

Mountain Lakes

Diamonds in the Rough

by Mick Hoover - IDFG Historian and
Mackay Hatchery Assistant Manager

One of Idaho's many mountain lakes.
Photo: Kayla Bovey

Naturalist John Muir may have said it best: "*The mountains are calling and I must go*". For over a hundred years, Idahoans have been lured by curiosity and adventure in the prospect of finding fish in the almost 2,000 remote high mountain lakes in the state.

Until around 1900 most of those trips would have ended in a bust, as the lakes would be found barren of fish. Not until the early 1920s would there be an organized stocking of high mountain lakes by the Idaho Department of Fish and Game. Before this time, the hatchery system was barely able to keep up with the demands of lowland lakes and streams and requests were made for the 'backyard' mountain lake by the private individual, with little knowledge of stocking an adaptable species of fish, nor were good records of such stockings kept. As the hatcheries became more efficient, an extensive mountain lake stocking program started in 1921 in response to several successful experimental stockings in the previous year.

The primary pieces of equipment used to get to these lakes were horses, pack mules, and the 10 gallon milk can. The typical milk can weighed in excess of 25 pounds empty and over 100 pounds with fish, water, and ice. Each pack animal, horse or mule, would carry two milk cans in strings of possibly 10 to 12 animals. From one-half to one pound of fry (1 to 1 ½ inch fish) could be carried in a can and ice was added to control the water temperature. The lids were modified with holes fashioned with the hit of an axe, drilled, or a small mesh screen soldered in to allow aeration. These same holes were also responsible for many backcountry rodeos with the sound of tinkling ice and cold water spilled down the back of a nervous pack animal. Progress was made with the use of water-tight canvas bags with a slight reduction in weight but problems with sufficient aeration ceased their use.



Milk cans full of fish waiting to be loaded on pack string headed for a high mountain lake.

The first attempt to stock mountain lakes by airplane was in north Idaho in 1919 with a Curtiss "Jenny" biplane. It wasn't until 1938 that it became a successful alternative to the slower pack trains. The planes may have been faster but were limited to the number of lakes that could be planted per trip, pouring the fish out of large metal cans. In the '50s and '60s, modern planes were fitted with expensive belly tanks that could still only plant 2 lakes per flight.

During WWII, 1,854 lakes had been cataloged just in time for thousands of service men to return to Idaho to pursue their favorite fishing spot which could then be a little over-crowded. So in 1947 an intensive high mountain lake stocking program was initiated with the stocking of 146 lakes inaccessible by car alone. In the next four years, 400-500 more lakes were stocked. With the interest in these lakes growing, the Department published its first pamphlet "*Mountain Lakes of Idaho*" to aid the angler in discovering a remote lake close to home. It provided detailed maps and the fish species stocked in each lake.

In 1955, the U.S. Air Force made a helicopter available for stocking in northern Idaho for the first time. Five-gallon containers were fitted with small, portable oxygen cylinders and aerating apparatus during the short, one hour flight time.

The fish were released from a height of 5 to 25 feet above the water surface. Several lakes were checked for survival in the weeks following with no mortality observed. While this technique was deemed successful and used for many years, in recent decades, helicopters have become unavailable and/or cost prohibitive.

Progress was again made in the early '60s, experimenting with a 2-gallon polyethylene plastic bottle. By filling the bottle with 1 ½ gallons of fish and water and injecting pure oxygen into the water under slight pressure, the weight was reduced up to 90% while the number of fish remained the same. The bottles were kept cool with ice in a custom insulated pack box that carried 2 bottles or 4 bottles per animal. This increased the number of lakes that



Historical photos courtesy IDFG

Regional Conservation Officer (retired) Dale Baird leaves North Star Lake in the Trinity Mountain Range after stocking fish.

could be stocked per trip and decreased the number of pack animals required.

Today, the stocking of mountain lakes is carried out by horseback, backpacking hikers, ATV, motorcycle, and fixed-wing aircraft. Private aircraft rental for stocking mountain lakes is an invaluable tool by the virtue of the number of lakes that can be planted in a short period of time. However, sometimes travel to the lakes by Department personnel is a must for site evaluation and the opportunity for backcountry angler interaction. Regardless of the mode of transportation, the preparation for the fish's travel is the same at the hatchery.

Since the mid-1960s, the choice for transporting small quantities of small fish has been the plastic 1 ½ or 3 gallon commercial milk dispenser bags. The bags are 12 to 14 inches square and double layered, with a 1 ½ inch opening. The closure is a plastic cap that snaps into the neck of the opening. The cap has a 12 inch long soft hose where the milk would normally be dispensed.

Commonly stocked trout species are cutthroat, rainbow, brook and golden, along with grayling. Several days before the fish are to be transported they are not fed to keep water quality as clean as possible. A sample count is taken the day before travel to determine their size and to calculate how many fish equal a pound. Depending on the lake's stocking request and the size of the fish, the

bag may only require a portion of a pound or multiple bags. Regardless of fish size, only one pound of fish can be put in the bag. About 1 ¼ gallons of water is put in a container, fish are netted and slowly weighed while the container is on a scale. The water and



Fish in commercial milk dispenser bag inflated with oxygen ready for transportation to a mountain lake.

fish are then poured into the bag through a large funnel. The cap is snapped into place and compressed oxygen is slowly added to the bag through the hose attached to the cap and then tied in a knot. When filled, the bags weigh approximately 11 pounds. During transportation the bags are kept in contact with ice to slow the fish's metabolism. As long as the bag is not punctured, releasing the oxygen, and temperatures are kept cool, the fish can survive a 10+ hour trip. At this point they may be transported by truck to meet the pack string, backpacker, or the aircraft. Their journey has only begun...

Mick Hoover was nice enough to share this historical perspective on mountain lake stocking. Idaho Game Warden Magazine thanks him.

Journey to the Lake

Stocking Fish in Copper Basin

by
**Senior Conservation Officer
Lew Huddleston**

Last spring I was invited by Cole Wilkie to come to the Copper Basin area and stock a few high mountain lakes with fish. Cole is the District Conservation Officer in the Challis District of the Salmon Region.

It didn't take but about a second to reply to Cole's e-mail letting him know that I would be available to help. Copper Basin is one of those areas that outdoor enthusiasts can get lost in. Countless high mountain lakes to fish, non-motorized trails that offer hikers and stock people areas to explore, as well as numerous motorized trails for the motorbike enthusiasts. On top of that the scenery is spectacular. Even though I have been in the Idaho Falls area for 22 years I haven't spent much time in Copper Basin. It has always been one

of those areas I'll get to next year. If at all possible I wasn't going to miss this opportunity.

Stocking fish on my mules is one of the most pleasurable parts of my job. I have often checked people fishing at a lake I have stocked and they will ask how the fish get there. I proudly let them know the fish they are catching were stocked by me three years earlier.

The night before we planned on getting the fish I arrived at the Copper Basin cabin to a meal of smoked ribs put on by Corey Taylor. Corey is the Mackay officer. I have to say I am extremely envious of the "office" he gets to work in. I gathered from the discussion the ribs are kind of a tradition when the Challis District officers have group patrols in the Copper Basin area.

I put my two mules, Chester and Buddy, in the pasture allowing them to graze and get acquainted to Cole's stock. Cole had two paint horses and one big white mule. After a few minutes of running around showing off, the animals settled down to fill their bellies.

With the group was Malcolm Clemenhagen, the officer in Challis who was going to work with Corey checking archery hunters from vehicles. Joining us on the stocking trip was Clint Rogers from Wendell. Clint brought a horse that had never had pack boxes or a pack saddle on it, let alone packed anything. He spent a few hours getting the horse used to the boxes, crossing a creek and a few other things. The young horse did a super job and acted like a veteran the entire trip. The fourth person on

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Above: SCO Lew Huddleston stocking fish into one of the mountain lakes.

Right: The newly released fingerlings begin to explore their new environment.

Top left: The coolers packed with bags of fish.
 Top right: The oxygen-inflated bags are transferred to pack boxes for the trip into the backcountry.
 Bottom left: The bags of fish are accompanied by ice to keep the water cool for the entire trip.
 Bottom right: The pack boxes are then strapped onto the pack animals.

the stocking trip was Zak Sedlmayr. Zak is a brand new officer stationed at Stanley. Zak is a young guy from Iowa who is still pinching himself because of his new job. Zak did joke that Copper Basin and Stanley are a little bit different from Iowa. We got the impression he thinks he is in heaven. We will see what he thinks of Stanley this January.

The next morning Cole arrived with the coolers of fish to be stocked. The hatchery knows which lake gets stocked with which fish and how

many fish get planted in each lake. Since the fish are only about one and a half inches long I know there is a water displacement method to estimating the fish numbers. I'm pretty sure they don't individually count the 1,000 fish in some of the bags. When the hatchery turns the bags over to us they have the specific lake written on each bag of fish so we know which bag goes in which lake. For this trip we stocked 7,000 fish in four lakes: Bench, Betty, Goat, and Babtie Lakes. We were stocking rainbow and cutthroat trout.

The bags of fish are inflated with oxygen to provide some rigidity to the bag so the fingerling fish don't get crushed. Along with the bags of fish come a couple of coolers full of ice. Sometimes it might take most of a day to get the fish stocked in the lake that becomes their new home so we need to make sure the water stays cool the entire trip to the lake. As we place the bags in the hard pack boxes we pay special attention to make sure we don't have any fingerling fish caught in the corners of the bags. We then put extra ice in the boxes to keep them cool through the duration of the trip.

The four lakes we stocked were actually on a loop trail. We started heading up the Jarvis trail. Cole told us that back in the 1960s a couple of outfitters built this trail so they could get their clients into an area. The trail was fairly flat to start but quickly started picking up elevation.

As we rode along we never knew what we might see or hear. From the buzz of a grasshoppers wings to the screech of a hawk soaring over head to the scream of a bull elk bugling, we were listening to wilderness at its finest.

As we got to the first lake we knew that the bag that needed to go in Bench Lake was in one of Clint's boxes. While Cole and Clint looked for the bag we had decided that we were going to eat a quick lunch before we left. So Zak and I got our lunch out and watched as Cole put the bag

of fish in the water. We put the bags in the lake for about 10-15 minutes to allow the temperature of the water in the bag to get close to the temperature in the lake. After 15 minutes we cut the corner of the bag and released the fish into the lake. Some of the fish will grow to be caught by some fisherman. Some will become food for the larger fish already in the lake.

After a quick lunch we made sure the boxes were still secured and headed up the trail. Betty Lake was only about 10 minutes from the first. Cole had noticed that it looked like a thunderhead was building so he wanted to make sure we got over the pass between Betty Lake and Goat Lake before any significant weather blew in. Cole had commented that a daughter of the area Forest Service fisheries biologist had caught a 26 inch cutthroat trout in the lake earlier this summer.

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Top left: DCO Cole Wilkie, CO Zak Sedlmayr and SCO Clint Rogers with beautiful Copper Basin scenery in the background.

Center left: SCO Lew Huddleston with Chester and Buddy.

Bottom left: One of the many beautiful lakes that can be found in Copper Basin.



We didn't take too long releasing the fish for Betty Lake so we could get to the pass. We got to the pass and the view was truly magnificent. Clint took out his GPS and found we were at 10,800 feet.

On our way down to Goat Lake we noticed there were some people fishing. At the lake Cole checked the people fishing and found that they had caught three fish between 10-13 inches in length. We showed them the fish in our bags, how we released them as well as the small fingerlings swimming around in the rocks after their release. Three bags of fish were released in Goat Lake.

About an hour later we reached Baptie Lake, the last lake we would stock. We only had one bag left and it didn't take long to get the fish released.

We then settled in for about a two and a half hour ride out. About the only excitement on the rest of the ride was seeing two moose in the willows as we rode towards the trailhead and trailers.

By now the animals were ready for the trip to be over. I think Zak was ready as well. I'm not sure just how much horse work Zak has done. I don't think he would have changed anything about the trip but I do think he was a little saddle sore that evening. Actually, we all were. Sore, but happy after a great day at our office.

Senior Conservation Officer Lew Huddleston is based in Idaho Falls.

Backpack Stocking Little Fish into Mountain Lakes

by Jadyynn O.

One day last summer my dad said that he had signed us up to pack little fish into some mountain lakes. He said it would be fun if my mom and I would go with him. So my mom and I agreed to go with him.

The night before we went on our trip, my mom went to the store and bought us some special juice drinks, and of course we packed sandwiches and bottles of water.

In the morning we went to the fish hatchery where there were thousands and thousands of tiny little fish swimming in the tank. Most of them were brown but a few of the fish were silver. The brown ones were alive and the silver ones were dead. My dad scooped up fish and measured them, and then he put them into special clear bags to take them to the lakes in.

At first we couldn't find the first lake that we were looking for because some of the directions were missing. So we went to the second lake first.

When we got to this mountain lake, Denick Lake, we let the bag of fish sit in the lake for about 15 to 20 minutes. While we were waiting we tried to catch some fish, and we found an old wrecked canoe. One time when I was walking over to my fishing pole my whole foot sunk in to the mud. I had thought the ground was solid but it wasn't. It was awesome.

Then we hiked back to the truck. My dad's GPS was looking for itself, but couldn't find itself so he set it on top of the truck. We drove around again trying to find the other lake using my dad's cell phone. We finally found the second lake, Sand Lake. It was too muddy around the shoreline to fish so my mom and I went and sat down in the shade while dad sat out on a log in the water. Then my mom, my dad and I hiked back to the truck, on our way to the truck my dad said that "getting to the lakes was half of the adventure," and my mom said that "the other half was making it back home." When we got to the truck my dad remembered that he had left his GPS on top of the truck at the other lake and so we went back and found it lying in the road, now we went home.

Jadyynn is the daughter of one of our north Idaho officers. She is ten years old and enjoys fishing and going on adventures with her dad. Thanks for your story Jadyynn!



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