

Target Prineville Reservoir For Largemouth And Smallmouth Bass

by Scott_Staats

If anglers can't make up their mind whether to head out after smallmouth or largemouth bass, then Prineville Reservoir should be the destination.

Largemouth Bass Smallmouth Bass - Photos by Scott Staats
Located in Central Oregon's high desert, this scenic 10-mile long reservoir holds about equal quantities of smallmouth and largemouth. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife stocked the reservoir with bass after the completion of Bowman Dam across the Crooked River in the early 1960s.

The bass fishery at Prineville Reservoir has improved tremendously in the last decade. In the early 1980's a few severe droughts all but drained the reservoir. The limit on bass was lifted due to an anticipated fish kill and it is estimated that about 80 percent of the fish were caught and kept.

Rain soon filled the reservoir averting a fish kill, but most of the bass were gone. Many bass anglers and local bass clubs stayed away from the reservoir for years.

About ten years ago, crappie were illegally introduced and the bass began feasting on the abundant new source of food, which now account for up to 75 percent of their diet. The crappie are abundant and easy to

catch for the bass.

According to Steve Marx, fish biologist for ODFW in Bend, the reservoir offers just about every type of habitat that draws bass, such as ledges, boulders, gravelly points and shallow flats with stumps. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife has also added junipers, boulders, clusters of Christmas trees and tire reefs to provide habitat for bass.

The nutrient-rich reservoir is very productive for both warmwater and coldwater fish. Before crappie entered the reservoir, bass preyed primarily on crawdads and trout fingerlings.

The best months to fish Prineville are May through October, although largemouth over six pounds and smallmouth over five pounds have been caught in early April when water temperatures range between 42 and 46 degrees. Prineville bass usually become active at around 52 to 54 degrees and begin to spawn when water temperatures get above 60 degrees.

Topwater bites come early and late in the day, but Prineville is a lake where you can catch fish all day long, except maybe when it turns over.

Popular sections to fish include the upper end early in the year where there are more flats with stumps jutting to the surface. Look for wood and youâ€™ll likely find bass. Last year was a low water year and the reservoir stayed at about half to three-quarters full. In lower levels, the lower half of the reservoir fishes better (from the resort to the dam).

Top lures for the reservoir are black Powerworms or jigs, spinnerbaits, buzzbaits, Rattletraps, Rapalas and poppers. Black and blue or pumpkin-colored jigs early in the year are a sure bet. Prineville Reservoir usually has little fishing pressure and most anglers don't realize the numbers of bass in Prineville.

The varied terrain -- from shallows to steep, rocky drop-offs -- is what makes the reservoir so good for bass. Some anglers have more luck with bass earlier in the morning when water conditions are calmer, the fish are more active and there are fewer people out on the reservoir.

One of my favorite techniques is a black Berkley Powerworm fished slowly on the bottom. I use the four-inch for smallmouth and seven-inch for largemouth. Earlier in the morning, it's a good idea to target the surface with buzzbaits then eventually switch to crankbaits and spinnerbaits. I've heard of several largemouth being caught that weighed in around six pounds. I've also taken some nice smallmouth near rocky points.

Look for areas such as underwater islands, rocky points and gravelly bars. Fish have been caught from just about every bank on the reservoir. In early summer, anglers have the best chance for bass in the back of coves and shallower depths where the water is warmer. After spawning, the best advice is to fish the points or around any structures.

There is a 12-inch minimum length on both smallmouth and largemouth. No more than three bass over 15 inches may be kept. The limit is five bass per day.

Prineville Reservoir held the state record for smallmouth bass for many years at six pounds six ounces until it was broken recently with a fish from Hagg Lake weighing over seven pounds. The state record largemouth is 11 pounds nine ounces from Butte Falls farm pond. Prineville largemouth get up to eight pounds with many four to six pounders caught every year.

On one outing, I tossed a Rapala near a stump and ended up with a bonus. No sooner did the lure hit the water when a swirling commotion began. To my surprise, there were two smallmouth on the end of the line and a third followed all the way up to the boat. The feeding frenzy resembled that of hungry piranhas.

INFORMATION: Contact the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife in Prineville at 541-447-5111.

Prineville Reservoir State Park (541-447-4363) has two campgrounds with 98 sites for RVs and tents, plus five cabins. Prineville Reservoir Resort (541-447-7468) has a 7-unit motel and a 69-unit campground with water and electric hookups. The resort also has a cafe, store, marina with moorage, boat rentals and the only fuel service on the reservoir. There are also several motels and stores in Prineville 15 miles from the reservoir.

The reservoir is one of the more accessible bodies of water for shore fishing although a boat will cover more area. There are five boat launches on the reservoir: two at the state park, one at the resort, a county launch before reaching the park and one at the dam. Access to Bowman Dam is up the Crooked River south of Prineville.

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