

Rifle River trout fishing, from Greenwood Road north

The main stem downstream from Sage Lake Road is open year-round (Stream type 3), and trout season north of Sage Lake Road, and on all tributaries, spans from the last Saturday in April through September 30 (Stream type 1). The West Branch of the Rifle enters the main stem below Highbanks Access (see below). The West Branch is a marginally coldwater stream, so fishing downstream of its confluence yields more and more bass and pike during the summer months, though there are brown trout year round; all pike caught are gently released and encouraged to walk back to the river. Other larger tributaries – Prior Creek, Gamble Creek, and Houghton Creek – are best fished with terrestrials. Easy canoe launches and takeouts are at several spots in the Rifle River Recreation Area, and at Sage Lake Road, Peters Road, Klacking Creek access, and Kenneth Road (Ladd's Landing). There's a skid at Highbanks access, but it's a long haul up or down. Remember that in good weather you'll face the strong likelihood that there'll be traffic on the river. Be sure to wear an orange hat during hunting seasons!

The Rifle's flow is fragile, and rain raises its level and increases its murkiness quickly; when levels drop, murkiness persists for a day. You can go to http://waterdata.usgs.gov/mi/nwis/uv?site_no=04142000 and compare current flows with average values before you waste your time driving up. There's a big run of suckers in early April, and steelhead follow them in. The steelhead subsequently spawn from mid-April through mid-May; they also follow the salmon run during October and November. DNR fish plantings are listed at <http://www.michigandnr.com/fishstock/>, Ogemaw County/Rifle River/brown trout or rainbow trout or all species plantings during whatever time period you choose (note: 21N 03E 16 is Kenneth Road, 22N 03E 09 is Selkirk, 23N 03E 27 is Sage Lake Road, 23N 03E 11 is Devoe Lake outlet, 23N 03E 34 is Peters Road).

Hatches arrive about a week before they do on the AuSable, but they are fewer, and sparser: sulfurs, bwo's, isonychia, but no Hendricksons. Mid-April to mid-May begs a size 16 stonefly, though size 12 through 18 elk-hair caddis, and 6 – 14 yellow sallies, work, too. Isonychia emergers are effective midday June – September. Due to the scarcity of hatches, fish in the Rifle River are opportunistic and aggressive, but not reckless.

Both food and lodging are available in West Branch, and Rose City, and the Rifle River Recreation Area (see last listing, below) offers good camping, both modern and primitive.

These directions assume that you are traveling north on I-75 from Bay City (remember that both M-33 and M-55 provide convenient thoroughfares from which all the listed accesses can be reached). So, exit I-75 at the Alger/Rose City exit, and go north to Greenwood Road. Turn right, to Skidway Lake, and turn north on Rifle River Trail.

Kenneth Road public access: 44° 14.703'N, 84° 04.498'W. There's a small standard sign on Rifle River Trail, indicating a canoe launch (Ladd's Landing). Proceed west on Kenneth Road (dirt), don't turn onto roads on left, that lead to houses. The next sign to the canoe launch is ambiguous, but take left-hand fork, downhill to a big parking lot/canoe launch; the memorial to Harold Kleinert is here, so take a moment. You can walk upstream on land, but if you do, the first possible entry to the river – there's a steep bank until this – is a quarter mile, at least. You can proceed on land even further, if you care to. Nice water, riffles and runs and deep holes. If you go downstream from the launch, you'll find the same sort of stream features: you can walk back through the woods on the right (west) bank. Further downstream is very marginal trout water, and smallmouth start to become dominant; all fishing below Greenwood Road should be considered warmwater.

Pipeline public access: 44° 13.212'N, 84° 03.940'W. Look for a fence with a short, fence-bounded road to a parking lot, on west side of Rifle River Trail. It's about 100 wooden steps down to a small beach. Upstream is pocket water, out from the beach is a broad, shallow hole. Downstream and across the Rifle is a deep hole that can hold good-size fish its full length. Be careful wading across the river, since the bottom is rock, and has many slots that grab your feet. Bottom is not slippery, but be careful, anyway. This stretch is supposedly good for steelies after 10 November.

Highbanks public access: 44° 14.703' N, 84° 03.826'W. Look for a big parking lot on west side of road, easy to spot. Steps lead up to an opening in the fence, then about 100 steps take you down to the Rifle. You can then cross the river and walk either up- or downstream. Upstream water tends to be riffles and runs; downstream the river veers right and there's a deep hole on the outside bend, with some good fish in it. Downstream the water can get a bit deep, so walking back through the woods is a good idea. You can also park

in the lot and walk along the hilltop fence, back south, to a set of stairs down to the river. That's nice as a concept, but the steps end at deep water, which you can fish to from the bank, but probably shouldn't get into.

Continue north on Rifle River Trail to M-55. Take a slight jog left, and continue on paved road, now Gerald Miller Road. (As alternatives, you can park near the bridge on M-55 – rumor has it that the locals don't like furriners to do that -- and climb down to the river, or go into the Ogemaw County fairgrounds and drive to the SW corner, then climb down the bank, though the caretaker might take offense. That's a pity, because the Mershon Chapter put a lunger structure there, and shored up the bank.) Anyway, continue north on Gerald Miller Road until you run out of pavement, at State Road***. Continue north, and turn off the (dirt) road at 44° 19.276'N, 84° 03.987'W, to the parking lot at the (Klacking Creek) access. The river, at a canoe launch, is down a short trail. You can walk a long way upstream on the left (east) bank, all the way to Klacking Creek, and further if you get into the river and wade. Here, the Rifle is mostly sandy bottom, with some holes, and gravel, and is generally easy wading. Downstream from the canoe launch is more of the same sort of cover. Gerald Miller Road does NOT continue through to Peters Road.

If you had exited I-75 and driven north on M-33 past M-55 about four miles to Peters Road, you can turn east on dirt and proceed to the Peters Road canoe launch site at 44° 20.083N, 84° 08.818'W (If you're coming west on either M-55 or State Road, turn north on Morrison Road to get to Peters Road). Park on the shoulder, or near the canoe launch, but don't block the launch site! You can walk downstream and fish all the way down past the Prior Creek confluence to Klacking Creek, and further; there is some private property, so plan on returning instream, though there's lots of public land, too. Or you can follow the trail on the right (west) bank, upstream from Peters Road. Legend has it that the best steelhead water is between Peters Road and Sage Lake Road. If you want to save yourself a trek through dense woods to get upstream, walk west from the bridge to the dirt road at the power line, then walk into the two-track between the second and third utility poles. There's a nice trail down to the water. You're in a big long run, with a riffle downstream, and a riffle and deep water a long ways up.

Six miles north of M-55, on M-33, is Sage Lake Road. Turn east and, after you've crossed the Rifle, you'll come to O'Neill Road 44° 21.797N, 84° 02.721W. Turn south on this dirt road; there are a few turnouts on the right. Some of them are scary. However, it's allegedly only a short walk to the river, so park in a dry place and walk down. If you continue south on O'Neill Road, you'll reach Twin Lakes Road. Turn right and go to the end 44° 20.973N, 84° 03.131W. There's an old Mershon-built lunger structure here, and the water's a little deep to get into. This stretch is alleged to be the heart of steelhead country, early in the season (see the introduction, and "Pipeline" entry, above). **DO NOT TRY TO ACCESS THE RIFLE RIVER FROM THE WEST, on Ogemaw Center Road!** The two-track at the end will sink your car up to its nuts – lugnuts, that is – in mud. It looks like you might be able to park safely and walk in, but there's no need to try, since that water is readily accessible from the east, as already described, off Twin Lake Road or O'Neill Road.

You can park at the river off Sage Lake Road 44° 21.801N, 84° 02.885W, and walk upstream, or go through the gate and walk, or enter the Rifle River Recreation Area by proceeding north on M-33 to Rose City, turning east at the traffic signal downtown, and getting to the entrance at 44° 25.290N, 84° 01.325W. A Michigan state park sticker is required for entry. In the recreation area you'll find small streams – Houghton Creek, Gamble Creek – that are tricky to fish, and the Rifle, which is pretty heavily-fished, though there're some big fish hiding out. You can drive the back roads in the recreation area, almost down to Sage Lake Road, but you can't drive out, nor enter the recreation area, there.

Enjoy yourself, and stay safe.

*** You can turn west a short distance on State Road and park on the south side, east of the river, where a sign on an old hangar indicates "parking for catch-and-release." This is Selkirk. Climb down to the river on the north side of the road, east end of the bridge, and then fish up- (that's where the DNR plants steelhead) or downstream. The bank is private property! Or, cross the bridge and, at the west end, climb down and fish downstream: again, private property!