

# What happened to swimmer's itch?

I'm taking a chance using that title for this column. Twenty years ago, I wouldn't have dared pose that question.

Getting swimmer's itch after bathing in Lake Cadillac and Lake Mitchell was considered a likely part of your summer experience, especially if you were a kid and spent lots of time wallowing in the shallows.

Within a half-hour after leaving the water, tiny red spots would appear and then the itching would

began. For about a week, you'd be scratching or dabbing on anti-itch powders for relief.



Dave Foley

On the Outside

A layer of baby oil on the skin before going in the lake, vigorous toweling right after leaving the water or taking a shower — that's how we tried to avoid the itch.

The culprit is a tiny parasite that develops in snails, uses ducks as intermediary hosts, and then enters the water. If the parasite encounters a human, it burrows into the skin and dies,

causing inflammation.

A lake where bathers contract swimmer's itch is not a selling point in promoting tourism so measures were taken to combat the itch.

The plan was to use copper sulfate to kill the snails that were host to the parasite. Shortly after the school year ended in June, orange-colored bleach bottles started appearing all over lakes Cadillac and Mitchell. These supposedly marked the snail beds, although I'm not sure how it was determined that these particular spots were snail havens. Once this was done, a small plane began crop dusting maneuvers, swooping through target zones dropping a blue powder near the orange bottles.

We'd sit on our lawn enjoying the air show. That day the lakes were closed to swimming so bathers wouldn't get direct exposure to copper sulfate. It was on one of the non-swimming days that I went Hobie Cat sailing and we turtled the boat.

Although I thrashed about in Lake Cadillac for nearly an hour trying to get the most out of the lake bottom, I suffered no ill effects from my chemical swim.

Even after the chemical application, people would still get swimmer's



DAVE FOLEY | SPECIAL TO THE CADILLAC NEWS

To fight swimmer's itch, low flying planes sprayed copper sulfate into the lakes.

itch, but we just assumed it would have been much worse had the lakes not been treated. It was hard to make a comparison since copper sulfate had been dropped every year since the 1960s.

One year while watching the blue powder spewing out of the bottom of the airplane as it flew along the shoreline in front of my house, I wondered, "If it's supposed to kill snails, what's happening to the leeches, fly larva and plankton that can't swim away at the airplane's approach?" Tom Rozich, who was the DNR fisheries biologist, agreed with my theory and supplied research studies that showed the harmful effects of copper sulfate.

With this information, I wrote letters for the Cadillac News "Speak Out" section, spoke out at county and city commission meet-

ings as well as met with the head of the Department of Public Works, hoping to end the practice of dousing our lakes with that chemical. Others joined me in this campaign.

The DPW had been allocating \$14,000 for the program. In 2000 they suspended the spraying and paid \$13,500 for a three-year study conducted by Hope and Calvin College staff and students.

A survey of resident water fowl population counted 350 mallard ducks, a few black ducks, and some Canada geese. Even though it was long felt that merganser ducks were the carriers, except for during migrations, none reside on the lakes so it was decided that mallards were the hosts of the parasite. During the summer, 330 mallards were lured to bait piles of cracked corn laced with the drug Praziquan-

tel, which would interrupt the parasite's life cycle.

Mercy Hospital set up a "Swimmer's Itch Hotline." At the end of the study and only four complaints had been received. Based on this information, the annual spraying of copper sulfate was discontinued.

To discourage ducks from congregating on beaches, in 2007 the Cadillac City Council passed an ordinance making it illegal to feed ducks in the city. Offenders can be fined \$50 or more, although warnings are given before a fine is levied.

Swimmer's itch continues to be a problem in Michigan lakes notably Higgins, Glen and Crystal Lakes. Copper sulfate is no longer considered a solution. Lakes battling swimmer's itch deal with the issue by working to stop the feeding of ducks and erecting barriers to protect swimming areas from the parasite.

In the summer, most days I dive into the lake after finishing my run and I've never had problems with swimmer's itch.

Before concluding that our lakes were free of the parasites, I called Wayne Fox, owner of the Sands Motel, who said it had been years since one of his motel guests had complained about swimmer's itch. I got the same answer when I contacted Mitchell State Park.

While a successive killer of snails, application of copper sulfate probably eliminated other organisms. The buildup of copper, which is not soluble, on the lake bottom may have wiped out the fly larva that produced the huge hatch of mayflies that used to appear the first week of June. Also gone are the leeches which terrorized my children, but were loved by bass and walleye and it has been years since I've seen crayfish near my dock.

At the time spraying copper sulfate was considered the best way to deal with swimmer's itch. If it had been known the collateral damage that was being done by this project, I'm sure, a different solution would have been sought.

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-Dave Wolf, PA Fish and Boat Commission

"It is in showing where to find out-of-the-way trout streams that makes the map such a treasure to the fisherman."  
- Joe Gordon, TRIBUNE-DEMOCRAT, Johnstown, PA

**LOST STREAM MAP**

The STREAM & LAKE MAP OF MICHIGAN resembles another map - known to Pennsylvania anglers as the "Lost Stream Map."  
The "Stream Map of Pennsylvania" was completed in 1965 after a thirty-year effort by Howard Higbee, a former Penn State Professor.  
Professor Higbee succeeded in creating a map of the highest detail possible - a map that shows every stream and lake. He painstakingly plotted by hand, the location of 45,000 miles of streams onto a 3 by 5 foot map.  
The map sold extremely well - until it was lost several years after it first appeared in print. Incredibly, the printer entrusted with the original drawing and printing plates, declared bankruptcy, then carelessly hauled Higbee's 30 years of work to a landfill.  
The few remaining dog-eared copies became a prized fisherman's possession. Professor Higbee was offered \$400 for one of his last maps. And state agencies were forced to keep their copies under lock and key.  
Experts told Professor Higbee that reprints were impossible, because the maps were printed in non-photographic blue.  
Then in 1991, at the age of 91, Howard Higbee's dream came true. Computers made it possible to reprint the map. Holding an updated map, Howard said, "I never thought I'd live to see this day."  
Then, by combining Professor Higbee's knowledge with computer technology - the STREAM & LAKE MAP OF MICHIGAN was created.

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