

## Maine's Precious Wild Trout



### What's so special about Maine's wild trout?

Maine is the last true stronghold in the East for wild salmonids, including brook trout, Arctic charr, and Atlantic salmon. With the most extensive distribution, abundance and habitat diversity of eastern brook trout within their native U.S. range, Maine's wild brook trout waters represent a unique, valuable, and irreplaceable ecological resource. Today, Maine contains over 50% of the nation's remaining wild population, more than 90% of all remaining native lake and pond populations, and as many intact subwatersheds as all other states in the eastern range combined. Unlike other states, these trout can be found in small remote ponds and large deep lakes; small tributary streams and very large rivers; high elevation ponds; and coastal estuaries and streams.

Maine is the only state in the continental U.S. with wild populations of Arctic charr and Atlantic salmon. Both species only occur at a few sites: endemic populations of Arctic charr are found only in 12 lakes; and wild sea-run Atlantic salmon occur in small numbers in 16 rivers, with only about 1200 of the endangered fish returning to the Penobscot River in 2019. Landlocked Atlantic salmon are fished in 304 lakes and 50 rivers and streams totaling about 320 miles.

Brook trout and salmon have important cultural and historic significance in Maine as well. These fish have been an essential food source for Native Americans for hundreds of years, they are interwoven with our state's recreational past, and have helped to shape our state's economy and sporting traditions.

In recognition of the importance of wild trout to our state, the State Legislature passed the Maine State Heritage Fish Law, naming brook trout and Arctic charr as State Heritage Fish and protecting designated waters from fish stocking and use of live bait fish.



### Threats to wild trout habitat

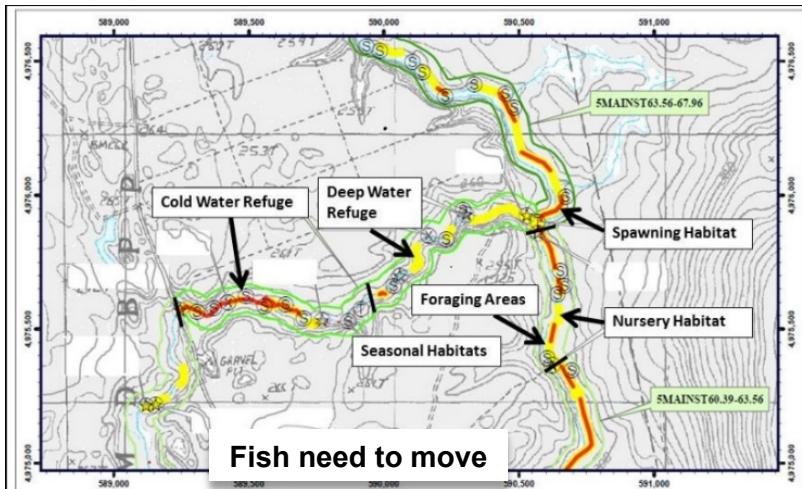
Unfortunately, a range of pressures including forestry practices, development, dams, invasive species, and over-fishing have compromised or destroyed wild fish and their habitat across their range. Brook trout and charr are sensitive species that require clean, cold waters and are intolerant to changes in habitat. Some of the largest threats to brook trout include the introduction of non-native species, including the introduction of predatory sportfish, as well as popular competing baitfish, adjacent land use practices that influence hydrology, physical habitat, and water quality, and limited connectivity caused by dams and inadequate culverts that prevents movement between important habitats.

Because Maine is at the northern edge of the lower 48's brook trout, charr, and Atlantic salmon's range, and still has a relatively undeveloped landscape with thousands of intact lakes, ponds and streams, Maine's watersheds are predicted to be some of the most resistant to climate change. Maine waters are therefore essential to sustaining these species—and opportunities to fish for them. Through proper identification and regulation, and proactive conservation and restoration measures, these waters can be protected, reconnected and restored so native brook trout, charr and salmon thrive in the future.

## Rule changes will provide further protection of our wild trout waters

Recently, to better protect Maine's wild brook trout and charr from introductions of non-native bait fish and other fish that may be found in the bait bucket, the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife - with support from the State Heritage Fish Working Group – adopted new rules to enhance protections for these Heritage Fish, while preserving traditional fishing methods and economies. The focus of the new rules is to reduce the risk of introducing nonnative fish into these wild trout waters, which many biologists and conservationists view as a serious threat to native brook trout and charr populations. Given the interest in Maine's nationally significant native treasures, this rule change was overwhelmingly supported by the public and adopted as a proactive conservation measure.

In the North Zone – which contains 95% of the designated State Heritage Fish waters and much of the wild brook trout resource in the state, General Law Regulations have been changed to prohibit the use of live fish as bait except where designated by special rule, reducing the chance of any new introductions of baitfish and other fish in the vast majority of flowing waters, deadwaters, and small ponds. Waters that were open to ice fishing with use of live fish as bait remain open and are assigned a special regulation to allow continued use of live bait fish. Live bait fish are also allowed on those waters during the open water fishing season. The change also simplified state rules by eliminating hundreds of “no live fish as bait” special rule listings that were previously in place.



This change to General Law should be easy for the public to understand, increase compliance, and be easier for Wardens to enforce.

In the South Zone – where there are 26 heritage waters, 16 of which have tributaries - no live fish as bait special regulations was applied to tributaries of the 16 heritage ponds with tributaries via special S-Code (S4) in the law book. An alternative strategy to that proposed for the North Zone is offered to protect tributaries to heritage ponds in the South Zone, where a prevalence of introduced species does not warrant the same conservative approach proposed for the North Zone.

## Other conservation strategies

These new rules are only one important part of a suite of brook trout, Arctic charr, and Atlantic salmon conservation initiatives the state is pursuing with a range of partners.

Projects include: surveying remote ponds and coastal streams for sea-run trout; collecting DNA to determine whether stocked fish genes have infiltrated wild trout DNA; prioritizing high quality habitat, such as cold water refugia, for conservation; restoring degraded habitat by adding downed wood into streams to create feeding, resting, and nursery areas; understanding the influence of adjacent land use activities on habitat suitability; protecting shoreland habitat; and reconnecting fragmented waterways by removing dams and using *Stream Smart* practices.



The goal of *Stream Smart* is to connect fish and wildlife habitat while protecting roads and public safety and to prepare for the large and frequent storm events that have been washing out roads around the state. In short, let the stream act like a stream! For more information, visit [Stream Smart](#).

Flyer created March 2020.

