

Bass fishermen in Oklahoma are hauling in more largemouth lunkers, thanks to the Wildlife Department's Florida bass stocking program.

Bass: Bigger is Better

Anglers Pulling Larger Lunkers from State Waters

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is the first in a series detailing the efforts of the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife to produce trophy largemouth bass in Oklahoma's waters.

By **Don P. Brown, Information & Education Specialist**

It was a gray, drizzly Saturday in mid-January that greeted Jeff Reynolds and Johnny Thompson. The fishing buddies from Calera, Okla., had arrived at Lake of the Arbuckles in the Chickasaw National Recreation Area, ready to fish in that day's no-entry-fee season-opening tournament.

For Reynolds, a former Elite Series pro fisherman, this was the first time he'd fished an event at the 2,300-acre southern Oklahoma lake. Thompson had been there before and had caught some nice largemouth bass that tipped the scale at more than 6 pounds.

In the back of his mind, Reynolds knew that Arbuckle was one of the lakes where the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife has stocked Florida bass. And some of his buddies had told him some giant lunkers were lurking in those waters. But neither of these men had any clue what would ensue during the next several hours on Jan. 19, 2013. It would turn out to be "one of them days I'll never forget," Reynolds said.

DAY TO REMEMBER

"We got on the water that morning, and the water was pretty cold. Lo and behold, I couldn't believe what took place," Thompson said. "Next thing I know, we're pulling fish in the boat. Jeff was thinking



Jeff Reynolds and Johnny Thompson hoist their winning stringer of largemouth bass Jan. 19, 2013, at Lake of the Arbuckles.

they were 5- or 6-pounders. I told him, "They're better than that!" Reynolds said he'd decided to fish deep – 25 to 45 feet. His first catch turned out to be about a 9-pounder. A few minutes later, he latched onto a 7-pound largemouth. Then another. "Johnny was just grinning and giggling," Reynolds said. "He was saying that we've got a chance to win with these fish."

As the hours passed, the men kept hauling in big bass. After catching and culling several more bass, the men had five fish in the boat. “Johnny said, ‘It’s over. We’ve got this thing won.’” Reynolds recalled. But there was still time remaining before they needed to weigh in at 3:15 p.m., and he made a decision: “No, we need to cull one more time!”

With less than an hour left for fishing, Reynolds latched onto another 7-pound lunker. But Thompson told him something that was hard to believe. “Johnny said that fish ain’t going to help us!

“I’m like, ‘Holy cow!’ We’ve got to have at least 35 pounds!” Reynolds said of his team’s super sack. “I didn’t know that you could catch five of them in one day!”

As weigh-in time approached, Reynolds and Thompson faced an unlikely situation with six monster bass in the boat. Thompson summed it up:

“I’m telling you, these fish are giant,” he said. “Plus, we’ve got

another one we need to cull!”

“We culled a 7-pound fish!” Thompson said. “It’s just unthinkable!”

The pair weighed in with a sack totaling 42.04 pounds for five largemouth bass, easily winning the tournament by some 20 pounds. The kicker, however, is that even with that astounding total weight, neither Reynolds nor Thompson took the “Big Bass” prize for the day! The fish that won that prize went 10.7 pounds!

BACK TO THE FUTURE

It’s a good bet that the big fish hauled in at Arbuckle that winter’s day were a result of the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation’s Florida bass stocking program. Reynolds said he’s been fishing since he “was old enough to throw a rod and reel,” and he’s noticed that bass have been growing bigger over the years.

“Fifteen years ago, you never heard of even a 15-pound stringer caught at Lake Texoma,” Reynolds said. “When I was younger, if you caught a 5-pounder out of a lake, that was something. Now, when I go to Texoma, I expect to catch a 5-pounder.”

“I’m pretty sure they’re just Florida-strain fish,” Jeff said of his 42-pound stringer. Fisheries biologists with the Oklahoma Wildlife Department would probably agree. The Department has been stocking Florida bass in Lake of the Arbuckles for more than a decade, and fish from the earlier stockings are now reaching remarkable sizes.

Why all the attention on Florida bass? It’s simple: These fish have the potential to grow bigger. The native largemouth bass in Oklahoma is a slower-growing fish and rarely exceeds 8 or 9 pounds. And these fish are able to make it through the winter months in Oklahoma’s lakes and streams. The largest-known northern largemouth was a 15-pound 8-ounce fish caught through the ice at Sampson’s Pond in Massachusetts.

Florida bass need warmer water to

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William Cross of Broken Bow holds his 1999 state-record largemouth bass, weighing 14 pounds 11 ounces.



Gene Gilliland, former Fisheries Division assistant chief

DON GROOM



Benny Williams Jr. of Poteau, Okla., holds his 2012 state-record largemouth bass, weighing 14 pounds 12.3 ounces.

MICHAEL BERGIN



Dale Miller of Panama, Okla., holds his 2013 state-record largemouth bass, weighing 14 pounds 13.7 ounces.



Wildlife Department technicians open the tank to stock Florida bass fingerlings in a southern Oklahoma lake.

sustain them. And their higher growth rate can produce much larger lunkers. The U.S. record largemouth was caught more than 80 years ago in Georgia's Montgomery Lake, where waters are warmer; it weighed 22 pounds 4 ounces.

Gene Gilliland, recently retired assistant chief of fisheries for the Department, spent 20 years researching Florida bass introductions in Oklahoma. He said the monster fish caught last year at Lake of the Arbuckles illustrate how proactive fisheries management can yield great results over time. In this case, that time amounts to about 40 years since the Department began to introduce Florida bass.

"Those fish have obviously matured," Gilliland said of the Arbuckles bass. "The fish we stocked, and/or the offspring of those stocked fish, are now turning into these trophy bass that are being caught on a pretty regular basis the past three years."

Indeed, for the past two consecutive years, the Oklahoma record largemouth bass has changed hands. In March 2012, Benny Williams Jr. hauled in a 14-pound 12.3-ounce monster at Cedar Lake in southeastern Oklahoma, breaking the 13-year record of 14 pounds 11 ounces held by William Cross at Broken Bow Reservoir.

But Williams' record would only stand for a year. In March 2013, Cedar Lake produced a second record largemouth. Dale Miller of Panama, Okla., wrangled a 14-pound 13.7-ounce lunker into the boat.

Both recent record fish were tested and found to have Florida bass genes.

INVESTING IN SUCCESS

Tournament angler Reynolds said most people overlook the fisheries management that has led to bigger bass in Oklahoma. "Most

people don't understand what goes on behind the scenes," he said.

Reynolds pondered aloud what the fishing at many of Oklahoma's lakes would be like now without the benefit of the thousands upon thousands of Florida bass fingerlings that have been stocked over many years.

"That's why we've got biologists that do that job. And I think we need to appreciate them more for what they do," he said.



Cliff Sager, senior biologist, South Central Region, Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation

One of those biologists is Cliff Sager, who now oversees the Department's Florida bass production and stocking program, working closely with the staff from the Durant State Fish Hatchery. Sager said the Department's goal has been to introduce Florida bass into local populations to boost the potential for anglers to catch a trophy bass.

Growing trophy bass in a particular lake "is an eight- to 10-year investment."

In the early years, the Department acquired Florida bass from hatcheries in other parts of the country. The first Florida bass stockings in Oklahoma occurred in the early

1970s in southwestern Oklahoma lakes. As the hatchery built up brood stock and production increased, dozens of lakes across the state were stocked in hopes of producing more trophy fish.

But successes in some lakes and failures in others raised questions about where the Florida bass should be stocked. Since these

OKLAHOMA'S TOP 20 BASS

Angler	Lb.	Oz.	Date	Location	Phenotype
Dale Miller	14	13.7	3/13/13	Cedar Lake	F1
Benny Williams Jr	14	12.3	3/23/12	Cedar Lake	F
William Cross	14	11	3/14/99	Broken Bow Lake	F
Roger Hockersmith	14	10	3/25/93	Mountain Lake	F1
Allen Gifford	14	8	2/27/08	Arbuckle Lake	N/A
Jeremiah Johnson	14	5.9	3/7/09	N/A	N/A
Rodney Shrouder	14	2	3/5/01	Broken Bow Lake	N/A
Bob Cody	14	1.67	3/30/08	Coal County Pond	N/A
Brian Lindsey	14	1	3/1/01	Mountain Lake	N/A
Tim O'Connor	14	1	2/28/09	Pottawatomie County Pond	N/A
Ronnie Henson	14	0	6/23/93	Comanche County Pond	F
Jeff McClain	13	14	3/25/01	McIntosh County Pond	N/A
Bob Cody	13	11	3/26/08	Coal County Pond	N/A
Ricky Patterson	13	10	3/18/95	Mountain Lake	F1
Paul Tasker	13	8	3/22/90	Lake Fuqua	F1
Diane Baker	13	8	10/4/94	Sardis Lake	F
Johnny Owens	13	7	2/27/97	Lake Murray	N/A
Mark Robinett	13	6	3/25/95	Longmire Lake	N/A
David Kinard	13	4	3/14/10	Longmire Lake	N/A
James Bullard	13	3	3/17/09	Arbuckle Lake	N/A

This table lists the top 20 largemouth bass by weight, caught by Oklahoma anglers who reported their catch to the Wildlife Department's Lake Record Program.

fish require warmer water, climate becomes a key factor. Oklahoma lies on the northern edge of where Florida bass can survive.

During the 1980s and 1990s, extensive research determined that Florida bass would not generally survive in lakes north of Interstate 40 because of colder water temperatures. So in the past 15 years, the Department has concentrated its stocking efforts in the southern half of the state.

Sager said a system eventually was developed to rank lakes objectively based on certain measurable criteria such as geographic location and electrofishing survey results.

In the past few years, the stocking criteria have been fine-tuned

to take some more subjective factors into consideration. Some of these factors include the lake's history of producing trophy bass, the prevalence of good bass habitat, the amount of angler pressure, and evidence that the proportion of Florida genes in the population has remained high.

Production of Florida bass fry and fingerlings at the Durant hatchery has reached all-time highs the past few years. In spring 2013, the Department was able to release 2.22 million bass into 44 lakes, compared to 27 lakes the year before.

Both Reynolds and Thompson agree that the Department's Florida bass stocking program has enhanced fishing in Oklahoma. "The fish

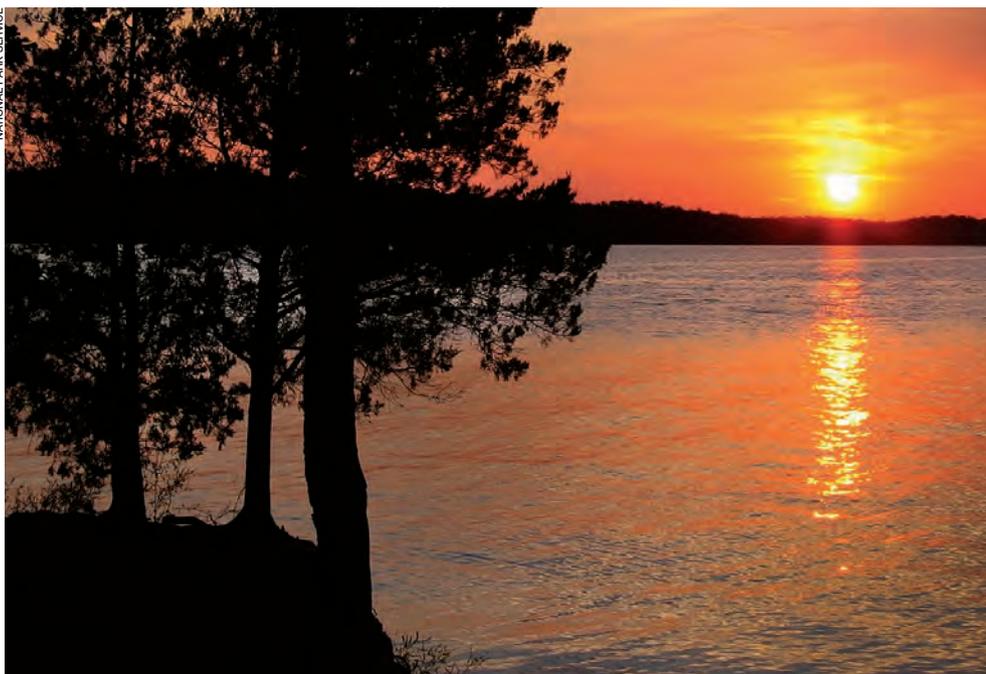
just seem like they're a lot meaner these days," Thompson said.

Reynolds concurred. "When they are biting, it can just be a slugfest!"

And as Sager sees it, the investment could pay off at any time.

"Being able to give so many lakes a 'shot in the arm' with the Florida genetics, that just increases the potential for trophy bass production for years to come."

NEXT ISSUE: The genetic journey begins. Follow along as Wildlife Department biologists and technicians begin the annual process to stock Florida bass in Oklahoma lakes. Don't miss the next part of our series, "Making Monsters!"



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