North Coast

EDITORS NOTE

North Coast Magazine is a visually driven publication that brings a fresh eye to the Great Lakes region. North Coast will explore a wide range of issues that are an integral part of the region, including culture, politics, the environment, the economy and health care. The thought provoking nature of this publication will showcase what the region has to offer through the imagery and writing of contributors who have an affinity for the region.

This month our writers and photographers have traveled from Altmar, New York, to Put-in-Bay, Ohio, covering stories from sled dog races to winter life on South Bass Island.

Our editorial board hopes that you find the inaugural issue of North Coast as enlightening as we did in its production.

04. Fly Away  New York Steelhead hooks anglers for life
10. Sled dogs  Tug Hill challenge keeps the mutts panting
20. Frozen in Place  Winter ice gives Put-in-Bay relief from summer crowds.

EDITORIAL BOARD
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It's before dawn, he's been standing on this spot for the last 30 minutes, in the water, in the snow, in 20-degree weather for his chance at what many say is the best steelhead fishing in the lower 48. Brown has staked out this spot not only because he knows the fishing here is great but he also knows that others know the fishing is great, and if he wasn't in this spot somebody else would be.

Brown, 43, a drywall finisher and painter, was recently laid off so he's had some extra time to fish this year. But fishing is more than a way to kill time between jobs. "You never know when the magic moment will happen...the steelheads get into your blood," and that is what keeps him coming back. He will land 22 steelheads before days end. "It's just phenomenally." Harry Powers knows this passion all too well. He grew up around fishermen but couldn't get anyone to take him to this steelhead Mecca, so a week after his sixteenth birthday and with a brand new driver's license in his pocket, Powers drove himself freezing cold and unable to catch anything, he went to the local tackle shop and began asking questions. Set up with the right gear, he headed back out and caught three steelheads.

Powers has fished around the country and prefers steelhead over most if not all others. For him the thrill is having the beautiful...
Phil Brown waits on the banks of the Salmon River for his chance at what many say is the best steelhead fishing in the lower 48.
explosive steelhead on light tackle and watching it go for a hundred-yard run, breaking the surface to leap into the air. "Once you have that first steelhead on your line you are hooked for life."

The challenge of the fish and the beauty of the river bring the fishermen back again and again.

The Salmon River flows through Oswego County and into Lake Ontario at Port Ontario. In the early 1800s the river (named after the native Atlantic Salmon) was teeming with fish. By the end of the century the numbers were down, decimated through overfishing. The river is now stocked annually with around 300,000 Chinook salmon, 80,000 coho salmon, 100,000 steelheads and 30,000 Atlantic salmon, in an effort to bring back the fish.

The fish that bring these anglers out in the winter start out as your average rainbow trout, but because they have access to the great lakes for several years before they return to spawn they grow to be monsters (the New York state record is 31 pounds, three ounces and 39 inches long). The room to roam and ample food supplies creates giants, and at this time of year they are dark green on top with flashes of pink and silver on their sides and bellies.

Steelhead anglers are different. They brave the elements using catch-and-release techniques whereby after capture on barbless hooks, the fish are unhooked and returned to the water hopefully before the fish experience serious exhaustion or injury. Anglers will sit back and watch another angler fight a fish and help him net it if necessary.
this because they love to fish and love being on the river.
For Powers it comes down to perfection.
Interacting with nature through a fly rod is a pure way of fishing. Perfect swing, perfect cast and a perfect presentation of your bait or you will come up empty handed.
Harry Powers loves the steelhead’s fight but interpreting the moving water is the real thrill. He describes a real sense of tranquility in learning to read the water like a book and learning how to think like a fish. “Nothing happens randomly on the river,” Powers said. “It’s you and nature and trying to understand it and imitate it... and when the fish hits, it’s an awesome thing. The exclamation point.”

“Once you have that first steelhead on your line you are hooked for life.”  
Harry Powers
Sled dog races include skijoring, a Norwegian variant where a cross-country skier is assisted by the dog.
The race is a two-day event with racers’ Saturday results determining where they will start on Sunday. Cranstone has tied each dog to different points on a long bar that is attached to her truck and as the excitement builds it’s possible to imagine the dogs dragging the vehicle across the parking lot. At the starting line it takes the help of several bystanders to keep the dogs under control. At the specified moment the pack is hurtling down the track and is soon out of view. A little more than 33 minutes later Cranstone is finishing the five-mile race right on the tail of another racer. With precision timing, she plants her foot and helps to propel the sled. Each mighty kick brings her face low over the driving bow. Despite commands of “easi” to slow the team after crossing the finish line, she applies the claw brake to slow the sled – otherwise they might just keep going. With tongues out, a few strands of slobber on their faces and some frost in their fur, the dogs appear as though they have been out for a stroll. Their thirst to run has been slaked and a sense of calm has overcome the pack.

Dog sled racing brings to mind the Iditarod, a multi-day Alaskan race with sleds pulled by large teams of 12 to 16 dogs. But the sport offers much more variety than that. The Tug Hill event held in Lorraine, New York, has 18 races in five categories. Events range from an eight-dog sprint sled race to the Nordic Combined, which is a one-dog event that consists of two five-mile laps. For the first lap the competitor on skis and dog pull a small, low-slung sled called a pulk that is attached by a harness between the dog and skier. At the five-mile point there is a transition area where racers leave their pulk and ski the second lap alone with the dog.

The dogs most commonly associated with sled races are malamutes and husky types, but some racers have brought in German shorthaired pointers, greyhounds and other hounds into the mix. Though the resulting animals have endurance and speed needed for racing some still prefer purebreds.

Winona State Park is located on the Tug Hill Plateau, which has the greatest amount of snowfall east of the Rocky Mountains, up to 250 inches a year, according to the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. The lake-effect snow is what keeps the Tug Hill race going year after year.

Record snowfall that was causing cities and airports to shutdown in the Midwest and Northeast during January 2011 was just what race organizers were looking for. Although this year’s almost constant snow did slow race times a bit, for dog sled racing “bad weather” means no snow.

On this race day, step off the trail and you would quickly be up to your knees in snow, but today the dogs are running on firmly packed trails.
Max and Drake, owned by Jennifer and Chris Patton, take a break from racing.

“If it’s not about the love of the dog you might as well race motorcycles.”

Murielle Ovenden

packed trails. Between events volunteers on a four-wheeler pull a flat-bottomed boat with a person on board up and down the trails to pack the newly fallen snow and cover the tracks from earlier races. It appears from around the bend in the course and looks as if a motor-less boat is chasing the four-wheeler on a frozen stream. One of the volunteers grooming the trails is Frank Caldwell, a Nissan mechanic during the week in Watertown, New York, became so enamored with sled dog racing that he moved from near the New Jersey shore to Mannsville, New York, so he could live two miles from the park. In New Jersey he bought a malamute and began racing wheeled carts on dirt trails when there wasn’t enough snow. He soon realized that he was spending five to six weeks each winter traveling to run his dogs and figured that as a mechanic he could live just about anywhere. Property was cheap near the park, so he packed up his dogs and moved.

For Caldwell it was an easy decision. “I love being out with the dogs and I hate being inside watching TV. The dogs love it and they don’t dig holes to China in the backyard because they are bored,” he said.

The disdain for television is a current that runs through the competitors. Television would take time that they could spend with their dogs.

Murielle and Mark Ovenden, of South Mountain, Ontario, have been married for 10 years and have never owned a TV. Instead they spend their time training their dogs Marley and Marvin for skijoring competition and building a fifty-foot boat that will eventually be their home.

In skijoring, a cross-country skier is harnessed to a dog or dogs and the pair propels themselves around the course.

With Murielle the love for dogs began when she was old enough to have one by her side. In a combination of accents from her native France and her new home, Canada, she said, “Skijoring is something we can do together. If it’s not about the love of the dog you might as well race motorcycles.”
FROZEN IN PLACE
Put-In-Bay Winter

Fish freeze almost instantly when pulled from below the ice of Lake Erie.
Jeff Herold squeezes into the Piper Seneca among the Girl Scout’s Do-Si-Dos and Samoas. He is holding four warm pizzas in his lap. Herold, a sergeant on the Put-In-Bay police force makes his way back to South Bass Island after a brief shopping trip to the mainland for milk, Velveeta shells and cheese, some cleaners and maybe a magazine. The pizzas?

“They are for Cops night at the police station,” says Herold, explaining that the weekly staff meeting involves getting together and watching Cops on TV while the chief talks about business. Pilot Jon Kujda has volunteered to fly the Girl Scout cookies to the island for free when he can fit them in. Herold was the only passenger on this leg of the seven-minute flight so he got packed in with the treats. For anyone else it might be an inconvenience but to the year round residents of the Lake Erie island it’s a regular part of winter life.

Airplanes are the only way in or out. During the summer, ferries bring 10,000 to 25,000 visitors a day to South Bass Island, an seasonal explosion of people for an island where the phonebook is only five pages. Winter living on the island can be tough. The high school kids don’t go on regular field trips, instead they go to the mainland to learn to drive with traffic lights because there are none on the island. There isn’t a lunch room at school so the kids go home to eat or they go to Tipper’s Lounge and Restaurant. The plane ride is $80-100 round trip to the mainland if you need anything during the winter. You have to go through all your menus for Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Years and birthdays and make sure you have all the ingredients because you can’t just run down to the store and buy it. There are no magazines on the island because merchants have to agree to buy a certain number of copies and the island stores can’t regularly sell enough to meet the seller’s demands. Islanders like Maria Pope, the owner of the Black Squirrel Bed and Breakfast, joke that this the island of misfit toys.

“The island has historically been a place where people can come who were trying to get away from things or leave things or escape,” Pope says. “John Brown Jr. was probably one of the first ones who came here after his abolitionist father was hanged at Harpers Ferry, in 1859. It is notoriously a place where people come when they don’t want to be found or they want to start over or they just don’t fit in anywhere else. And this tends to be a very accepting and tolerant place for a variety of different people. Anytime you just want to dropout or anytime you just want to separate yourself.”

Pope, a native American who wears her hair in a long, tight braid, with a Sacagawea coin necklace and turquoise jewelry on her arms, talks about her move to the island. “I'm an old hippie so this is a good place. There are a lot of kindred spirits here.” She and her partner Rob Hard moved to the island about five years ago. “We were like a lot of middle age couples and we had a lot of things. We were at a spot where our last child was leaving home and we took a look around and said we don’t have to live like this anymore.” They decided to get out of the rat race and bought the bed and breakfast. Pope’s place is one of only a handful of places open during the winter. The off season clientele are mainly ice fishermen looking for walleye. A village of several to several hundred ice-fishing shanties pop up on the
Honorary Put-In-Bay sheriff Theresa Finney and pilot Jon Kupila share pictures at the Skyway bar, one of two open during the winter.
In a game to mark the end of the winter ice Jack Booker makes a mad dash across intentionally broken ice in downtown Put-In-Bay.

With his lap full of pizzas in a plane full of Girl Scout cookies Put-In-Bay Police Department sgt Jeff Herold heads to South Bass Island after a shopping trip on the mainland.

Black Squirrel bed and breakfast resident cat Zoe takes her perch as a new snow falls.

“‘I’m an old hippie so this is a good place. There are a lot of kindred spirits here.’”

MARIA POPE

ice. Fishermen travel from all parts to hover over holes in the ice inside shanties made of thin strips of wood and covered in discarded billboard fabric.

Local ice fishing guide Brian Burkett’s hat is plastered with snow and the right half of his moustache — just the right half — is covered in ice. It’s easy to explain their love of ice fishing.

“It’s cause we’re all nuts and it’s the only time of the year that I get to have fun.”

The rest of the year Burkett works repairing boats, like most of the year-round residents.

There are evergreen branches jammed in the Lake Erie ice at odd angles that appear suddenly in the near total whiteout, providing a rough guide to a safe passage between the ice fishing shanties and the relative security of South Bass Island.

Even the islanders who have known the ice for years need the branches in the event of a whiteout. But for the mainlanders who head out on the ice on snowmobiles and four-wheelers for Put-In-Bay and Rattlesnake Island, they can be a godsend.

Miss the route and you might find yourself falling through a crack that has opened in the seemingly solid surface.

Dan Sinclair has been ice fishing on Lake Erie since he was 10 years old, making the annual trip to be with his father. Sinclair, now 67, says he has missed maybe three years over that time while he was away at college in Marietta, Ohio. Sinclair’s father died recently at age 86 but that didn’t stop Dan from returning each year since to his ice shanty. To the uninitiated, it can seem slow and boring.

“You gotta love it. You can’t be an impatient person,” Sinclair says. “So if you don’t mind sittin’, it’s rather serene. And then when it’s four o’clock somewhere in the world I’ll have a rum and Coke.”
Under whiteout conditions the horizon disappears and ice fishermen can quickly become disoriented.