



Left to right are Dwight Hammond, Sheridan County warden; Dick Bard; Eddie Smith, temporary worker; Dick Bandy, Johnson County warden; and Wilbur Huggins in the background, who was a temporary worker at the time. Huggins retired in 1979 with more than 45 years of service with the Game and Fish. (WGFD photo)

Historic Stocking

Fish stocking has taken place in Lake DeSmet for decades with the first reports of unofficial stocking dating prior to the 1900s

By Christina Schmidt

In the office of Sheridan Fisheries Supervisor Paul Mavrakis is a pile of yellowed index cards. In neat, small handwriting on more than three dozen cards is the summation of decades of stocking efforts at Lake DeSmet, one of the region's premier fisheries north of Buffalo.

The earliest notation records that in 1937, brown and rainbow trout, perch and crappie were stocked in the lake, though numbers are absent. However, a 1936 article in *Wyoming Wildlife* magazine and a 1923 article in the Buffalo Bulletin suggest that stocking of the lake began much earlier.

On Thursday, May 17, 1923, spawning trout in the Leiter Ditch, which supplied

water to the lake, warranted a front page article in the Buffalo Bulletin.

"State fish commissioner Bliss Bayne, Hank Schuler and Game Warden Carl Lund when notified herded the schools up the ditch and into a trap and proceeded to take care of the spawning by taking the eggs and returning the fish to the water," the paper reported.

The article determined through records at Story Hatchery that stocking had been done for the past 20 years by local businessmen George Munkres, Eugene Mather, George Hersey and Charles Morgareidge, who was appointed superintendent of Fish Hatchery District No. 2 in Feb. 1899. It noted Morgareidge stocked 30,000 steelhead trout (a sea-running strain of rainbow trout) from Grants Pass, Oregon, in the lake between 1910 and 1912.

The May 1936 issue of *Wyoming Wildlife* suggests even earlier stockings that originated in an unofficial and by today's standards, illegal and unfortunate manner, with local anglers transferring fish between waters.

Charles Walter, a Johnson County rancher, claimed in the issue that, "... the first trout was planted by him in Lake DeSmet more than 40 years ago — but did it on a wager with C. J. Hogerson (later mayor of Buffalo), who then claimed to be champion fisherman. Walters challenged his right to the title and agreed that what fish were caught would be kept alive and planted in Lake DeSmet. That was in 1896."

A 1980 Game and Fish report on the lake adds that cutthroat or "black spotted trout" were reported in 1919, mackinaw were

reported by anglers in 1936 and kokanee were planted "sometime before 1929 as reliable observers reported a spawning run in Shell Creek that year" with "a great many of them taken by locals, primarily with pitchforks as they ascended the creek."

But rainbow trout dominate the stocking records. Beginning in the 1940s, the species makes an almost solid run, its name covering the index cards year after year, with only sporadic introductions of other species, including 8,800 brook trout released in 1944, an effort deemed a failure when no brookies were caught by anglers or biologists in subsequent years.

The lake's reputation as a rainbow trout fishery was already established by the early 1930s. Rainbow trout strains did so well in DeSmet that it served as a spawning location for decades, with eggs collected by fisheries managers first in the Leiter Ditch and later at the mouth of Shell Creek.

"Lake DeSmet has now become a permanent and valuable spawning camp for rainbow eggs," noted the 1935-1937 biennial report of the Game and Fish Commission. "In the spring of 1935 more than 2,800,000 eggs were taken, while in 1936 more than 3,800,000 eggs were taken ... we attribute this gain to the permanent construction of cement fish traps and one additional lateral ditch to facilitate the handling of more brood fish. Through proper control and stocking methods of Lake DeSmet in the future, we anticipate we will take 5,000,000 rainbow eggs annually."

But Lake DeSmet physically changed over the following decades, with dam projects occurring several times. These projects have transformed DeSmet from a relatively shallow, productive lake to the lake currently seen with an average depth of 75 feet — making it fairly unproductive. With these physical changes, the fishery has had to change as well.

From 2000 to the present, occasional stocking of cutthroats has taken place in Lake DeSmet, along with Fall, Firehole and McConaughy strains of rainbows. The most recent addition to the lake is kokanee salmon, with 40,000 5-inch fish stocked on April 24, 2019.

"We added kokanee to improve fishing opportunities," said Gordon Edwards, one of the Sheridan Region's fisheries biologists.



This photo was taken in the late 1920s at the spot where the Piney Creek road crossed Leiter Ditch, about 1 mile north of Lake DeSmet. The man with the cap has been identified as Elmer Carlson, temporary worker, and Dick Bard is standing to his left. The men to the outside of the photo are unidentified. (WGFD photo)



Dick Bard, former Story Fish Hatchery superintendent, holds a 14-pound rainbow trout in this photo taken sometime prior to 1932. Dick's wife, Winnie, is shown over Bard's left shoulder. (WGFD photo)

"The rainbow trout fishery has declined over recent years despite consistent stocking. The lake's population of large predatory fish has grown to the point that people are traveling to DeSmet to target large lake and brown trout and walleye, which were illegally introduced into the lake in the 1980s. We stock trout at Lake DeSmet as large as we can grow them in our hatchery system. Yet, we are no longer getting enough of them past the big predators to sustain the trout fishery we once had."

"If they do well, kokanee can create a following and generate a lot of excitement with anglers," Edwards added. "Kokanee will take advantage of the open water habitat of the lake and we hope they survive better than rainbow trout have in recent years. Anglers will need to be patient, though. It will be a couple years before they grow to a catchable size."

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