



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

INFORMATION SERVICE

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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Whether there is reasonable hope that the Great Lakes smelt will reestablish itself as an important fishery resource will be determined this spring when runs of this small, silvery fish normally swarm into the tributary streams of Lake Michigan and other Great Lakes to spawn, Dr. John Van Oosten reported today to Dr. Ira N. Gabrielson, Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

The smelt of Lake Michigan, center of the Great Lakes smelt fishery, were visited by a mysterious disaster during the winter of 1943, when almost the entire population was wiped out. Whether the destruction was due to an epidemic or some other natural cause has never been determined.

Although it was believed that almost no spawning occurred in 1943, reports of scattered runs in 1944 gave rise to the hope that at least a remnant of the runs had escaped destruction and might in time reestablish the species.

Dr. Van Oosten, a Fish and Wildlife Service biologist of long experience in the Great Lakes area, said that the winter catches of smelts in the Green Bay area were disappointing, lifts in January and February seldom exceeding 30 pounds. However, 81 percent of the males in samples of the winter-caught smelts were two years old, and had therefore been spawned after the onset of the disaster, while 51 percent of the females belonged to the same age group, Dr. Van Oosten's studies showed.

"We are now anxiously awaiting the reports on the spring spawning runs to learn whether the smelts have come back in any considerable numbers," Dr. Van Oosten said.

Mature smelts--those two years old and older--are ready to spawn as soon as the ice breaks up in the spring. At this time they leave the large lakes and run up the tributary streams, traveling at night.

Before the 1943 disaster, the spawning runs consisted of incredible numbers of smelts. Former spring catches by dipnetters in the Green Bay area ran to about six million pounds; about the same quantity was taken in the Menominee River. During the spring runs amateur fishermen took even larger quantities of smelts than commercial operators.

The smelt is not native to the Great Lakes but was introduced from New England to provide food for salmon, which was also being introduced. A series of plantings was made between 1906 and 1921. The salmon failed to survive; the smelts, however, multiplied beyond all expectation, escaped into Lake Michigan, and later spread throughout the Great Lakes.

First considered a nuisance by those who feared they might compete with native species, the smelt later came to support one of the more important commercial fisheries of the Great Lakes and, through its attraction for tourists during the smelt-dipping jamborees, became an economic asset to many Great Lakes communities.

Carload lots of smelts are normally shipped to New York, Boston, Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago, and other cities.

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