

# SANTEE LAKES

## Trout Fishing

*What began as a project designed to combat water pollution, conserve water and save money is now a fisherman's paradise near San Diego, with about 50,000 pounds of fish stocked annually.*

*by Jo Eager*

I saw a couple of boys on scooters the other day, with fishing rods in tow. They were headed for the lakes. When they left a couple hours later, one of them carried a nice-sized fish, excited about the prospect of a trout dinner. What's so strange about that? This took place in metro San Diego.

Every winter, two lakes in a chain of seven at the Santee Lakes Recreation Preserve are stocked with rainbow trout of all sizes, including the Santee Lakes record of 16 pounds, 9 ounces.

Planting starts in the beginning of December and continues into March.

"Our lakes are so shallow that we have to wait for the water to get cold enough. Then in the spring they heat up really fast so we have to be careful how late in the spring we stock our fish," said Greg Even, park operations coordinator. "If we have an early heat wave, we have to watch it." The Santee Lakes range in depth from 10 to 12 feet at the deepest point to 4 or 5 feet at the shallowest.

The initial stock of trout is 1,500 pounds. After that, 1,000 pounds are planted every other week, entering at the northern end of the lakes.

Park supervisor Bryan Hague says the best day to fish is not necessarily

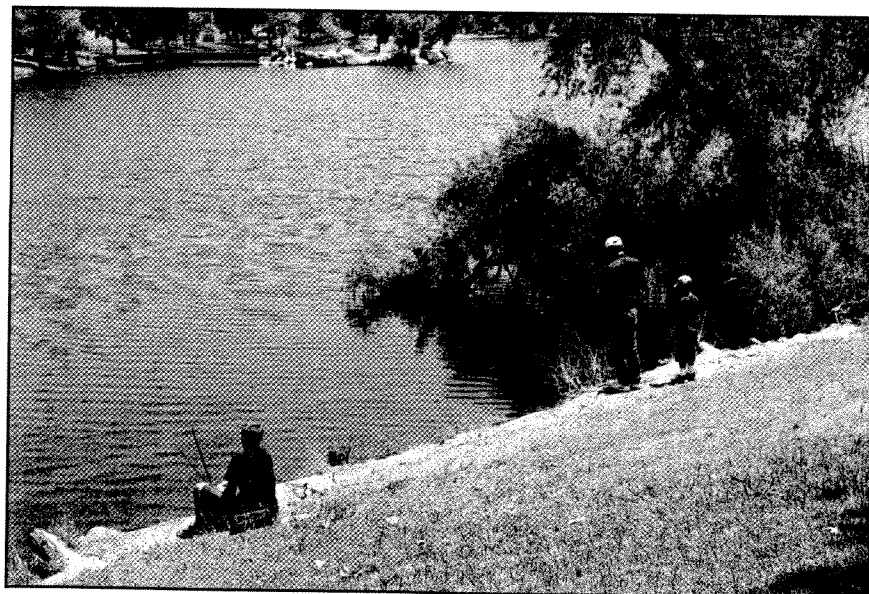
right after a stocking. "The fish have to get acclimated. They're so shocked once they hit the water, it generally takes them a couple of days to get used to it. We stock on Thursday so they're ready for the weekend."

According to Hague and Even, no spot is better than another for a catch. "The lakes are small — more like ponds. The fish don't have that many places to hide," said Hague. Fish are caught at every point around the lakes, said Even. "It hasn't been one particular spot," he said. "Last year the northern end was better but in previous years the southern end was better. It's somewhat unpredictable."

Lake 4 has two islands, one on the east side and one on the west; both are good places to fish. There's a new pier on the south end of that lake for people with disabilities. Lake 3 also has a pier on the east side where your odds are pretty good on getting a bite.

"What I've seen here in the past few years, trout fishing is better in the morning hours; from sunrise until about 9 or 10 a.m. is probably the best bite. Then occasionally we'll get a late afternoon bite, but we do get bites at all hours of the day," said Even.

Fishing is done from the shoreline. Your best bets: chartreuse and rain-



*Prodigiously stocked, the Santee Lakes are a favored destination for weekend bank anglers. Photo by Jo Eager*

bow Power Bait, Rooster Tail or Mepps spinners, meal worms, red worms, night crawlers and Velveeta cheese (tossed out on a treble hook).

In addition to rainbow trout, the Santee Lakes include bass, catfish, bluegill and carp. While bass, bluegill and carp reproduce well in the recycled water, trout are stocked during the winter and up to 4,000 pounds of catfish are stocked monthly. All seven lakes are stocked with all of these types of fish with the exception of trout, which are only planted in Lakes 3 and 4.

While catch-and-release of trout is prohibited, bass fishing is limited to catch-and-release, and the practice is recommended with catfish and bluegills.

Minnnows, frogs, goldfish or other game fish are not allowed for use as bait. The only shiners permitted are those approved by the Department of Fish and Game. Neither corn nor any type of attractant or chum can be used.

"Between 40,000 and 50,000 pounds of fish are stocked annually. We spend roughly \$100,000 a year in fish," said Hague. "We are our own aquaculture. We're not governed by the Department of Fish and Game. They don't supplement any stockings."

### **THIS IS RECLAIMED WATER?**

As you relax on the shoreline waiting for a bite, you wouldn't have the slightest idea that the park was designed to solve the city's sewage disposal problem.

When Ray Stoyer went to work for the Santee County Water District in 1956, there were two challenges. First was the short supply of fresh water for a rapidly increasing population. A few years later, sewage disposal became an even bigger problem. Water wasn't cheap, either. The town's main source of water flowed more than 300 miles from the Colorado River. Stoyer figured the cost would increase three or four times by 1970. The town and its residents would have to cut back on water use to the bare essentials. So he set out to find a way to offer low-cost water to residents.

Stoyer trained his thoughts on how Santee could use sewage water,

which was already paid for and was, in fact, 99 percent pure, as a potential water supply. What the city needed was a method to rid the water of its one percent of impurities.

It's expensive to clean wastewater so thoroughly that it can be reused. Plus, the thought of reclaiming sewage water is normally disregarded for fear people won't like the idea. This was what Stoyer believed would be the biggest obstacle to transforming sewage water into recreational lakes.

Construction was booming and a mining company excavated nearby Sycamore Canyon for sand and gravel, leaving behind piles of poor soil surrounded by pools of stagnant water. As Stoyer looked at the gravel pits, he began to envision a series of lakes with the source of water coming from the town's sewage treatment plant.

He approached the company's operator, Bill Mast, with his idea. When Mast agreed to donate the used sand and gravel pits to the town, the project got the thumbs up. Authorities discussed ideas for cleaning the sewage water enough to make it safe and attractive for the lakes, and the water would be reused for irrigation and recreation, saving precious fresh water for home use.

As Stoyer's vision became reality, he saw proof that public acceptance would not be a problem. The area was fenced and the many residents that came by for a look complained that they couldn't get in to enjoy the lakes. Stoyer listened — gladly. He assured them the park would soon open. First they had to be certain the water was safe.

The response couldn't have been better. Ten thousand people enjoyed opening day celebrations to enjoy boating, picnicking and relaxing, showing no concern whatsoever that the water had recently been part of the town's sewage.

Today, the project is a financial, environmental and social success. More of the imported fresh water is used for drinking and human use. It decreases the amount of wastewater that must be treated and disposed of in the ocean. And in a town with a low annual rainfall, reclaimed water

provides a drought-proof supply of irrigation water.

One million gallons of recycled water fill the seven lakes and irrigate the park's grass and landscaping. The other million gallons treated daily are used for irrigating Santee schools, parks and businesses.

In 1962, the Department of Fish and Game stocked the lakes with fish for many months. Seining tests showed which species would spawn in the reclaimed water, and the Santee Lakes quickly became a popular spot for anglers. "They're stocked more than any other lake around," said Hague.

No state fishing license is required to fish there, but you do need a Santee Lakes fishing passport which costs \$7 daily. Night fishing, for campers only, is \$6.

The lakes are surrounded by 190 acres of parkland, just 20 minutes from downtown San Diego. Two lakes are for campers only with 172 full hook-up RV campsites, 18 of them waterfront locations. Work is under way to expand the number of RV sites to 350. The campground has a clubhouse, swimming pool, laundry, showers and playground.

The park is peaceful, with ducks, squirrels, native plants and over 175 species of birds. Pedal boats, canoes and rowboats are available. There are paved paths for walking, jogging and bicycling. Nearby Mission Trails Regional Park provides numerous hiking spots, including Cowles Mountain, the highest peak in the city of San Diego, and the scenic Old Mission Dam.

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### **FOR YOUR INFORMATION**

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Santee Lakes Recreation Preserve  
Reservation Desk & Business Office:  
619-596-3141, 9040 Carlton Oaks  
Dr., Santee, CA 92071; [www.santee-lakes.com](http://www.santee-lakes.com).

General Store, Santee Lakes: 619-562-4579; hours vary.

Lakes Market & Deli: 9292 Carlton Hills Blvd., Santee, CA 92071; 619-562-7415, also with varying hours.

Wal Mart: 170 Towne Center Parkway, Santee, CA 92071; 619-449-7900; 7 a.m.-11 p.m. daily. □