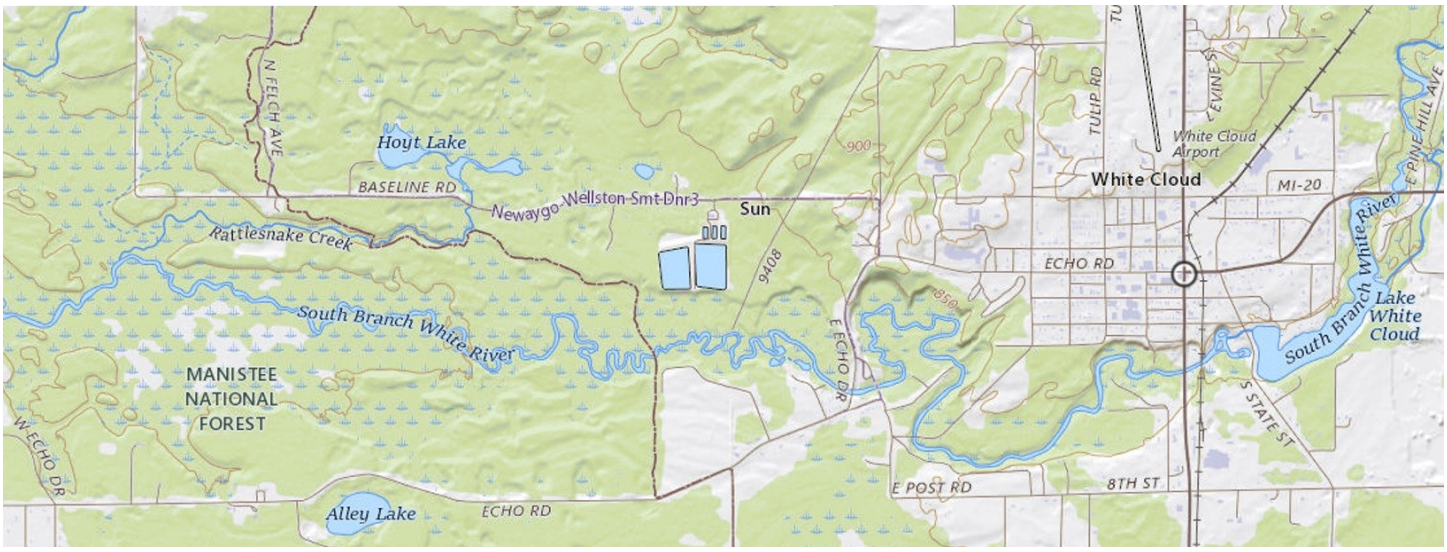
WHITE RIVER FISHING CONDITIONS: Round Table Discussion

On April 27, 2023, Mark Heying, along with several interested guests, joined our monthly board meeting, taking questions from our Chair Ray Schinler for the better part of an hour. Mark is a professed dedicated dry fly fisher and writer who has contributed to *Near North Now*, a Newaygo County based web publication.



Ray's lead off question: **What parts of the watershed do you fish?**

Mark replied he kayak-fishes the South Branch of the White from below White Cloud Dam down to Rattlesnake Creek.

There are two obvious launch sites. The White Cloud Rotary Park is just below the White Cloud Dam, off S. State Street east of M37. Next, a little less than two miles downstream is Flowing Wells Park, off E. Echo Drive. The White Cloud Blue Water Trail connects these two parks. Volunteer cleanup and restoration efforts earned it the Michigan Water Trail designation in 2017.

From here to Rattlesnake Creek, about where Mark has the luxury of taking out in his own back yard, there are about six more miles of river to kayak (River Mile points 68 to 62, starting at Lake Michigan = 0). As the crow flies, its only 2.4 miles. Between these two points there is a drop of about 24 feet, that works out for a stream valley slope of 10 ft per mile (0.19%). The slope down the meandering channel is considerably less (0.08%).

All these values are typical of what Mark see making his way down the river. A predominately bank-fed alluvial river coursing its way through a fairly flat "pitted outwash plain" in a valley between moraine ridges north and south. In the 1990s DNR found that between Echo Road (River Mile 68) and Bingham Road (River Mile 58.5) the stable summer flow rate increased about 15%. As the artesian well at Flowing Wells Park suggests, the ground is anxious to discharge it water.

(I need a better description of the river cross-section, width, depth, bottom conditions, amount of different types of habitat. Has WRWP ever completed an assessment in this run?) The river averages about 25 feet wide and 24 inches deep, has predominately a sandy bottom, manly runs with overhanging banks, a few riffles along the way, a numerous wader-topping holes on the outside of the bends.

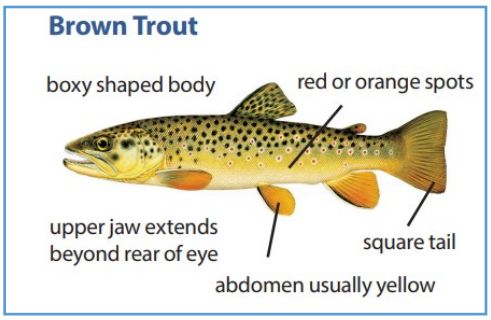
If you're after solitude, this float's for you. Shortly after going under the Echo Drive bridge, civilization

begins to disappear and the river flows into Manistee National Forest. Though buffered out of view, the trip passes the lagoons of the White Cloud Pump Station to the north off Baseline Road. (??What happens across the river in the field with six "crop circles" just west of Glory of the Latter House Ministries???) Mark pointed out there is limited access, a few fire roads ending at the river. He may spot hikers making their ford (slosh) across the White, the spot nearly the midpoint of the 4,800-mile North Country Trail.

Above the banks, the riparian landscape is post-lumbering forested wetlands of mucky hydric soils of low oxygen in the top foot and a half, characterized by wooded vegetation—predominately conifers such as second-generation white pines mixed with hardwoods reaching 20 feet tall or taller . Beneath them is an understory of younger trees and shrubs, you may find ruminants of cedar swamps. The herbaceous layer has an array of Michigan's favorites, think skunk cabbage, trilliums , mayapples and trout lilies. Correlating hatches to when they bloom is the true mark of your scientific angler.

What species do you target?

"Brown trout, and the occasional chub." Next Mark quickly qualified his answer, "The water gets too warm" for brookies and few, if any, rainbows making it above the Hesperia dam.



What is your assessment of the current state of the fishery?

Speaking to this specific stretch, Mark responds, "Not a great fishery." He elaborates, year over year there has been "no major change."

Several years back Mark was among the dozen or so gung-ho White River Kayakers Coalition that took on opening passage over the 30-miles down to Hesperia dam. The group's efforts stayed well within DNR approved protocols on the width of cross-fallen tree openings. Before winter of 2022 was the last time Mark had made his the run down his familiar stretch, "There now one massive tree down requiring portage." He responded to the inquiry from his neighbor to the south that his winter bear count remains at zero.

Both Ray and Mark are seasoned anglers, so knowledgeable the regs never came up. But your not-so writer had to troll through the 2023 Michigan Fishing Guide to page 43, Inland Trout & Salmon Stream Regulations, then check the online maps to determine it's a Green Class 1 Trout Stream, open from the last Saturday in April through September 30. To be a keeper, browns need to be 8 inches, rainbows and steelhead 10 inches. Good for you if you were among those who already knew this, but don't forget to get your license.

From ***Near North Now***

Newaygo County's Forgotten River Series on the White River by Charles Chandler and Mark Heying

10/15/2018 Part one: The voyage of discovery Newaygo County Public Opinion - Near North Now ◦Celebrating the White River Kayaking Collaboration project completion of passage from White Cloud to Hesperia.

01/30/2019 Part two: The White River: Newaygo County's Forgotten River Part II - Near North Now ◦"The White River is clearly undervalued, misunderstood, is somewhat ignored, and with few friends." ◦How White River Kayaking Collaborative follows DNR guidance in opening passage.

04/25/2019 Part three: The State of the Fisheries and Water Quality Newaygo County Public Opinion - Near North Now ◦"Simply put, expert studies show that the White Cloud and Hesperia Dams take the heart out of the White River fishery."

06/23/2019 Part four: Why White Cloud and Hesperia Can't Afford the Dams Newaygo County Public Opinion - Near North Now ◦Making the economic case for the potential of the White River by taking a visit north to the Pere Marquette River and seeing what it provides the citizens of Lake County and its county seat Baldwin.

As to tackle, Mark "sticks with basic" dry flies, even though he sees few "heavy hatches." He explains there's too much wood mass below surface to waste on sinking lines, nymphs and weights. Life's too short, but with patience, multiple casts, he reassures us the fish are there. He often gets his five-fish daily limit, but doesn't recall an outing landing three 15" or larger.

How long into the season does the trout fishery hold up into the summer?

It's like the old joke, the fishing's not too good, but fortunately the season's not too long. Please take a look at the articles Mark and Charles Chandler wrote on the river for *Near North Now* (find links above). In Part 3 they go deep into dam history, both White Cloud and Hesperia. If you're in for some scholarship, follow their referenced link to DNR fisheries biologist Richard P. O'Neal's 2012 report. In it O'Neal estimates 8 feet of water over the sediment in the White Cloud Impoundment. Eight years later, DNR fisheries biologist Mark A. Tonello reports in the 2020 Status of the Fishery Resource Report it's filled in so there is only a 6-foot depth. During our discussion in 2023 our guest guessed it's now only four feet.

Tonello wrote that as far back as 1955, W. H. Tody (a decade or more before he succeeded H. A. Tanner as DNR chief of fisheries) was concerned about the thermal impact from the impoundment. Again in the summers of 1995 and 1996 O'Neal and company did a full EKG on the upper watershed, recording temperatures in several locations. At Echo Bridge July 1996, one day-time high reached 76°F and over 70°F a dozen more times.

Over the last quarter century, summer stream temperatures continue to risen. The EnviroDIY recording station installed near the mouth of Rattlesnake Creek by Trout Unlimited with ongoing support from WRWP documents July 2022 day-time highs approach 80°F. (See additional information at the end.)

Mark Heying sums it up, "It's not uncommon to see some dead fish." Any surviving trout keep to the deepest holes and hide out during the day.

Have you heard of "Hoot Owl Hours"?

Stress on trout is very much a function of water temperature. Even studies on "catch-and-release" practices found fish returned to a warm stream may not fully recover and could die. Though not (yet) adopted in Michigan, the Montana "Hoot Owl Hours" restrictions will close fishing by designated river segments from 2pm till midnight. To Ray's delight he found that Mark was both aware of the concept and supports it.

From *Near North Now*, ***Newaygo's Forgotten River , part two***

Compared to the Pere Marquette and Muskegon Rivers, the White River is clearly undervalued, misunderstood, is somewhat ignored, and with few friends. It is a relatively slow flowing river, often times shallow, and winds its way quietly along the wooded river bottoms. It is a kayaker's river, with many narrow passageways, too narrow for riverboats, and too shallow for motors. It will never be a 'party river', but rather one which provides a very contemplative experience to those with the patience to enjoy it.

What do you think about the reduced Steelhead bag limit on certain rivers but not the White? Have you seen an increase in fishing pressure since the bag limit change?

The casual reader may not know that a couple of our (most dedicated) board members and the majority of our guest audience for the Round Table were confirmed White River steelheaders. In these two questions Ray is looking for evidence that the special limits imposed during the last two seasons on the Pere Marquette River to the north and the Muskegon River to the south are driving the traveling angler to the White where there are no special limits.

This discussion takes Mark out of his home stretch. The dam at Hesperia creates a barrier for all lake-fun fish. Both technocrats and die-hard steelheaders feel these species spawn either up the North Branch or give

up (if not harvested) at Hesperia and retreat to less than ideal waters down stream. However, there were readers who commented to Mark's *Forgotten River* article expressing the opinion that dam elimination would diminish the habitat of brown and brook trout. In the several DNR reports reference here there is no evidence support this position. Mark agreed.

Our guest was interested to learn that WRWP has begin conducting annual redd surveys in the North Branch to better track the spanning activities of steelhead.

How best to managing the middle stretch—Hesperia to White Cloud?

Between the dams is an isolated fishery that the DNR has struggled to make self sustaining for at least 85 years. Possibly it was Mark who recalled that in recent years volunteers have offered to float this stretch in hopes of seeding four to five potential spots as far downstream as Stone Road.

Ray pointed out that in 2022 the state stocked this middle stretch with 30,000 sub-legal sized browns, and that Fisheries biologist Mark Tonello's most recent shock sampling found some natural reproduction of mainly browns.

In wrapping up the conversation Ray had a final question for Mark, **What should the White River Watershed Partnership be doing?**

Without hesitation and delivered with absolute certainty, "Take the dam out at White Cloud!" He went on, "People don't understand it, the relationship to temperature. Even property owners on the river don't get it."

Within the month following our April 27th Round Table on Fishing Conditions, one eagle eyed member of the WRWP board spotted May 18th EGLE press release Sixteen Michigan dams get safety upgrade funding through $15.3M risk reduction program. Look what it reports on the White Cloud dam.

> **White Cloud, $222,712.** To the City of White Cloud for repairs to the high-hazard, poor-condition White Cloud Dam. The city proposes to complete concrete and metal work that addresses inadequate spillway capacity issues. The city will also complete a dam disposition feasibility study to inform the city on the potential future of the dam.

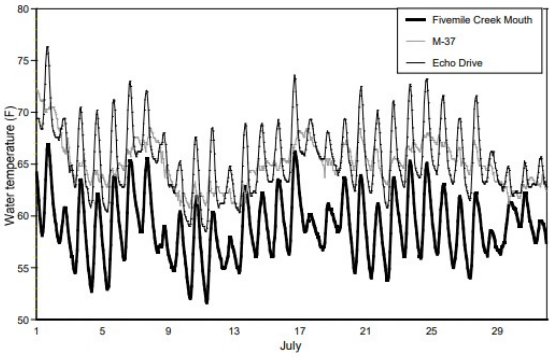
The Michigan DNR's say on the matter

From O'Neal's 2012 report: "The White River has an extensive history of fisheries management ."

Later O'Neall provides the following detail: "Brown trout were the primary species of fish stocked into the river between White Cloud and Hesperia from 1936 through 2010 . Some brook trout were stocked during 1937 to 1940 and rainbow trout were stocked sporadically (six years) from 1940 to 1974. Stocking of brown trout continues in this river section because survival of juvenile and adult fish is low due to high water temperatures."

In the section "Analysis and Discussion " he lays out the case for dam removal very succinctly: " The White Cloud and Hesperia Impoundments have significant negative effects on the production of coldwater fish and other aquatic life in 54.4 miles (69%) of the best habitat through water quality degradation (thermal) or prevention of seasonal fish migrations from Lake Michigan. Water quality degradation from water temperature warming is affecting fish production in 37.9 miles of the river from White Cloud Impoundment to Cleveland Road. Lake Michigan fish are prevented from migrating to 47.7 miles of stream from Hesperia Dam upstream to Elm Avenue in the headwaters. This represents significant, broad scale ecosystem effects that are degrading the overall health of aquatic communities within the watershed as well as Lake Michigan. Important species of fish that are affected include brown trout, steelhead, Chinook salmon, suckers, small forage fish and possibly lake sturgeon in the lower river.

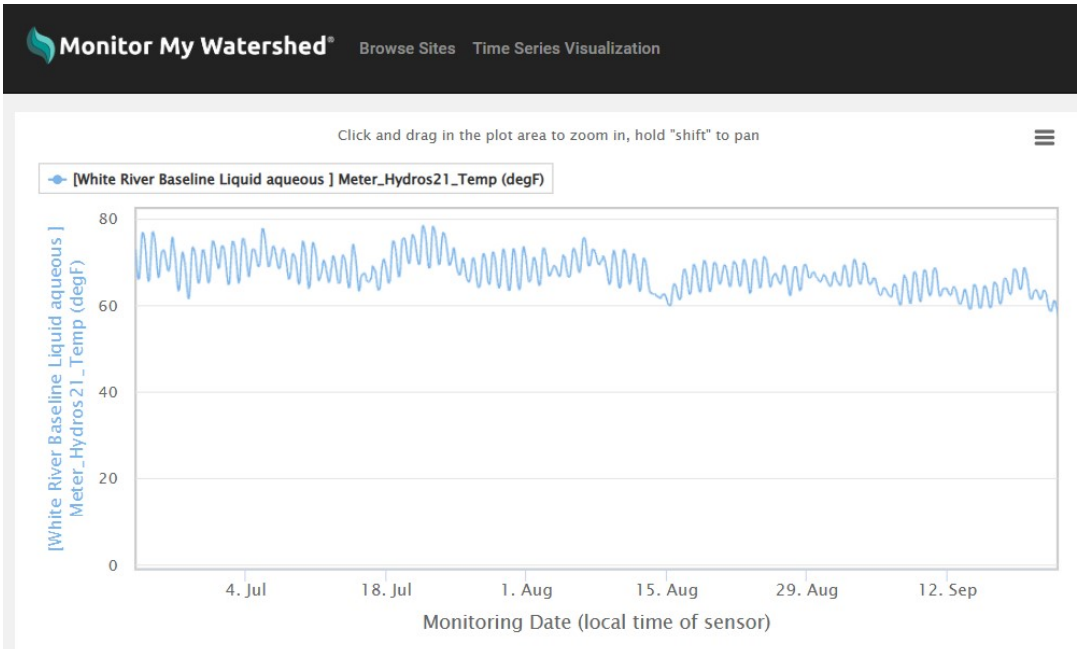
From Tonello's 2020 report: "White Cloud Dam effectively separates the middle and upper sections of the White River. White Cloud Dam was originally constructed as a logging dam in 1872. The dam has failed or been breached numerous times since then. It was severely damaged in the flood of 1986 and re-built in 1990. It most recently overtopped in 2017, sustaining damage and requiring repairs (Tonello 2020). White Cloud Dam has a profound impact on the White River. It acts as a fish passage barrier, and as a sediment transport barrier (O'Neal 2012). The 42-acre impoundment formed by the dam warms the White River dramatically in the summer. A recent fisheries survey on Lake White Cloud found that the pond is essentially filling in with sediment, with most of it shallower than 6 feet. The fisheries survey also found a poor fish community with few fish that would be considered desirable by anglers (Tonello 2020).



WRWP looks to others to recommend habitat criteria (ideal to critical) for the species common in our watershed. Water temperature is definitely part of the criteria, but is complicated and involved. We support the efforts to collect and track such data.

The graph to the left is of water temperatures collected by Michigan DNR in July 1996 above and below White Cloud Impoundment.

The graph below is also of water temperatures reported on Monitor My Watershed for the summer of 2022. The recording devise is located upstream of where Rattlesnake Creek joins the South Branch.



White River Watershed Partnership

White River Watershed Partnership is a 501c3 Michigan non-profit membership corporation whose mission is

To protect the unique characteristics and the natural resources of the White River Watershed by promoting education, conservation, restoration and preservation activities.