

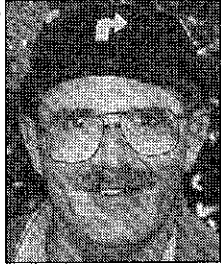
# Sixteen-pounder is an outstanding Superior steelhead

Last week, my friend and fellow angler Scott Thorpe of St. Paul called. He is piecing together state record verification for the 16-pound, 6-ounce steelhead he caught in the Devil Track River near Grand Marais in 1980. Minnesota's former record rainbow trout — a 17-pound, 6-ounce fish credited to Ottway Stuberud of Knife River in 1974 — recently was withdrawn by Stuberud. The DNR now lists a 15-pound, 7-ounce rainbow caught in Lake Superior by the late Clifford Lovold of Two Harbors in 1970.

Rainbow trout swim in many of Minnesota's cold streams and lakes, but the biggest ones live in Lake Superior and spawn in North Shore streams. They are called steelhead. Thorpe is well-known among the cadre of anglers who call themselves steelheaders.

One of Minnesota's best

## POINTS NORTH



BY SHAWN PERICH

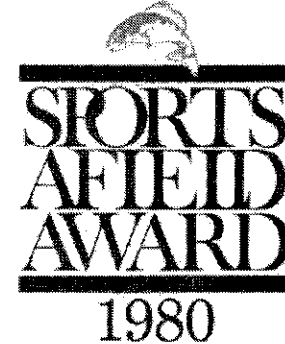
trout streams, the Devil Track is a river of dangerous beauty. The lower river races through a deep, sheer-walled canyon where the water runs clear and fast over a bed of red rhyolite and cobble. In winter, sightseers walk up the frozen river to marvel at ice formations on the cliffs. Summertime tourists peer into the canyon gloom from overlooks along Superior Hiking Trail. These people are merely voyeurs.

To know the Devil Track,

you have to wear chest waders and enter the canyon in spring, when the river is high and snarling, and the steelhead are running. To make your way, you must wade swift currents that threaten to sweep you off your feet and scramble along rocky walls with razor-sharp protrusions that have caused a few anglers to seek stitches. Occasionally, chunks of rock break away from the cliffs above and come crashing down.

On an April day in 1980, Scott and his brother, David, climbed into the canyon in a place where someone secured a length of telephone cable to hold as you make the long descent. They were fishing upstream of the Cedar Hole, so named for an ancient tree growing there, when Scott hooked the big fish. He battled it downstream until he reached a place where rushing water and a canyon wall prevented him from going further. David made a Hail Mary swipe with the net and scooped it.

The monstrous rainbow was a hen fish heavy with eggs. Scott was going to release the trout, but David convinced him to kill it and get it weighed. When they returned to the car the battery was dead (the lights were turned on by an irate golden retriever who'd been left there because he was a bad dog earlier in the day), so they didn't go to Grand Marais until the next morning.



## BEST IN SPECIES ANGLING

Is Presented To

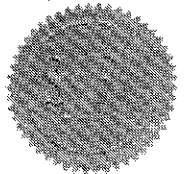
SCOTT THORPE

For Outstanding Achievement  
in Sport Fishing By Catching a  
16 LB 6 OZ RAINBOW TROUT

In MINNESOTA

On APRIL 27, 1980

*Homer Circle*  
Angling Editor

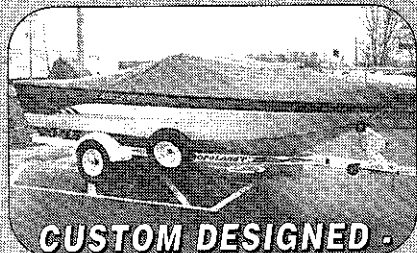


Thorpe won two big-fish awards for his massive Devil Tract River rainbow trout from *Sports Afield* magazine. The magazine has been published erratically the past several years.

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MARCH 14, 2003

# Perich

(From Page 8)

Buck Benson, the owner of Midway in Grand Marais (now Buck's Hardware Hank) remembers weighing the fish. However, the scale — which was also used to unofficially weigh Leroy Chiovitte's 17-pound, 8-ounce state record walleye and other outstanding fish — was destroyed when Midway burned in 1987.

A picture of Thorpe and the steelhead appeared in the *Cook County News-Herald* and on the cover of *Outdoor News*. The catch was also recognized by *Sports Afield* magazine and was mentioned by noted outdoor writer Steve Grooms in a 1983 story in *Fins and Feathers* magazine. The mounted fish hung in Bob Nasby's St. Paul fly shop for several years. Scott has ample proof of the fish, all he lacks is an affidavit that it was weighed on an official scale.

This is a question of documentation, not character. Thorpe is well-regarded among his angling peers. Custom fishing rod builder Cedric Knuckey, who's fished with Thorpe since 1981, describes him as a "very honest person." He hasn't seen Thorpe kill a steelhead in at least 15 years. Nasby, who's also known Thorpe for decades, says there's no reason to dispute the story.

"Seeing that fish has inspired me to catch one like it for 20 years," Nasby says.

In my experience, Scott is consummate sportsman. About 10 years ago, I was fishing a North Shore river with two friends. Between us, we landed about 10 steelhead using spawn sacks, a natural bait.

Scott and Cedric were a short distance upstream — and fishless. Finally, Scott came over to ask what we were using. When we said spawn sacks, he gave us a look that would curdle milk.

"I'd rather not catch fish than use spawn," he said. Thorpe started steelhead fishing as a young, Twin Cities teenager in 1966, when his mother took him, David, and a friend to the North Shore on Easter vacation. They didn't catch anything. He has a tracing of the first steelhead he eventually caught in the Split Rock River on April 18, 1970, using a piece of pink sponge a local fisherman gave him for bait. Fishing every weekend, he managed to land 16 fish that year. Since then, he's kept up that hectic angling pace. During the two-month spring steelhead run, Thorpe spends all of his free time on rivers in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Ontario.

"He's a dedicated steelheader," Knuckey says. "I think the more he's fished, the more obsessed he's become with it."

A 16-pound steelhead wouldn't attract attention in their native West Coast waters or in the lower Great Lakes, but it is an exceptional fish from icy-cold Lake Superior. Thorpe, who has kept a journal since he began fishing, says his second-best Minnesota steelhead was a 9-pounder he caught in the

Split Rock River. I contacted several long-time Superior anglers who said the biggest fish they'd seen were about 12 pounds. Thunder Bay outdoor writer Gord Ellis recalled a 16-pounder caught by a Canadian angler from the Cloud River, just north of

*Thorpe started steelhead fishing as a young, Twin Cities teenager in 1966, when his mother took him, David, and a friend to the North Shore on Easter vacation.*

the Minnesota border, in the early 1980s. Duluth angling personality Butch Furtman says his best steelhead weighed 13 pounds, 8 ounces and came from the Knife River.

In the book, *Brethren of the Brule*, published in 1984, the late Bill Bauer observes, "In 40 years of Steel-heading on the (Wisconsin) Brule, the rarity of taking a really large steelhead has been impressed on me. Once in a while a 10-, 11-, or 12-pounder is taken. Even more rare is a 13- or 14-pounder.

"Since 1943, I have taken nine fish or 15 or more pounds and lost others that at least 'seemed' as large."

Bauer goes on to write that his largest Brule steelhead was an 18-pound, 13-ounce male.

Jon George, an Ontario biologist who studies Lake Superior steelhead, says fish may grow somewhat larger along Wisconsin's South Shore, where the lake's ecosystem is more productive. In his Ontario study stream, which is closed to public fishing, the biggest fish he's seen was estimated at 14 pounds. To reach an exceptional size, George says a steelhead must spend several years feeding in the lake before making its first spawning run. Unlike Pacific salmon, steelhead survive spawning, but they lose

about one third of their body weight, which they must regain when they return to the lake.

Veteran anglers seem to think Lake Superior steelhead grew to larger sizes in the past, prior to the recovery of lake trout and other predator fish. Smelt, once a primary forage species, have mostly disappeared, and significantly larger numbers of lake trout, salmon, and steelhead compete for the available forage.

Regardless the fate of Thorpe's quest for record-book recognition, the state rainbow trout record is unlikely to be topped by a present-day fish. Minnesota implemented a no-kill regulation on steelhead in 1997 to stem a population decline.

*Note: Shawn Perich's book, Fishing Lake Superior, is available at [www.shawnperich.com](http://www.shawnperich.com).*

## Will the DNR recognize the fish?

Will Scott Thorpe's impressive 1980 steelhead qualify as the new state record? Despite excellent documentation and witnesses who saw the fish, not to mention an incredible mount, Thorpe may be fighting an uphill battle.

The 23-year-old fish story came to life again last week when Ottway Stuberud withdrew his record for the state's largest rainbow trout — a fish long regarded as caught through the ice. Thorpe heard the news and immediately began making the case for his impressive fish.

Fishing with his brother, David, on the Devil Track River on April 27, 1980, then 29-year-old Thorpe caught the 16-pound, 6-ounce fish on a yarn-fly rig. An active catch and release angler even back then, Thorpe intended to release the spawning female, but agreed to kill "the hen" when his brother offered to carry the fish out of the remote Devil Track canyon they were fishing.

"Even before last week, I always felt like this was the unofficial record," said Thorpe, a Minneapolis architect. "Because I caught this the way a traditional north shore steelheader would catch it."

Gordy Morris, who Thorpe describes as "the dean" of north shore steelhead taxidermy,

mounted the fish, and it hung in fly-fishing guru Bob Nasby's his shop for more than a year.

Jenifer Matthees maintains the record fish program for the Minnesota DNR and says she's waiting to see the paperwork from Thorpe on the fish. Thorpe needs proof that the fish was weighed on a state certified scale, and an "identifier" or printout from a certified scale typically accompanies modern records — an impossibility given that the scale that weighed Thorpe's fish was destroyed by fire.

In the meantime, a 15-pound, 7-ounce rainbow trout caught by Cliff Lovold of Two Harbors in 1970s is the reigning state record steelhead. Matthees said she having a plaque made for Lovold's daughter, Two Harbors resident Patricia Haveri.

Thorpe didn't officially register his fish with the DNR at the time because he knew his trout weighed a whole pound less than Stuberud's, and "nobody cares about No. 2." But today he's serious about registering a truly impressive catch.

"It happened. Whether or not I can prove it to the DNR to their satisfaction is the question," he said. "I'm certainly going to give it a run for the money."

—Rob Drieslein



Scott Thorpe (above) stopped by the *Outdoor News* office last week with the mount of the 16-pound, 6-ounce steelhead he caught in northeast Minnesota in 1980. Below, Thorpe at age 29 in Grand Marais with the fish the day after he caught it.

