

Ochoco Reservoir offers good spring fishing, chance to see varied wildlife

by Scott_Staats

A 3/4 moon hung in the sky over the eastern end of the reservoir in early afternoon. An osprey flew overhead, keeping a sharp eye on the chilly water for its next meal. A river otter lifted its head above the water about 30 yards from our boat, checking us out. A coating of snow still lay on the summit of Lookout Mountain in the distance.

I accompanied Mike Lunn and his chocolate lab Lulu for an afternoon of fishing on Ochoco Reservoir. Lulu lay on the deck with her front paws over the side and tail wagging, anxiously waiting for something to happen, as if saying, "Come on guys, where's the fish?" We were thinking the same thing.

13-inch rainbow trout from Ochoco Reservoir " photos by Scott Staats

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We targeted the upper end of the reservoir for trout and crappie but didn't get any bites and didn't see many fish on the screen of the fish-finder. We concluded it was a bit early for either of these fish to be in this part of the reservoir. Trout will stage at the upper end of the reservoir before going up Ochoco Creek and Mill Creek to spawn between April and June.

We did see a lot of fish on the screen in the area of the 10 mph markers but had no luck. Many of the fish were in 20 to 40 feet of water. The air and water were only about 44 degrees, a little chilly for both fish and anglers to be active. The last part of the afternoon we spent trolling down near the dam. We had time only for two passes. On the first pass I got a few pecks on the line then the fish hit. I pulled a plump 13-inch rainbow to the boat. There's nothing like fresh fish in the net and frying pan.

After getting the trout in the net, the hook came out easily " from the fish but not the net. I spent the next several precious minutes frantically trying to figure out the puzzle of getting the treble hook out of the twisted netting while Mike was getting some bites. He may notice that some holes in his net are bigger than others as I had to cut a few of the strands to finally free my spinner and get it back in the water.

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The average size trout in the reservoir measures between 12 and 14 inches with some getting up to 20 inches. Higher success rates are reported from anglers in boats trolling with flashers and lures. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife manages Ochoco Reservoir for a rainbow trout fishery and most people who fish for trout keep the fish.

Bank anglers have luck along the entire north shore using worms, Power Bait, marshmallows, spinners, flies â€” just about anything thatâ€™s used to catch trout.. Much of the lake shore is private so be sure to respect the rights of property owners.

On a past outing I tried my hand with the fly rod. We trolled slowly at the upper end of the reservoir using Woolly Buggers with about 40 or 50 feet of line out, starting in about 10 feet of water and heading in to about three or four feet. We were using clear sinking line with 4X tippet and 9-foot leader on 5-weight, 9-foot rods.

The proper way to hook an Ochoco trout on a fly while trolling is to keep the rod parallel to the water, pointing it back behind the boat. When you feel a strike, simply lift the rod tip up and keep the line tight. Most of the time, the fish will set the hook themselves. I opt for the knee-jerk reaction of a state record bass or salmon strike, which for these trout almost always results in a miss.

I didnâ€™t have too much luck with the fly rod and opted to employ drastic measures, which consisted of grabbing the spinning rod. On about the third or fourth cast, I hooked a plump 16-inch rainbow on an orange and green Rooster Tail.

The reservoir is just about at capacity, according to the Ochoco Irrigation District. Total capacity is 44,247 acre feet and recent measurements recorded 41,264 acre feet, making it about 93 percent filled.

Ochoco Reservoir receives an average of 25,000 fingerlings each year around mid-May, according to Brett Hodgson, fish biologist with ODFW in Prineville. These rainbow trout come from Oak Springs Hatchery in Maupin. Prior to 2003, ODFW had been stocking about 60,000 fingerlings a year. However those fish were three to four inches and the latest stocked fish are five to six inches. This new stock will be eight inches by this fall and around 14 inches by next spring.

Hodgson hopes the larger fingerlings will compete more favorably with the bullhead and crappie in the reservoir and produce a better trout population.

Besides hatchery fish, there are also wild trout in Ochoco Reservoir. "The reservoir fishery is not completely dependent upon our stocking," Hodgson said. There are no plans to discontinue the state's stocking program in the reservoir, he added. About an equal number of trout spawn up Mill and Ochoco creeks.

Hodgson said that five or six years ago the ratio was about 60 percent wild fish to 40 percent hatchery fish but the last couple of years of monitoring has shown 80 percent hatchery fish to 20 percent wild fish.

"The last few drought years have reduced spawning success," Hodgson explained. He would like to see at least a 50-50 ratio between wild and hatchery fish. Monitoring data indicates that hatchery fish aren't leaving the reservoir to spawn or otherwise interact with wild fish.

Crappie were first detected in the reservoir in 1997 by ODFW sampling. Their numbers continue to increase with some reaching ten inches or more. Bigger crappie can now be found in Ochoco Reservoir than in Prineville Reservoir. Crappie can be targeted in the shallower parts of the reservoir, especially along the south shore (opposite the highway) in May and June. As the water warms, the fish will head for deeper water near the dam.

There are also brown bullhead present throughout the reservoir. March and April are best months to target bullhead when they are spawning in the shallower upper sections. Worms on the bottom work best. Fish up to a pound and a half are possible and, just like crappie, the average fish is bigger in Ochoco Reservoir than in Prineville Reservoir.

“We are quite disappointed that crappie and bullhead were illegally introduced into Ochoco Reservoir,” said Hodgson. “I think ultimately it will have a negative impact on the trout fishing; it already has in Prineville Reservoir.” He said that people think they may be helping out a fishery by planting other species illegally, but in reality they are hurting it.

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