OLA/DEC Cormorant Summit Produces Big Results

A November meeting between leaders of the Oneida Lake Association and New York State DEC is leading to big results: DEC will run an expanded, professional cormorant program to keep the birds in check from their spring arrival until the migrating flocks leave Oneida Lake in the fall.

Starting in April, DEC will assign two wildlife staff to the lake at least weekly, conducting scientific cormorant counts and nest destruction. If more than 100 cormorants are observed, DEC will start harassment efforts twice a week until the number of cormorants drops back below 100. In August, as migrant cormorants return to the lake in larger numbers, DEC will increase its wildlife managers’ presence on the lake and conduct more hazing. During the peak migration in September, DEC law enforcement staff will lend a hand for a total of up to four days of professional hazing each week.

Compared to recent years, this effort will run much longer—up to six months instead of the four to six weeks of the previous fall-only hazing. It also increases DEC’s allocation of professional staff to the program. Deploying professional (as opposed to volunteer) wildlife managers means more efficient tools can be used, including lethal management. The new program will provide professional cormorant counts, which are the most reliable way to monitor fishery impact and plan future management efforts.

The stakes were high for Oneida Lake’s walleye and yellow perch populations, as cormorant numbers have showed signs of increasing since the lake lost its successful federal management program in 2009. This was well understood by DEC’s Division of Fish, Wildlife and Marine Services and fisheries administrators in Regions 6 and 7 when they came together last fall with OLA Board of Directors members to compare notes and listen to OLA’s case for a more aggressive approach. The DEC team made clear that they too wanted to do more to keep the lake’s cormorant problem from exploding like it did in the 1980s.

“We applaud this great match between the interests of Oneida Lake anglers and the commitments made by DEC,” says OLA President Edward Mills, Ph.D. “DEC is continuing to work hard to solve the Oneida Lake cormorant problem, and they are finding creative ways to combine Region 6 and Region 7 resources to promote a strong, professional cormorant hazing program.” Mills added that the meeting agenda was set by OLA after 2013 data included cormorant populations higher than target levels, and cormorant diets with significant numbers of age-1 yellow perch.

In outlining the new program, DEC reaffirmed its long-standing cormorant management goal for the cormorant population to be limited to 100 individuals from spring arrival until fall departure. The target dates back to citizen task forces held in the mid-1990s and it has been repeatedly cited by DEC and other authorities as the basis for cormorant management. The agency also decided to scrap the volunteer program, noting that while the volunteers’ efforts were much appreciated, the DEC staff time that went into organizing it could be better used on the water with a full suite of cormorant management tools at hand. DEC also outlined plans to minimize cormorant predation on gamefish without disrupting nesting by native waterbirds such as the common tern.

The program is funded in DEC’s budget for 2014 and 2015 and DEC and OLA will continue to monitor its effectiveness in reducing cormorant damage to Oneida Lake.
President’s Message

To All Oneida Lake Association (OLA) Members:

Let’s be glad it is spring as the winter of 2014 was long and hard. Winter generated lots of ice reminiscent of the good old days and fun for those enjoying ice fishing, snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, and other winter activities. Now as spring and summer approach, our favorite lake has lots to offer: great fishing, beautiful sunsets, excellent boating, colorful birdwatching, tremendous sightseeing, and more. Take time to enjoy Oneida Lake and its surrounding landscapes, which are precious and magnificent!

I lead off this message with a huge THANK YOU to Jack Henke who retired from the Oneida Lake Association Board of Directors and the editor’s post of the Oneida Lake Bulletin after 16 years of service. Oneida Lake and OLA benefited tremendously from Jack’s many contributions and dedication. Jack, the Oneida Lake Association thanks you and wishes you all the best in your pursuit of new endeavors and accomplishments. I am pleased to announce that Directors Patricia Cerro-Reehil and Matt Snyder have volunteered to fill Jack’s oversized editorial shoes starting with this issue. Their professional skill sets to serve as co-editors are unparalleled. Thanks much to both Patricia and Matt for finding time to make such a significant contribution to OLA and Oneida Lake.

Spring and summer is boating season so I remind ALL users of Oneida Lake to read and use our Boating Safety Map. You can access this map FREE of charge from our website at www.oneidalakeassociation.org. If the safety map saves one life, it has been worth the effort!

The OLA Board has been busy tackling a number of issues that face Oneida Lake. The board is your voice on issues ranging from changes in fishing and waterfowl regulations to lake access sites to law enforcement to water levels to cormorant control, and more. I am pleased to report that several OLA Board members met with DEC in November 2013 for a summit to discuss a more comprehensive cormorant management program for Oneida Lake. Our summit was a HUGE success. I hope you’ll take a moment to read the lead bulletin article for details.

I encourage your attendance and welcome you to our annual meeting on Wednesday, April 30 at Cicero-North Syracuse High School. Doors open at 6 p.m. with great exhibits on display, and the meeting will start at 7 p.m., highlighted by presentations important to the governance of the OLA. The meeting will start around 7 p.m., followed by electing our Board of Directors. Terms Expiring April 30, 2014

Ed CDC160

Edward Mills
George Reck

Terms Expiring April 30, 2015

Anthony Buffa
Richard Cote

Terms Expiring April 30, 2016

Patricia Cerro-Reehil
Darby

The Oneida Lake Association, Inc.

Founded in 1945

The Oneida Lake Association is published by the Oneida Lake Association, Inc., so that its members may be informed regarding the activities of the association. The Oneida Lake Association, Inc., was organized in 1945 to restore and preserve the natural resources of Oneida Lake and its environs.

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Patricia Cerro-Reehil
Darby

The OLA strongly believes in the winning blend of “family, children, and fishing” and that “Lake a Fish” is a good place to start. USGS and its partners, along with student interns onboard, and they had remarked how awesome it would be to see a sturgeon. But an unexpected breaching of the good old Oneida Lake waves beginning to build, and it would be important to get the net in fairly quickly; this would definitely not be a great time to wrestle a 6 foot, slimy, unhappy behemoth. As we pulled in the usual catch of fish, someone exclaimed “Hey, we caught a sturgeon!” Oh great, I thought, this is not going to end well. The sturgeon was 19 ½ inches long, and weighed a mere 1.5 lbs. A tiny section of the fin ray revealed growth rings (like a tree) that indicated the fish was actually already 2 ½ years old, born in the spring of 2011! The sturgeon had been spawning for 2 years before researchers could even confirm it, so it had actually taken the fish 16 years to spawn successfully for the first time.

In addition, USGS researchers caught a young sturgeon in the Oswegatchie River also in 2013, and another was captured in USGS netting in Fish Creek in the fall of 2013. Two anglers have since provided photos of their young sturgeon catches in 2012 and 2013. While still rare, the young sturgeon appear to be doing well.

Oneida Lake is at the forefront of New York’s sturgeon rehabilitation program. In addition to finding the baby sturgeon, one of our tagged sturgeon from Oneida Lake was found 123 miles away! A resident found a tagged sturgeon that washed up along the shores of Lake Ontario, west of Rochester. Kathy Gibson from Hilton,....
NY reported the fish on September 18, 2013 and noticed a small yellow dangler tag in the fish’s dorsal fin. When they called to report it to Cornell University, everyone was astonished – the fish had been stocked and tagged in Oneida Lake by Cornell University fish researchers way back on July 21, 2004 at Messenger Shallows. In the 9 years since then, this fish traveled the length of Oneida Lake, down the Oswego river to Three Rivers (10 miles) and down the Oswego river through Fulton and Oswego to Lake Ontario (another 24 miles), navigating through multiple locks and dams on the way. It then wandered around through Lake Ontario another 72 miles to Hilton, NY for a total travel distance of about 123 miles. This is the farthest any tagged sturgeon from Oneida Lake has traveled to date. Two other tagged sturgeon from Oneida Lake have been found in Lake Ontario near Oswego in past years.

Our adult sturgeon in Oneida Lake nearly reached the 100 lb. mark this spring, with a 96 lb. specimen tagged and released by USGS on May 3, 2013. Who would have ever thought there would be a 100 lb. fish swimming around Oneida Lake? (Don’t be afraid, they have no real teeth! They have a muscular mouth used to crush small snails and zebra mussels.) The Oneida Lake sturgeon have reached almost 100 lbs, in only 18 years, this is an excellent growth rate. Considering that this fish can live over 100 years and reach 300 lbs, when full grown, imagine what lies ahead for Oneida Lake! Legendary fish tales of our forefathers hooking into huge sturgeon may become a reality in the near future for Oneida Lake.

**State of Oneida Lake – and Gobies Are Here in 2014**

Provided by Staff at the Cornell University Biological Field Station

Oneida Lake stands out as a prominent feature of our local landscape and is important to both the local culture and economy. A 2007 survey conducted by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation showed Oneida Lake to be second only to Lake Ontario in the amount of fishing effort attracted each year – resulting in more than 12 million dollars a year flowing into the Oneida Lake community. Walleye support the lake’s marquee fishery, and yellow perch and bass also provide excellent fishing and draw many to the lake. Scientists at the Cornell Biological Field Station have been monitoring the lake for more than 57 years and appreciate the opportunity to share with readers of the OLA Bulletin an update on the status of the lake from our 2013 field season.

Walleye

Our mark-recapture population estimates of walleye are conducted every three years and give us the most accurate measure of population size. In 2013, our mark-recapture estimate put the number of fish at around 360,000 fish. This is down from a population size of just under 500,000 fish from our 2010 population estimate, but still well above the numbers we observed in the late 1990s, when the population was undergoing severe declines. While walleye numbers are lower than in the ‘good old days’ of the 1960s-1980s, the walleye population is clearly capable of generating angler catch rates as high as they were when walleye were more abundant. Oneida Lake is still one of the premiere walleye lakes in New York State. Anglers in 2013 enjoyed another year of excellent spring and early summer fishing, with good catch rates until gizzard shad came on in late July. We saw the highest fishing effort we’ve recorded since we began regular monitoring of fishing effort in 2000, and estimate that some 60,000 walleye were harvested during the open water season. High harvest rates combined with generally poor recruitment likely account for the decline in the walleye population, but the 2010 year class was strong and should add many new fish to the adult population this year. The walleye population should be able to sustain current levels of effort and harvest into the near future, but we are concerned at the overall poor survival of fish hatched during the 2000s, and there are no strong year classes following the one from 2010. We will need to continue monitoring the population to ensure that it remains capable of supporting the good fishing Oneida Lake is known for.

Yellow Perch

The yellow perch population now sits at around 1,500,000 adult fish, and our samples in 2012 and 2013 produced the highest catches of adult perch we’ve seen since 2008. As with walleye, yellow perch are below levels observed from the 1950s to 1980s. We suspect that changes in the lake associated with establishment of combined quagga and mussels have reduced survival of very young yellow perch, and for the immediate future we expect abundance to remain below long-term averages. Anglers can still enjoy good catch rates of yellow perch, and they should continue to be a staple of the winter ice fishery. Poor ice conditions during many recent winters likely kept many winter anglers off the lake, so harvest of yellow perch may have been lower. Anglers fishing shallower waters should enjoy a diverse catch.

Gobies are Here

More changes may be in our future, as the round goby was confirmed in Oneida Lake in 2014, meaning they soon may expand to become an important part of our fish community. Based on information from other systems where goby have become established, we would expect them to provide an excellent food source for walleye and bass, and may also become a favorite food of the coromants on the lake. Unfortunately, if goby provide a plentiful food source for walleye and bass, it could make fishing more difficult, much like the gizzard shad do in late
Oneida Lake Bulletin – Your Environmental Voice for Over Sixty Years

Get Ready for the Annual Meeting!
Wednesday April 30 • Cicero-North Syracuse High School

Attention all OLA members: Mark your calendars for Wednesday, April 30 at 6 p.m. for OLA’s 69th Annual Membership Meeting!

Our annual meeting will be at Cicero-North Syracuse High School, 6002 Route 31, Cicero, NY 13039. Doors open at 6 p.m. so members and visitors can review their OLA memberships, sign up for raffles, and view exhibits and demonstrations provided by friends of Oneida Lake. A brief business meeting will begin at 7 p.m. and will be followed by guest speakers presenting on topics of interest to Oneida Lake anglers and other lake users.

As usual, OLA directors and volunteers will operate a membership sign-up booth so that past members can renew and new folks join our vital organization. You can take care of your renewal right on the spot, for just $5 per membership. You can also take the opportunity to bring new members to the meeting to sign them up—it’s a great opportunity for them to be introduced to OLA and learn what we are about. If everyone brings a fellow lake lover to the meeting, we can boost our membership rolls and add significantly to OLA’s meaningful, long-lived political clout on behalf of our lake.

The opening exhibits will again be of interest to members, including author, historian, and longtime Oneida Lake Bulletin editor Jack Henke’s book display and signing; fishing tackle and equipment displays; taxidermy exhibitions and information about other organizations that work to promote the well-being of Oneida Lake.

The business meeting will be conducted at a familiar, rapid clip, permitting OLA to “take care of business” and put its directors to work on behalf of the lake. Members will learn how membership numbers fared this year, elect a new slate of Board of Directors members, and receive the annual report on OLA’s revenues and expenses.

Then the real meat and potatoes of the meeting will be served, with reports from the Oneida Fish Cultural Station on the year’s hatchery efforts and how they fared after the winter’s heavy ice; a report on the lake’s fishery from Cornell; and DEC providing details on cormorant hazing plans for this year. There will also be a presentation by the Verona Beach Lighthouse Association on enjoying and preserving some of our lake’s signature, scenic views. There will be an expanded Q&A after the presentations.

As usual, OLA will raffle off a variety of lake-oriented prizes, including a free kids-and-moments fishing charter with Captain Tony Buffa. Anglers aged 16 and younger and their family members can sign up for the kidx42 trip, amusingly titled “kids+fishing=fun and a commitment to conservation” remains a vital part of Oneida Lake’s future.

OLA can only meet the future’s challenges with your support. Make sure you attend this tremendous annual meeting! Mark your calendars—Wednesday April 30 – OLA- CNS! Your board of directors looks forward to joining you there for an evening of Oneida Lake fellowship.

Call 1-800-TIPP-DEC!

OLA Salutes New and Returning Members

For Oneida Lake, Association members are the lake’s greatest asset. Every person who signs up or adds a friend or family member to the rolls adds to the Oneida Lake Association’s horsepower to get things done with local, state, and national agencies and partner organizations. The vast majority, if not all, of the volunteers at our events come from our membership. Entire conservation programs, such as the 2009-2013 cormorant hazing program, relied on the commitment of our members. And your membership dues help us produce Bulletins twice a year, host an annual meeting open to all members, and facilitate the work of our unpaid, volunteer Board of Directors.

From time to time, the OLA pays respects to those who signed up as new members or renewed after a brief hiatus from the Association. By coming on board with us or coming back to the OLA in 2013-14, the following individuals boosted our annual membership total by about 10 percent. We thank each one for your support!

Anthony Albanese, E. Syracuse, NY
Marlene Alexander, Fair Haven Beach, NY
Daryl Allen, Canastota, NY
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David Kendrat, Bridgeport, NY

Gobies Continued from page 5

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OLA Members - Report Violators - Call 1-800-TIPP-DEC!

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OLA Members

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Peter Waack, Syracuse, NY
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James Weiss, Voresville, NY
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Wendell West, Central Square, NY
Carl Westcott, Sherburne, NY
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Philip J. Wood, Laceyville, PA
Jonathan Woody, Camillus, NY
Joan Woolier, Sylvan Beach, NY
Ted Yager, Newfane, NY
Rob Zdanowicz, Boca Raton, FL
Joseph Zdanowicz, Lighthouse Pt., FL
Sturgeon in Oneida Lake and nearby waters may be tagged. Biologists at Cornell University and NYSDEC need your help to track these fish. Yellow tags may be attached at the base of the dorsal fin. If you catch a tagged sturgeon, please write down the number on the tag and length of fish, release the fish immediately, and call Cornell University at (315) 650-6241 or contact NYSDEC at (315) 787-2282 as soon as possible.

REPORTagged STURGEON

Cornell Field Station
Bridgeport, NY 13030
(315) 633-9243

New York State
Department of Environmental Conservation

South Shore of Oneida Lake
1801 Rt. 31 Bridgeport, NY 13030
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