

wildlife

R E V I E W

UTAH DIVISION OF WILDLIFE RESOURCES



Stocking fish from the sky

*Airplanes drop fish into
high mountain lakes*



Stocking fish from the sky

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This past year, the Division of Wildlife Resources celebrated its Golden Anniversary of dropping fish out of the sky.

Utah started stocking fish with fixed-wing aircraft back in 1956.

Many of the lakes in Utah are excellent places to fish, but you can't get to them with a truck or a car. The Uinta Mountains alone have more than 650 fishable lakes. The best way to stock many of these valuable fisheries—and sometimes the only way to stock them—is from the air.

To better understand the program and where we are today, let's take a look back and see how these backcountry lakes used to be stocked.

Milk cans and pack horses

As you think back, picture in your mind an old-time Utah Department of Fish and Game biologist. You're watching as he leads a string of pack horses to a stream and stops.

One by one, he unstraps a handful of milk cans from the side of each horse. Each can contains small brook trout fry. It's a long trek to the lakes he'll stock, and he's



Stocking mountain lakes was once a slow process using milk cans and saddle bags to add a few fish at a time.

stopped at the stream to exchange the old water for fresh water.

After he's exchanged the water, he ties a gunnysack around the top of each can. The sacks will help keep the water in the cans. Then he straps the cans back to the sides of his trusty horses.

As the pack horses start walking again, the walking of the horses jostles the water in the cans. That aerates the water enough to keep the small fish alive. On long trips, he'll stop at least once or twice to add fresh water to the cans.

The year is 1955. As he rides atop his horse, the old timer knows this will be his last trip. The new fixed-wing airplanes will replace him next year, and a way of life will be lost.

Taking it to the air

What used to take the old-time biologists and their pack trains months to stock can now be stocked in a few hours with an airplane. And using an airplane stresses the

fish less. That means more of them will survive their fall to the water.

This aerial stocking effort happens many times during the year. It begins in early July as the DWR drops brook, rainbow, splake and tiger trout into high-mountain lakes. Following this effort in July, small but unique Arctic grayling are stocked into waters across Utah. The aerial stocking ends for the year in September as many different strains of cutthroat trout are dropped into waters across Utah. These cutthroats will help supplement the state's native trout populations.

Still lots to do

Two excellent DWR pilots help the agency's fish hatcheries stock their precious cargo in off-the-road lakes across the state. From lakes on the Boulder, Fish Lake, Cedar, Manti and LaSal mountains in southern Utah to the Wasatch Mountains and the high lakes of the Uintas in the north, these pilots stay busy covering the state.

Each stocking effort starts in the darkness of early morning as hatchery personnel load small fingerling



Fish stocking used to take a few months, but with advances in technology it now takes just a few hours.

fish into DWR trucks. These trucks will take the fish to a designated airport.

Meanwhile, back at the DWR hanger in Salt Lake City, the pilots are checking their planes and equipment. Soon

they'll take off in the darkness to rendezvous with the hatchery personnel at the designated airport.

After flying for awhile, the planes touch down in the predawn light. Awaiting them are fish trucks carrying tens of thousands of small passengers.

Each of the planes includes seven special compartments filled with water. DWR personnel weigh the fish from the trucks into each tank so the right number of fish are stocked in the proper lakes.

After the planes are loaded, they take off in the calm morning air. The engine of the Cessna 185 roars like a lion as it struggles to carry its heavy load of fish and water.

In addition to a pilot, a spotter/co-pilot is also on board each plane. He'll help locate the various waters using topographical maps and Global Positioning System coordinates.

Each plane can stock seven lakes on one trip and a total of 40 to 60 lakes in a single day.

Once the pilot and co-pilot locate one of the lakes, they make a plan of attack. This plan is made in the high, thin air where there's little, if any, room for mistake. A

rocky ledge or a dead snag from an old tree is always there to make the pilots pay for any mistake they make.

After making their plan, the pilot flicks a switch. The switch sets a trigger that will let him release the fish at a certain point during his stocking run. His airplane's speed, the direction and speed the wind is blowing and the altitude he's flying will all combine to determine when he releases the fish.

Now it's time to make a run at the lake. When he's about 150 feet above the water, the pilot releases the fish, and they flutter through the brisk mountain air to their new home.

Most of the fish will make it to the water safely. Soon they'll provide a hearty soul, who is willing to get off the road and walk a ways, a fishing experience he'll never forget.

More exciting than any park ride

To line up these small waters, the pilot sometimes must use maneuvers that are both aeronautic and acrobatic. These waters are often tucked into tight

spots and require a well-planned escape route. Many of the runs into these lakes are more exciting than any amusement park ride you'll ever experience. And these guys get paid to do it!

Even though it's risky, I've always enjoyed aerial stocking. It's very rewarding to see anglers experience these pretty high country lakes and the fish we placed in them from the air. From the air, you can also see how beautiful Utah is. It's full of thousands of beautiful lakes, many of which might be in your own backyard. Many of these lakes are full of fish and memories if you're willing to get out and see them.

Back in time

Let's go back to 1955. The old-timer is sitting down after dumping his milk cans full of fish into the pristine, high-mountain waters that he and his horses have walked so far to reach. Now it's time to take out his fly pole, and like an artist painting a masterpiece, catch his supper for the evening.



He'll also survey the lake to see if it needs more fish next year, this time dropped from a plane in the sky. 🐟