

Brownlee Reservoir Offers a Variety of Fish And Scenery

by Scott_Staats

If you like catching lots of fish and a variety of fish, then Brownlee Reservoir is the place. My wife and I joined two other couples from Prineville on September 8 and came home with plenty of fish and memories.

Impounded by Brownlee Dam in 1958, this part of the Snake River system provides some great fishing. "Brownlee is probably the best fishery in the Northwest for catching a variety of warmwater species," said Gary Gorbet, owner of Brownlee Charters in Richland. "I like the variety of fish in Brownlee and being able to go anywhere and find solitude."

Gorbet fishes the reservoir most of the year and said fishing for all species has recently been on the upswing. This is his twelfth year fishing the reservoir and his fifth season as a guide.

A typical crappie found at Brownlee Reservoir - photos by Scott Staats Brownlee is home to a wide variety of fish including black and white crappie, smallmouth and largemouth bass, yellow perch, bluegill, pumpkinseed sunfish, trout, brown bullhead, channel catfish, flathead catfish and blue catfish. Most of the warmwater species were introduced in the early 1900s to the 1940s into the Snake River system.

Vonda Elmore of Prineville with a nice bluegill Of all the fish present, Gorbet likes targeting crappie more than all the other species. While fishing for crappie, he said he usually catches some of the other fish. On our outing, we caught black and white crappie, bluegill, perch, smallmouth bass and channel and blue catfish.

Although the skies were a bit smoky from fires around the Northwest, the morning brightened with the first tugs on the lines shortly after Gorbet dropped anchor at a favorite spot in the Powder River Arm of Brownlee. We soon began tossing good-sized crappie, bluegill, perch and a nice catfish in the cooler.

We fished two spots in the arm and two spots in the main reservoir from 7 a.m. to about 2:30 when the winds began picking up. By this time, we had the cooler pretty well full of fish and thought about the filleting yet to come.

For crappie and bass, Gorbet likes to target the banks in six to 20 feet of water, paying special attention to rocky points jutting out into the reservoir. He prefers plastic tubes and grubs up to two inches long on 1/16-ounce leadheads. For crappie, we tipped our hooks with Power Bait Crappie Nibbles.

Most crappie we caught measured 8 to 12 inches, with the biggest being 12 ½ inches. Gorbet has caught a few that measured 16 inches. Two smallmouth we caught were close to 15 inches and one channel catfish measured 20 inches.

That day we saw only a few other boats fishing out fishing. Steep canyon walls dotted with sagebrush and rocky outcrops rose up from the shoreline. Near the rim, pockets of tamarack and fir seemed a fitting hiding place for deer and elk. While fishing, Gorbet has seen elk, deer, antelope, black bear, chukar, otter, eagles and herons. We did see a nice mule deer buck laying in the shade a few hundred yards up the slope.

There's nothing like fishing in comfort. Gorbet's 20-foot pontoon boat has four swivel chairs, shade canopy, changing room, porta-potty, electric motor and plenty of room to move around for six of us anglers.

Even though crappie fishing appears to be pretty successful, it was once doing even better. According to Terry Schrader, warmwater fish biologist with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife in Bend, there was a boom in the late 1980's and early 1990's. A creel survey in 1989 found that anglers caught two million crappie, almost a million smallmouth bass, 70,000 yellow perch and 60,000 channel catfish.

“Crappie populations tend to be cyclic,” Shrader said. He pointed out that there tends to be more white crappie in the upper part of the reservoir since they do better in more turbid water, while the lower end of Brownlee has more black crappie. The fish feed on zooplankton, insects, macroinvertebrates and even small fish.

Brownlee Reservoir is the biggest warmwater fishery in the state, according to Shrader. The amount of angler pressure on Brownlee in the late 1980s and early 1990s was equal to one percent of all the fishing in the entire state, which included all freshwater and saltwater angling. That means one out of every 100 angling hours spent in Oregon occurred on the reservoir. The pressure has dropped off some, Shrader said, but Brownlee still receives significant pressure. Overall the fishery for crappie, smallmouth bass and catfish is staying fairly consistent, he added.

Anglers need to be aware of afternoon thunderstorms that can appear over the rim with little warning. “It’s best to start back at the first indication of an approaching storm if you’re out on the Snake or lower Powder River,” Gorbet suggests.

The fish cleaning station at Hewitt Park is one of the best I’ve ever seen. The stainless steel setup has water, a shade covering and electrical hookups for those handy electric fillet knives. The buzz of three electric knives filled the air as the fillets were washed, slipped into baggies and put in the cooler on ice. Gorbet estimates that he’s filleted well over 10,000 crappie.

There are also three good boat ramps at the park as well as tent camping and RV hookups. Richland is only a few miles up the road.

“The fishing was just fantastic,” said Wayne Elmore of Prineville. “Brownlee is a great place to kick back, catch a bunch of fish and enjoy some beautiful scenery. It’s a spectacular place in the state of Oregon.”

To contact Brownlee Charters, call 541-893-6863 or go to www.brownleecharters.com.

We stayed at the Hitching Post Motel in Richland (541-893-6176), which also includes a store with groceries and just about all the fishing gear needed for the reservoir.

“Brownlee is a great fishery,” said Thorny Hampton, owner of the Hitching Post. “Crappie is king but

there are so many other species you can catch here.â€•

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