ohio (464,898; 26%), New York (173,827; 9.7%), Ontario (60,533; 3.4%), and Michigan (55,795; 3%). Total steelhead stocking in 2023 (1.78 million) was below the long-term average. Annual stocking numbers have been consistently in the 1.7-2.0 million fish range since 1993. The summer open lake steelhead harvest was estimated at 13,512 steelhead across New York, Pennsylvania and Ohio and below the long-term average harvest of 23,503. Tributary angler surveys, representing the majority (>90%) of the targeted fishery effort for steelhead. Catch rates remain high and there are planned creel surveys in the future in most jurisdictions. The Partnership index gill net catch rate for steelhead (0.03 fish/lift) was low relative to the 25-year time series (4th percentile).

