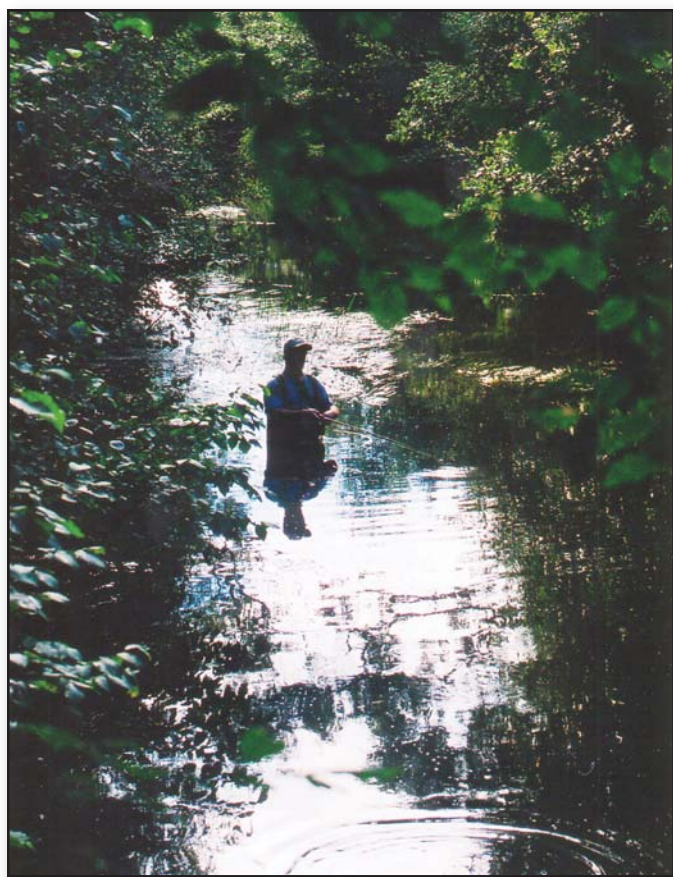


Dick Ellis is on medical leave.
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On the Straight and Narrow

History, brook trout flow with Portage County drainage ditches

By Dick Ellis



Ditch #2 in the Buena Vista Marsh reflects another Steve Henske cast for Brook Trout. (Ellis)

The Buena Vista Marsh in southwest Portage County had given Steve Henske better summer evenings of trout wrestling.

The brookie that left the dark water of a deep hole to sting a flashing rooster tail, though, was worth the wait.

Henske brought the fish

closer to surrender in the clearer shallows and rifted sand, the ultralight doubled over, the fish protesting the whole idea with a series of four beautiful boils. "Nice brookie," he said quietly as I continued to work the camera from high on the bank. "In fact, 13-1/2 inches."

My friend had taken even bigger brook trout here. And more fish. But Henske was on the straight and narrow of Ditch #2 within the Portage County Drainage District. No meandering trout stream here finding its own way across the pages of time. On the ditches, things can change, including the degree of fishing success. Henske comes to catch a unique piece of Wisconsin history, almost as much as another brookie or brown.

According to Ed Wade, Chairman of the Portage County Drainage District Commission, in the late 1800s Bradley University of Peoria Illinois would bring Students to the Buena Vista Marsh area for hands-on experiences in agriculture. Impressed with the fertile soil here, The University began to purchase

parcels of land, develop and sell the property, then buy more. That is the reason, he said, that many of the farmhouses in the area today are similar appearing.

In 1903, Bradley University along with local property owners began the legal process of creating the Portage County Drainage District. The goal of the district and draining the marsh was to create more productive land with longer growing seasons.

Shortly after 1903, with necessary easements purchased from private landowners, the University began to dredge seven original drainage ditches. The task was completed with a floating barge and mechanical shovel. The work crew lived on the barge.

Seven ditches proved inadequate to meet drainage goals, and three additional ditches placed between the original veins were dredged in 1913. The ditches are identified numerically, one through ten. But due to the two separate dredging projects and ditch placement, the ditches are not referenced chronologi-

cally on maps.

With time and erosion dictating the need for maintenance repairs by the depression years of the 1930s, the ditches were re-dredged. Wooden decks placed as road bridges during the original dredging allowed barge shovels, starting upstream, to lift the decks, dredge through the roadways, and reset the wooden bridge again.

With employment opportunities sorely lacking in the depression era, Wade said workers were hired to construct concrete dams on the ditches. The structures were designed to control underground peat fires and hopefully make the surrounding soil more agriculturally productive.

From the beginning, four of the ditches held a brook trout population by connection with natural streams. Buena Vista Creek meandered through the marsh and became ditch #2 with dredging and straightening. Ditch #4 connected with Creek Four and Duck Creek. And Ditch #6 and Ditch #5 flowed into 10 Mile Creek and became the north and south branch of that fishery.

(The uniqueness of the ditches as trout water can be appreciated visually on page 19 of the DNR Trout Fishing Regulations and Guide, the outdoor bible of trout anglers. In the 2002 regulation, six of the ditches are categorized as trout water.)

The Potage County Drainage District has jurisdiction over 60,000 acres. Its primary purpose is to provide proper growing environment for the agricultural interests in the area. Because of that,



A highway bridge lets Steve Henske continue his hunt for brook trout upstream on Ditch #2 in the Buena Vista Marsh. (Ellis)

dredging of the more than 100 miles of ditches periodically continues today, not always with the approval of some trout anglers.

Wade, of Bancroft, said he has one of the three positions on the Drainage Commission because he manages farming operations for OK Ray Family Farms of Plover. Business operations include cultivating acreage within the Buena Vista Marsh. And dredging the ditches, he said, actually benefits trout fishing.

"Lots of people think we destroy habitat, but stagnant water very rarely holds trout," Wade said. "These ditches have fish because we dredge, keep the water flowing, and work closely with Trout Unlimited (TU) and the DNR to maintain a quality fishery. Our first responsibility is to eliminate water from the fields for the farmers. These lands were purchased with private funds. But we do maintain the ditches to enhance fishing too. And when we do have to impact the ditches, they recover quite well."

DNR Fisheries Biologist Al Hauber concurs on both counts. Not only is dredging a district right, he said, the fishery remains in excellent shape with naturally reproducing populations of brookies. And browns that were initially established through stocking.

"People have to be aware that the drainage district has the right to do this ditch dredging," he said. "And that fishing conditions may change. You could have very good fishing one year and it might change because of the maintenance dredging."

Indicative of the quality fishery, Hauber said that 2001 state shocking surveys on Ditch #4 showed strong brook trout populations. Despite a heavy fish kill on that water discovered last year from aerial crop overspraying. The spraying brought legal charges.

"We found 200 to 300 brook trout dead in the



Steve Henske prepares to release a beautiful brook trout on Ditch #2 in the Buena Vista Marsh. (Ellis)

middle of the stream, but still found good numbers of brook trout with some big fish," he said. "On August 16, 2001, we sampled 300 feet of Ditch Four and found 80 brook trout. Then we did another stretch and found 283 brook trout up to 10-inches. Those are good numbers, despite the kill."

The fishery brings avid trout anglers like Steve Henske back annually. For the Stevens Point resident, every year since he enrolled at UW-Stevens Point in 1979. Personal introductions with good populations of brookies from nine to 13 inches, and browns in the 17-inch class will do that to a trout man.

"My biggest brookie here was 14-1/2 inches and I've seen friends take browns up to 20 inches," he said. "The ditches seem to go in cycles. What's good now might not be next year. You have to put your time in to find the right ditch. It's a unique experience...trout fishing on the prairie." ^oW_o

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