

## Born to be Wild ... and Free

### Release Ethic Keeps Self-Sustaining Brule Trout Strong

By Dick Ellis

**D**amian Wilmot was in no hurry to lift a wild steelhead or brown from the Bois Brule River. That would come with time, as it always has since his father first handed him a fly rod at age five and introduced him to this special addiction and its certain promise of natural highs.

So Wilmot stood again with the Brule Thursday, reading the water and laying down his stone fly or egg fly again and again to ride the current over those places where his instincts told him a trout might be holding. He laid out his patience, too, and he took his fix. Long before the first steelhead rose to the fly.

This is beautiful Douglas County. A river runs through it. It also runs through Damian Wilmot. Three decades after a father first showed a son just how it's all done.

"I love this river," he said. "I don't go out steelheading on the Brule on any given day expecting to catch fish. But I go out of my way to find the rivers like this with self-sustaining, wild trout. I don't want to sound arrogant because some rivers need stocked fish. But there is just something special about a wild fish."

"For these steelhead, their home is this river, and each of these fish is doing their own part to sustain the species. They don't need anything from us. With the exception of releasing them again when we do catch them."

Maybe these steelhead making the journey inland from Lake Superior don't



Fly rod in hand and net on his back, Damian Wilmot drops from the bordering ridges to reintroduce himself to the Bois Brule River below in Douglas County. ON this April 17th afternoon, Wilmot will tangle with both Lake Superior steelhead and brown trout. He releases all fish caught. (Ellis)

need man. But man, from the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) fisheries experts to the Brule River Sportsmen's Club, to the Wild Rivers Chapter of Trout Unlimited, lends the occasional hand regardless to ensure that the fish and the spawning areas necessary for the trout to naturally reproduce are adequately protected.

"Dennis Pratt (DNR Fisheries Biologist) saw to it that the one-fish bag limit

with a 26-inch minimum size limit was adopted," Wilmot said. "That, along with a growing catch and release ethic by the fishermen, has made a tremendous difference. It used to be a five fish bag and a lot lower size limit. People were carrying backpacks of steelhead out of here."

To emphasize the need for proper regulations and self-restraint, Wilmot said that more anglers each year fish the Brule originating near Solon Springs at the north end

of Lake St. Croix before eventually feeding Lake Superior 44 miles to the northeast, than the steelhead that inhabit it. He asks a visitor to consider the consequences of lesser restrictions.

“Quite literally, more people fish the Brule than there are fish,” said Wilmot, a part-time guide from South Range, Vice President of the Brule River Sportsmen’s Club and fulltime machinist. “If everyone kept one fish, think about the damage to our fishery. I stress a catch and release ethic. My clients know before we go that every steelhead they catch will be released. Oh I’ve made exceptions when someone catches a real trophy for the wall. Then I might bring up the option.”

To help the fish help themselves, the Sportsmen’s Club and Trout Unlimited have also worked closely with state fisheries managers to make natural reproduction easier though improved habitat. “We have created and improved several spawning areas more successfully than I think anyone ever imagined,” Wilmot said. “We even had a black hawk helicopter hauling in gravel to remote parts of the Brule.”

Thursday, three hours of massaging the beautiful Brule eventually coaxed the good fight from three steelhead and two browns. Only the browns, one at 16-inches, surrendered to a man with a fly rod whose only priority was to get the fish back in the water anyway.

“I just love this river area,” he said again during the walk out through the hardwood ridges. “I hunt here. I fish here. But I am a catch and release advocate. It’s the future of our fishery.” *W*

#### IF YOU GO...

For more information on Bois Brule River fishing opportunities or fishing guide services contact Superior Fly Anglers at 1-715-395-9520. Visit the Brule River Sportsmen’s Club [www.brulerriversportsmensclub.com](http://www.brulerriversportsmensclub.com). For information on hunting, fishing, and other tourism activities offered in Wisconsin’s beautiful far northwest, contact the Superior-Douglas County Convention & Visitors Bureau at 1-800-942-5313, [www.superiorchamber.org](http://www.superiorchamber.org), or [chamber@superiorchamber.org](mailto:chamber@superiorchamber.org).

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## Protecting Wild Superior Trout a Priority



*Damian Wilmot works the Bois Brule River on April 17th for wild steelhead. The Vice President of the Brule River Sportsmen’s Club will lose three steelhead in-river from Lake Superior on this afternoon and land and release two beautiful brown trout to 16-inches*

While Lake Michigan biologists’ major concern relating to the spring steelhead run is enough water, and enough brood fish and eggs collected to sustain the population another year, Lake Superior fisheries experts must adequately protect a wild, self-sustaining strain of steelhead for the exact same purpose.

Numerous tributaries from the Bois Brule in the west to Fish Creek in the east offer a spring run of steelhead off of Superior generally peaking in mid-April. Of these, he said, the largest Lake Superior tributary, the Brule, already begins to see fish migrating off the big lake in August.

“The Wild Brule River strain of self-sustaining steelhead continues to move into the Brule until winter interrupts them, according to DNR Fisheries Biologist Dennis Pratt. “Fifty to 80 percent of the run spends the winter in the Brule. The river is big with lots of holding water. The run continues again after deicing. In early March there was 20 to 30-inches of ice on

the Brule. Few steelhead over-winter in the smaller tributaries. Most come in in the spring after deicing.”

Unlike Lake Michigan tributaries which either have low water from lack of snow melt-off or rain, or high water from heavy precipitation which eventually runs down again, Pratt said the Brule maintains an extremely good base flow year-round. Spring snow melt-off may raise the river level to an extremely high level, until it drops again to that base flow.

Even with significant ice, Brule spring water and spring melt-off generally initiate resumption of the steelhead migration just after the snow melt with the peak of the run generally around the second week of April. The run is so weather dependent, Pratt said, that the journey can resume as early as March or as late as May.

Several weeks ago much of the Brule opened for fishing, an event celebrated by a vast number of anglers. That popularity, and the self-sustaining resource, necessitates restrictive regulations on both Lake Superior and its streams of one steelhead at a minimum of 26-inches.

“We need to make sure enough of those fish make it to lay eggs for the next generation,” Pratt said. “That’s different than Lake Michigan because these fish are self-sustaining. The reason for the 26-inch minimum is that it ensures that nearly all the steelhead spawn at least once before their harvested. During years with a long growing season, a few steelhead ascending the rivers for the first time may exceed 26 inches. But generally, we’re protecting the brood stock.” *W*

