

Lake Billy Chinook is home to some of best bull trout fishing in the west

by Scott_Staats

Sometimes it seems like the fish you lose are more memorable than the ones you catch. Such was the case on one of my first outings at Lake Billy Chinook several years ago. On the fifth cast toward shore, a big bull trout hit the Rapala and the fight began.

John Garrison with his 14-pound bull trout from Lake Billy Chinook – photo courtesy of Garrison’s Guide Service

After several minutes of playing the fish (or more correctly, the fish playing me), it got to within 10 feet of the boat and appeared well over 24 inches, the minimum length for keeping bull trout. Then, just as quickly as it had begun, it was over.

Somehow, the fish either managed to free itself of the lure or I managed to free the lure from the fish. I learned that if you give these bulls just a little slack, they’re gone.

On another outing, I could see a few big bull trout prowling the shoreline. As soon as my Rapala hit the surface, one of the fish struck. After a few seconds of splashing and thrashing, the elusive fish let go. How a fish can spit out a lure with several large treble hooks attached is beyond me. I have since hooked and actually landed a fish over 24 inches.

Anglers anxiously await the March bull trout opener in the Metolius Arm of Lake Billy Chinook. Many head out after trophy fish up to 20 pounds, while others enjoy the kokanee fishing and the spectacular scenery.

According to John Garrison, owner of Garrison's Guide Service in Sunriver, the best fishing for bull trout is from mid-March to April 30 in the Metolius Arm. After that the bite slows down and the presence of jet skis and waterskiers picks up.

Garrison prefers trolling more in March for bulls and casting lures more in April. He suggests trolling Rapalas and other deep diving lures close to shore in about 20 to 30 feet of water.

"Sometimes it takes a while to locate the fish," he said, "so you have to be patient." On his best day out on the lake last year, his clients caught seven bull trout, four being over 24 inches. The biggest caught from his boats last year measured 12 pounds. In 1998, Garrison caught a 31-inch, 14-pounder. The state record came out of the reservoir in 1989 weighing 23 pounds 2 ounces. The chance of hooking into a 30-inch fish is what excites most anglers.

A fish finder can help locate the bulls. They will usually be found alone or with only one or two other fish. The best bite is from about 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

“Most anglers try for bull trout due to the fact that they can grow to be a big fish and put up a fight much like a huge brown trout,” he said. When trolling, Garrison uses bait-casting reels with 12-pound test. For casting he uses spin-casting reels with 10-pound test.

Besides bull trout, anglers also have the opportunity to catch kokanee, brown trout and even bass later in the season. On slow days when the bulls aren't biting, anglers can be seen jigging for kokanee. Anglers need to be aware of a new law that states - It is unlawful to continue fishing for any fish once a bull trout has been harvested. So if you plan on fishing for other fish besides bull trout, you better do that first and try for bull trout afterwards.

Bull trout can also be caught in the Deschutes and Crooked River Arms of the reservoir but anglers usually have better luck for more and bigger fish in the Metolius Arm.

Some bull trout are tagged. If you happen to catch one of them, leave the tag in the fish if you release it and write down the information and turn it in to ODFW. If you keep the fish, return the tag to ODFW.

The success of the bull trout population in Lake Billy Chinook begins in the tributaries of the Metolius River. Streams flowing into the Metolius River have some of the most robust bull trout populations in the west, according to the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

These streams survived a lot of the past habitat degradation that occurred in Central Oregon and were not entirely fished out when Round Butte Dam was built in 1964.

Most bull trout spawn from mid-July to early October in the small, cold water tributaries of the Metolius River. The juvenile fish remain in the streams for two to three years before migrating back downstream to Lake Billy Chinook, usually in May or June.

The fish will then spend another two to three years in the reservoir before heading back up the river to spawn when they are four to six years old. After spawning is completed in the smaller streams, most bull trout adults will return to the Metolius after about two weeks, then move back down to the reservoir within about a month.

When compared to other basins in the west containing bull trout, the Metolius River tributaries have some of the highest densities documented for juvenile fish with up to 21 juveniles per 100 square meters of habitat. The smaller streams have undercut banks, overhanging vegetation and large woody debris, all important

habitat components for the trout.

Two major changes occurred to allow the bull trout population to increase. The kokanee population increased and established itself in the basin, providing a prey source. Restrictive angling regulations were imposed in 1982 limiting the catch from 10 bull trout per day to one and no harvest of wild trout in the Metolius River and most of its tributaries.

There are several historic photos of anglers with huge bull trout from the Metolius River and the upper Deschutes River. The last bull trout observed in Crane Prairie Reservoir was 1955 and in the Deschutes River upstream of Bend in 1954.

Weather on the lake is usually nice in March, but be prepared for chilly and windy conditions. It's best to launch from the Crooked River boat ramp and head down to the Metolius Arm.

Today the outlook for bull trout is superb. There's a very healthy population and a lot of effort is being put forth to maintain that population.

Regulations: Metolius Arm is open to angling March 1 through October 31. The limit for bull trout is one per day at least 24 inches long. The limit on kokanee is 25 a day, with no size limits. Bull trout must be released unharmed unless kept in the daily catch limit.

Call Garrison's Guide Service at 541-593-8394 for more information or to book a trip. Besides a fishing license, a tribal angling permit is needed to fish in the Metolius arm of the reservoir. These permits can be purchased in Culver.

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