

Eagle Lake – ON THE REBOUND

California Inland Fisheries Foundation – Project Eagle Lake Trout

By Sep and Marilyn Hendrickson

For the first time in several years, anglers at northern California's premiere rainbow trout fishery, EAGLE LAKE have something to brag about, and it's the size of the fish. The average size has improved remarkably over the past two years...and it is not by coincidence.

In recent years, anglers have complained that the trout are "smaller and there's not as many big fish as there used to be". Well...that was partially true. There were more small fish, but it was a result of a planting procedure enacted by the Department of Fish and Game. Paul Chappell, the now retired DFG Fisheries Biologist, and Randy Benthin, DFG Regional Biologist, developed a program to plant 50% of the hatchery-reared fish into the lake in the spring and the remaining 50% to be introduced in the fall. The move was multi-faceted...The spring planters grew all season long and by late fall were in the two and half to three pound range. The fall planters sustained less fishing pressure because they were planted after the traditional end of summer fishing activity. These fall fish were held in the hatchery longer, grew to a larger size prior to planting and subsequently had the ability to more easily ingest the lake's population of natural food sources. Larger mouths can eat larger meals, primarily made up of the lake's population of tui chub minnows. That meant that these fish would have the opportunity to eat and grow, "unmolested " by anglers during the late fall, winter and spring months and be in prime condition when the lake opened for fishing on Memorial Day weekend.

As a result of the planting program, Eagle Lake has more small fish year 'round. ...but it also now has more large fish year' round too. The goal of the program was to give at least 50% of the planters the opportunity to learn to survive on what the lake had to offer and basically jump start the growth rate of rainbows for anglers to enjoy...AND IT WORKED.

At the same time, Chappell and a dedicated crew of local California Inland Fisheries Foundation - Project Eagle Lake Trout (P.E.L.T.) volunteers were determined to save every last fish that returned to Pine Creek to "naturally spawn". Early in the run, torrents of water run down Pine Creek for a very few weeks to sometimes months depending on the annual rainfall and snowpack. Thousands of fish pour into the small creek on the western shore, near the town of Spalding, as soon as they sense the flows. Lined by sharp volcanic rocks and boulders, Pine Creek is a hazardous natural path for the fish to enter to spawn. As water levels fluctuate with run-off and freezing temperatures, big

mature ready-to-spawn rainbows can easily become stranded in pools or become injured and die trying to get upstream to spawn. The volunteers carefully monitor the creek and team together in rescue efforts to ensure that the fish do not get stranded and after spawning, return successfully and healthy to the lake.

CIFF/PELT purchased Alaskan weirs to block Pine Creek and other tributaries to prevent fish from entering the streams and becoming stranded. Once sufficient eggs have been harvested at the egg collection facility, a weir is put in place on Pine Creek to prevent and protect the trout from entering the hazardous waters. Other, smaller weirs are placed on narrow, shallow streams around the lake to prevent spawning fish from being stranded and becoming easy targets to natural predators such as pelicans, bald and golden eagles, coyotes and poachers that prey on the now vulnerable trout.

The real work starts after the artificial spawn is complete. Hatchery personnel return to their respective hatcheries and care for the eggs, leaving DFG biologists and CIFF/PELT volunteers to deal with the fish as the water level of Pine Creek continues to drop. The lowering water levels would soon strand hundreds, if not thousands, of trout in the drying streambeds.

Once weirs are installed, fish rescue volunteers methodically prowl the creeks often crawling on their hands and knees in the frigid water and sharp volcanic streambeds, to save thousands of trout. Often the conditions are unbearable. Project Eagle Lake Trout furnishes heavy-duty rubber gloves, waders and nets to all the teams of volunteers assisting in the fish rescues. Chappell and a team of PELT volunteers as well as a group of trustee prisoners from Susanville State Prison successfully rescued over 9,000 trout from the drying streams during the 2007 spawning run. Their efforts aided the population of big rainbow trout in the lake and future generations of trophy –sized trout.

The cooperative efforts of CIFF-PELT and the DFG don't end there. Under a special agreement, CIFF-PELT pays for food and labor to hold "BONUS FISH" in the DFG hatcheries at Crystal Lake and Darrah Springs for four to six months of extra growth each season. These fish are planted in the spring and fall at an average weight of about two pounds each and are planted over and above the normal allotments. It's a wonderful feeling to see the local residents, PELT volunteers, DFG personnel, local business owners, interested anglers and donors line up at the launch

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ramp to watch these bonus fish hit the water. Annually 10,000 pounds of fish are added via the bonus fish program. Estimates by biologists state that if 10K to 20K fish are added annually, within ten years there will be a significant increase in the size of the fish at Eagle Lake.

CIFF-PELT also helps to pay for the scientific aides conducting the creel census by collecting data at the launch ramps around the lake. Valuable information is obtained to plan for the future by better understanding the growth rates, development and size of each generation of Eagle Lake trout. It is the information gained from the creel census and angler's surveys that led to the current management plan.

Annually there are fundraising events at Eagle Lake to benefit CIFF-PELT. Over the 4th of July Holiday, a seminar day with top professional guides in the area, live music, lots of free products and a giant raffle is held at the south end of the lake at the Eagle Lake Marina. The biggest event annually is held on Labor Day weekend at the Eagle Lake General Store in Spalding. Live music, BBQ, live auction, seminars and demonstrations and a huge raffle help generate funds to support the cause. You can help by attending the events or making a donation to PELT at these venues. Thousands of dollars are raised annually to preserve and enhance the fishery for future generations. Your support would be greatly appreciated.

It is the dedication of the DFG and CIFF-PELT partnership that IS MAKING A DIFFERENCE in the size, health and future of Eagle Lake Trout. If you'd like to help and become part of one of the biggest success stories in California's fishing, become a member or make a donation. You can do that by contacting Rod Browning (916.456.1331), Chairman of the Board of Directors of the California Inland Fisheries Foundation Inc. , or by sending a check directly to CIFF-PELT, 4260 24th Street Sacramento, CA 95822. CIFF is a non-profit 501 C3, ALL VOLUNTEER, foundation dedicated to the improvement of California's fisheries. For more information you can also check out the CIFF website at www.kokanee.org.