

THE TROUT OF

Dublin

DUBLIN LAKE © GABE GRIES PHOTO



BROOK TROUT © ERIC ENGBRETTSON PHOTO



Lake

BY GABE GRIES

In Dublin, N.H., you'll hear "fish tales" about 5-pound brook trout — heavy as fire logs, colorful and distinctive as our state's peak fall foliage. Anglers are enticed by the very real chance of catching those robust brookies on Dublin Lake, also known as Monadnock Pond — a picturesque, natural 239-acre coldwater lake nestled in the shadow of Mount Monadnock.

By today's standards, Dublin Lake offers tremendous fishing opportunities for big brook trout. Of course, as is the case with most waterbodies in the state, anglers will say the fishing here "ain't what it used to be." But fisheries biologists see few reasons why the lake can't realize its full potential as a fishery — and with proper research and regulation, the fishing just keeps getting better.

They grow like crazy

Though known for its exceptional trout fishing, Dublin Lake also hosts native white suckers, pumpkinseeds and horned pout. Yellow perch and largemouth and smallmouth bass populations are the result of illegal introductions. Dublin

Lake has at times been stocked with landlocked Atlantic salmon and rainbow trout, but since stocking brook trout proved to be the most successful, the lake is now managed solely as a brook trout fishery.

The lake has much to offer trout: it's cold because of springs, well-oxygenated, and has good deepwater habitats with an average depth of 43 feet. Above all, the trout in Dublin Lake get a steady diet: abundant populations of rainbow smelt and crayfish. The brook trout grow like crazy here — New Hampshire Fish and Game Department surveys have shown that stocked yearling trout grow an average of more than two inches and gain almost half a pound in weight between spring and fall.

With all that deep water and great food, trout have plenty of places to hide and lots to eat, which makes it harder for anglers to find them and lets them be choosy about what bait or lure they decide to take. Dublin can be a tough lake to fish. "I've fished the lake for 30 plus years, and it took 15 of those years to learn how," declares local angler Fred Gove. "Old timers — older than me — used to tell me that to catch fish in Dublin Lake, you had to do your time." As a bonus for the fish, the same conditions that make them difficult to catch give them the opportunity to live longer and grow bigger.

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Abundant rainbow smelt populations keep Dublin Lake trout well-fed.

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Sgt. Craig Morrocco, a Fish and Game Conservation Officer whose patrol includes Dublin Lake, says, “Dublin is a terrific trout fishery, and I get reports every year from anglers who have caught brook trout over three or four pounds, and of larger ones that anglers have lost.”

Tradition and sentiment fan the fishing flames. “I love fishing the same lake that my Dad and Grandfather grew up fishing,” said third-generation Dublin fisherman Adam Dubriske. “Every time I go there, I always think that this might be the day I get the big one.”

Why change?

When a fishery is this good, why does it need to be actively “managed”? For unique or high-quality fisheries, Fish and Game biologists want to ensure that the quality continues. Of course, we also like to try to improve the quality when appro-

priate, taking into consideration factors like the ecology of the waterbody, the biological needs of its fish populations and the level of fishing pressure at various times of year.

My colleagues and I have been studying Dublin Lake since 1998 through trout netting and an angler survey. We’ve examined stocked trout survival and growth; success of stocking at different times of year; angler catch and harvest rates; and anglers’ opinions on management direction. Additional goals were to estimate the population size of the lake’s brook trout and to assess current angling regulations to help us understand whether changes could help improve the quality of the fishery.

Before deciding on any changes in management strategies, we needed to be sure that anglers’ opinions were taken into account. When Dublin Lake anglers were asked if they would be in favor of special angling regulations for trout, 75 percent answered “yes,” showing that they clearly understood the goal of improving the fishery.

With the support of the angling community, and based on earlier research findings, Fish and Game shifted management direction starting in 2002, with a new program to stock yearling brook trout into Dublin Lake each fall (in addition to the spring stocking). Though we know that fall stocking wouldn’t work just anywhere, the Dublin Lake effort started paying off quickly, due in large part to the abundant food resources available to the fish, plus the excellent quality of fish provided by the Milford Hatchery. More than 22 percent of trout now harvested by anglers during the spring are from the fall stocking, and the fall-stocked trout weigh an average 1.3 pounds — nearly twice as much as the spring-stocked fish.

Weighing the options

Following the success of fall stocking, we started looking into additional management strategies to improve fishing quality on Dublin Lake. Our studies showed that while a variable number of yearling brook trout (fish that were stocked that year) were present in the lake each fall, the number of fish surviving *longer* than one year — “holdovers” — was consistently low. We also found that once a yearling trout survives to its first fall, its chances of surviving to the next fall are very good. Therefore, we realized, if we could decrease the number of stocked trout harvested by anglers during their first year in the lake, it should allow for an increase in the number of holdover trout (i.e. more, bigger fish).

How could we reduce the number of yearling trout harvested, yet still allow anglers to keep some of their catch? Some regulation options included daily bag limits, slot length limits and tackle restrictions. We first examined existing



GETTING THERE

The main access to Dublin Lake is a town boat launch on Lake Road, on the west side of the lake, off Route 101. Several locations around the lake offer shorebank access.

special angling regulations that might be applicable to Dublin Lake, such as a two-fish daily bag limit; a 12"-16" slot length limit; or limiting tackle to artificial lures and flies only.

Based on our study results, it looked like a slot length limit or tackle limitations would be too restrictive for the Dublin Lake brook trout population — and the anglers, too. For example, if a 12"-16" slot length limit were put in place, 65 percent of all fish usually kept by anglers in the spring would no longer be legal to keep. And, Dublin Lake anglers' survey answers showed that a 12"-16" slot length limit would severely limit their ability to harvest the trout they seek. It was also decided that tackle restrictions would not benefit the Dublin Lake fishery — they would only limit the use of the lake for many typical anglers there.

Then there were three

Once the slot limit and tackle restriction ideas were ruled out, we took a look at the daily bag limit of five fish. Decreasing the daily bag limit would still allow anglers to harvest fish, but would eliminate concerns about hooking mortality from fish that had to be released because of their size; and it would allow some of the trout normally harvested to survive to the next year. A two-fish daily limit would likely provide more holdovers, but seemed to be too drastic a decrease from the five-fish limit. A three-fish daily limit seemed like a good compromise — providing additional holdover trout, yet still allowing anglers to put some fish in the frying pan. By reducing the daily limit of trout from five to three fish, 16 percent of the fish that are usually harvested would have the chance to survive to the next year and become the big brookies that Dublin Lake is famous for.

Which brings us to today. After a year of public hearings and rulemaking activity, the daily bag limit for trout in Dublin Lake changed from five fish to three starting in 2005. Fish and Game will continue to monitor trout in the coming years to ensure that the new daily limit is helping to



Above: A spring-stocked brookie netted at Dublin Lake the following year. Left: Angler Fred Gove shows off an 18-inch, 2.72-pound brook trout he pulled up in April of 2004; this fish was stocked the previous fall.

increase the number of large trout in the lake. We'll keep doing age and growth surveys of spawning rainbow smelt, and we plan to examine ways to improve smelt spawning habitat and increase spawning smelt access to streams entering Dublin Lake, to keep the brookies' major food source strong. By continuing to study the brook trout in Dublin Lake, being responsive to angler's opinions, and with the efforts of interested citizens (*see box below*), the future looks bright for Dublin Lake brook trout and the anglers who pursue them. WJ

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A Helping Hand

Dublin Lake, the fish that live in it, and the people who fish there are all lucky to have the Dublin Lake Preservation Committee on their side. This group, chaired by Thomas Wright, is a seven-member committee whose purpose is to monitor the condition of the lake and report to town selectmen on the lake and plans for improvements. Committee members are involved with projects to control shoreline erosion and invasive plant species; they also monitor water quality and are working with the N.H. Department of Transportation to minimize road sand and contaminant runoff into the lake. The committee seems to be excited not only by the quality of the trout fishery, but also by the fact that anglers recognize the wonder and uniqueness of fishing in this special lake. — G.G.