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Scott Thorpe of St. Paul shows off the 16-pound, 6-ounce rainbow trout he caught in 1980 in Devil Track River near Grand Marais, Minn. The fish could be a state record now.

Record is just another fish tale

Scott Thorpe says he's the new rainbow king. When he read last week that Ottway "Red" Stuberud lied about his state-record rainbow trout, Thorpe, of St. Paul, realized the new state record resides on his wall.

Twenty-three years ago, Thorpe was fishing on Devil Track River when he muscled in a giant rainbow trout — commonly called a steelhead, the Holy Grail of Lake Superior fish — and had it weighed in front of witnesses in Grand Marais, Minn. Thorpe's fish weighed 16 pounds, 6 ounces, but one witness astutely remarked, "Nice fish, Scott, but it doesn't beat the Stuberud fish."

At 17 pounds, 6 ounces, Stuberud's rainbow had been the state record since the Knife River

man said he caught it through the ice Jan. 18, 1974. That was until last week, when the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources announced Stuberud admitted lying about the fish and his record will be expunged. After 29 years, Stuberud's conscience had gotten the best of him.

The debate over the new state record rainbow opens a new can of worms about the veracity of Minnesota's record fish.

In a state with 2.3 million anglers, a spot in the state record book can be an angling glory above all others. Whether because of peer pressure or personal glory, the temptation to stretch



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the truth is strong, DNR officials say.

One angler who submitted an application to the DNR for a potential record bass, later proved illegitimate, sent a picture of himself wearing a hat. The words above the bill: "I fish, therefore I lie."

Dick Sternberg of Deep Haven, Minn., a former DNR biologist who tracked down that fraud and many others, said at least four state record fish should be expunged.

"I'm inclined to have the DNR go back and expunge the yellow perch, the black crappie, the northern pike and the smallmouth bass records," he said. "There's little or no documentation for them, and at least one is a complete phony."

Sternberg's issue that those old records don't have proper documentation is different than cheating, which isn't as easy as it sounds.

In the 1980s, DNR officials tightened the application process, requiring anglers to weigh fish on state-certified scales in front of two witnesses and have the fish examined by a DNR fisheries biologist. Over the years, the DNR has had to purge several records, including the largemouth bass and muskie records, after it came to light the fishes' sizes were exaggerated.

Yet, the DNR's ability to cull fakes from real fish still is tested by wily anglers.

DNR officials last week said another record, that of a 52-pound, 8-ounce catfish, also was being expunged because the angler lied. DNR officials approved the catfish, caught last spring by Steven J. Ness of Long Prairie, for the record book, though they were skeptical because blue catfish aren't native to Minnesota.

It wasn't until conservation officers, following a tip, learned that Ness had caught the fish in South Dakota. He faces charges in Todd County for illegally possessing wild animals unlawfully taken and for knowingly signing a false affidavit.

Sternberg thinks he can discredit another record. The phony — a 3-pound, 4-ounce yellow perch — was caught in 1945 by Merle Johnson, a prominent Minnesota fisheries biologist at the time. Sternberg said Johnson admitted to catching the fish in a net and entering it because there was no record listed.

"It was weighed on a Hanson milk scale, which is probably plus or minus a few pounds," Sternberg said.

The state-record black crappie, a 5-pounder caught in 1940 in the Vermillion River, could have been a white or a black crappie because the old paperwork doesn't specify.

"That one is completely open to question," Sternberg said, "and so is the northern pike record. There's a picture of that fish (a 45-pound, 12-ounce northern caught in 1929), but anyone looking at it will tell you it's not a 45-pounder."

Many of the old records, Sternberg said, were never accurately weighed or documented. Others were simply frauds. A muskie record, now expunged, turned out to be a fish caught in Canada. At least two of the former largemouth bass records, also expunged, were proved to be fish caught in Florida.

Jenifer Matthees, who oversees the DNR's fish records, has heard these stories and many more. She is aware of Sternberg's desire to rid the books of the perch, smallmouth bass, northern pike and black crappie records.

"I know it's been brought up before, but they were never pulled, so I assume there was a reason," she said. "We can certainly look at it, but it's not a priority, budget-wise."

Since the DNR announced last week it was expunging two records, Matthees' phone has been ringing constantly, mostly with calls from the media. It's not surprising that Minnesotans are interested in the faked records, she said, because "there's always a lot of interest in record fish."

Matthees also has heard from Thorpe, though she wouldn't comment on his chances of securing the steelhead record.

"I'll have to wait until I see all the paperwork," she said.

Stuberud's surprising admission — he has refused further comment on the issue — hasn't resulted in any criminal charges. But news of his phony record has spread through the arcane community of North Shore rainbow anglers.

A 15 pound, 7-ounce rainbow caught by Cliff Lovold of Two Harbors in 1970 is now the record. Lovold died three years ago never knowing his record could have stood at least another six years — provided Stuberud hadn't lied — and Thorpe's fish would have been installed as the record in 1980.

Matthees is preparing a plaque honoring Lovold's record for his daughter, Patricia Haveri of Two Harbors.

But Thorpe believes revisionist history should read that Lovold held the record until 1980, at which time Thorpe's fish should have become the record. Yet, Thorpe's evidence might not stand the test of time. He has no documentation that Midway Service Station, which burned in a

1987 fire, was state-certified by the Department of Weights and Measures.

There is only anecdotal information that the DNR on occasion checked the station's scale with its own weights.

But Thorpe has his supporters on the North Shore.

"(The Thorpe fish) is the state record in my mind," said Buck Benson of Grand Marais, who owned Midway Service Station and weighed the fish 22 years ago. "If it's not the state record, it's only by a technicality."

A picture and news story about the fish were published in the Cook County Herald, and Thorpe won two big-fish awards for the trout from Sports Afield magazine. He had to submit witness statements for those records, too.

But rules are rules, and Matthees said Thorpe needs proof that the weigh-in was accurate. "Our application states the scale has to be state-certified in the last six months," she said.

No such certification exists, though Steve Persons, the Grand Marais DNR fisheries manager, said he's combing his records for any helpful documentation. Another potential witness, retired DNR biologist Jim Storland of Eagan, said he doesn't recall witnessing the weigh-in, although Benson recalls he was there. Benson's new store, Buck's Hardware Hank in Grand Marais, is still a fixture for North Shore anglers.

Thorpe, who has kept a fishing diary since 1966, has no doubt his fish was larger than Lovold's and thus should be installed as the record.

He wants to be the new rainbow king.

"Of course I never thought about having the record because Ottway held it," Thorpe said. "Everybody said my fish was a great fish, but what can you do? It was a pound smaller than Ottway's."