

# Fishing Guide to ESLA Waters

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This introduction to fishing in ESLA waters was prepared for those who don't fish or fish very little but are interested in learning more, and especially, those who would introduce young people to the joys (and frustrations) of angling. Also, it may help experienced anglers unfamiliar with the lakes. It contains history and descriptions of Elk and Skegemog Lakes, the fish that inhabit them, and methods for catching them. Also, invasive species and issues ESLA is working on to understand and improve the fishery are explored. For those interested in more detail, you'll find links to other references.

### Background on the Waters

**Elk Lake** has a surface area of 8,088 acres with almost 26 miles of shoreline. **Skegemog Lake** has a surface area of 2,755 acres and 15 miles of shoreline. Elk is nearly 200 feet deep with an average depth of 67 feet. It is classified as oligotrophic: meaning deep, clear, cool, hard bottom of sand, gravel, and rock, little vegetation, and excellent water quality with high oxygen content. The surface water temperature hits the 70s each summer and will penetrate down as deep as 50 feet. Water deeper than 100 feet never warms above the mid 40s. Skegemog Lake has a maximum depth of 29 feet and averages 11 feet. It is classified as mesotrophic: meaning shallow, warm, with generally a softer bottom of sand, marl, and muck, lots of vegetation and submerged wood, and good water quality with medium oxygen content. The surface temp will reach the high 70s in August with little difference from top to bottom.

The water level in both lakes is controlled by the Elk Rapids Hydro Dam on the Elk River. There have been dams installed in the Elk River since the 1860s. As required by law, the difference in Elk Lake depth between the lowest level in winter and the highest level in summer is about 7 inches. Elk Lake is around 11 feet on average above Lake Michigan. Before the dams in Elk Rapids, Elk and Skegemog were about five feet lower than today, as evidenced by the remaining underwater tree stumps in the Elk River and especially in the eastern part of Skegemog.

## THE FISH

Before the dams were built, fish traveled freely between the Elk Rapids Chain of Lakes and Lake Michigan. The dams today prevent fish passage between East Bay and the Elk River.

**Lake Skegemog** supports a healthy population of warm-water species: large and smallmouth bass, rock bass, perch, northern pike, gar pike, Great Lakes muskellunge, suckers, sculpins, and many minnow species. There are

also fewer catfish, bullheads, walleyes, bluegills and other panfish. All these species are found throughout the lake around weeds and submerged wood. Fisherman mostly target smallmouth bass and perch in open water, and perch through the ice.

**Elk Lake** has most of the warm-water species in its shallower waters. They are mostly found at nearshore drop-offs, sparse weed beds, and rocks. The cooler deeper waters contain lake, rainbow, and brown trout, whitefish, cisco, and some Atlantic salmon. The DNR has found the lake trout are self-sustaining natives, probably descended their ancestors in the Great Lakes before the dams were built. Whitefish and cisco are also native. Rainbow and brown trout have been planted over the last century. The DNR has been planting Atlantic salmon in Torch Lake for decades, and some migrate into Elk.

## FISH PLANTINGS

Since the late 1800s, bass, walleye, perch, bluegill, and lake, brown and rainbow trout have been planted by the MDNR. From 1984 to 2008, only brown and rainbow trout were planted in Elk Lake. As the trout fishery declined over several years after 2008, ESLA strongly advocated the DNR to again stock Elk Lake, which led to a resumption of planting in 2018 with annual planting plans through 2025. (See the Elk Lake Trout Planting chart on this website for details) Although more than 220,000 brown trout have been planted through 2023, few have been caught in Elk Lake. The DNR with ESLA's support is studying changing planting locations and other changes to improve the return. Much speculation is that the browns migrate to Torch Lake.

Since Skegemog maintains a more stable population of most of its fish species, and habitat remains good, no planting had been done until recently. Due to a recent decline in the muskie population, the DNR released 1,600, 10-inch, muskies in Skegemog in October 2023. They plan to continue to plant more in future years.

## DNR FISH SURVEYS

The DNR monitors the fishery primarily in three ways:

1. Direct angler input to the DNR. Anglers are encouraged report their catches and impressions — positive or negative.
2. Creel Surveys in which DNR personnel travel around the lake and survey active boat fishermen.
3. Comprehensive fish surveys every 10 to 20 years.

The fish surveys involve netting and electroshocking the shallower waters. Every fish species is targeted, caught, measured, and released. This occurred most recently in the summer of 2022 in Elk Lake. For 10 days and nights in July, DNR staff netted and shocked many locations of Elk Lake. They caught more than 6,200 fish of 30+ species. Observations: The forage base (small fish the bigger fish eat) is very good. The most predominant game

fish by far was rock bass. Good populations of smallmouth bass and perch were identified. The trout and whitefish were not represented because they are deep water during summer months and not caught in shallow net settings. Unfortunately, they found invasive quagga mussels and round gobies. The complete survey results were presented at the ESLA August 10, 2023 Shore Thing meeting by the DNR's northwest Michigan biologist, Heather Hettinger. The hour-long presentation is available on ESLA's YouTube site, [CLICK HERE](#)

## EFFECTIVE FISHING METHODS

Because our lakes range from warm to cold, shallow to deep and are home to many species, many methods are effective both in open water and through the ice.

**Skegemog** is popular for bass, pike and perch fishing from the spring opener through fall. Trolling is done everywhere on the lake with body baits, crankbaits, spinners and spoons. Some people still fish with live bait, especially for perch. Others cast and retrieve jigs, blade baits, and crankbaits in weeds and around the wood. Casting in the shallows and along the shoreline around the entire undeveloped eastern end of the lake, from the Torch River clockwise to the Baggs Rd. launch, is productive for bass and pike, both using spinning gear or a flyrod.

Skegemog usually freezes in January and is popular for ice fishing for perch. Some anglers also target pike and there's a cadre of muskie spearers, but with the now 50" size limit, they need to be very careful to avoid a ticket.

In **Elk Lake**, trolling for trout and salmon starts in shallower water in early spring using long lines and spoons or body baits. As spring progresses and the water warms, trollers will fish deeper as well, with spoons behind diving devices, above downriggers weights and/or with lead core line is popular. Trolling near the surface is still productive for rainbows, browns, and the occasional Atlantic salmon throughout summer and fall. Downriggers are used to get down to 60-120 feet, especially for lake trout.

Elk Lake freezes later than Skegemog, usually by late January. The ice thickens more slowly and on rare years the lake doesn't freeze — at least with ice safe for ice fishing. The primary target fish through the ice are trout and whitefish. A few trout are caught shallow, but most are in deeper water, just off the drop-offs in 30-100ft. Whitefish are found in this depth, too. Jigging spoons and heavy lures like Swedish Pimples and the Elk Rapids jig are popular, as are minnows and salmon eggs on rod set-ups or tip-ups.

Some muskie fishing occurs on both lakes. They tend to stay in Skegemog Lake in spring after spawning, then spread into both lakes in June through the rest of the year. Most fishing is done by trolling shallower waters and drop-offs with big plugs, body baits, crankbaits, and spoons. They are occasionally caught accidentally, most anywhere, by anglers targeting other species.

# INVASIVES: THREAT TO FISHERY

Unfortunately, our lakes have invasive aquatic animals, too. The construction of dams on the Elk River stopped the free travel of fish and potential invasive animals from Lake Michigan's East Traverse Bay, But invasive mussels of eastern Europe origin and dumped from ballast water of trans-oceanic ships have made their homes in ESLA waters. Slightly smaller **zebra mussels** arrived a few decades ago. They're primarily in shallower waters where they attach to docks, hoists, rocks and logs. They eat by filtering microorganisms from the water that are also the food base for the native insect life and smaller fish. Fortunately, their population has declined, likely because they have less food.

ESLA-prodded research in 2022 confirmed **quagga mussels** in Elk Lake for the first time and their impact may be even worse. They tend to live in deeper waters and there's no current control method. In 2023, ESLA began sampling plankton in both lakes to establish a baseline for continued testing.

Another new invasive is the **Round Goby** fish. It has been present in the Great Lakes for many years, in other inland lakes, and now Elk Lake. It is 2-6" long and looks similar to our native sculpins. Although it is an aggressive eater and can reproduce several times each year in all water depths, it is a favored, nutritious food for smallmouth bass, lake trout and other fishes. For more information about invasive species, [CLICK HERE](#)

## MANAGEMENT ISSUES

ESLA and the DNR will continue to work several fish issues into the future:

1. Quagga mussel impact
2. Round Goby impact
3. Continuation of trout and muskie plantings
4. Poor success of recent brown trout plantings, new strategies
5. Decline in whitefish numbers, likely due to quaggas/reduced plankton
6. Annual plankton monitoring to determine impact of mussels
7. Promotion of reporting catch results/observations to DNR

## LEARN MORE

"The Elk-Skegemog Lakes Association Riparian Handbook", by Mark Stone in collaboration with ESLA, copyright 2005. ESLA still some copies that will be available at Shore Thing events and the Annual Meeting. ESLA expects to have an updated, online version in early 2024 and will provide the internet link when it is available.

**“Fish of the Elk River Chain of Lakes: A Watershed Prospective”**, by Douglas R. Fuller, Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council, copyright 2001.

[Click Here to view Digital Copy](#)

Search records of fish planting by date, lake, river and species in the Michigan Department of Natural Resources database: <https://www.dnr.state.mi.us/fishstock/>

