

Fishing

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and December, when a low-water reservoir, good water temperature and hungry trout often bring excellent fishing conditions.

“The fish are also better eating,” Henry said. “They’re coming out of that colder water. A lot of them have been in the reservoir for a while and are feeding on insects. I think in the winter, their flesh is a little pinker and just a little tastier.”

Henry and I had so much fun fishing the reservoir this season — and putting trout on the grill — that we decided it would be worthwhile to try and fish the reservoir even without a boat ramp.

The question was where to start.

Where to walk to the lake?

On a cool morning last week, Henry and I met at Detroit Lake with a plan: we would carry his 12-foot, 100-pound Jon boat from a parking lot to the water.

The next part was tricky.

At Mongold boat ramp and parking lot, the lakebed drops so steeply that trying to get a boat to the water might have required a bobsled run down the bank.

Instead, we headed to the old boat ramp at Detroit Lake, which still has a parking lot. This route required a longer carry — around 400 to 500 yards — but was a lot more level.

“Activate the glutes!” Henry said, in encouraging both of us to lift with our legs, as we both have lower back issues.

It was an interesting walk. Our route took us through fields of tree stumps and the concrete foundations of a government camp that housed dam workers in 1953. In 2015, when the reservoir reached the lowest point in its history, a 19th-century wagon appeared in the mud.

The final challenge of the carry was mud. As we got closer to the water, we sank calf-deep, almost knee-deep, into quicksand-like muck. But with a little work, and about 45 minutes of scouting and carrying, we pushed our small boat onto an eerily quiet reservoir.

It was an odd moment, being the only craft on a lake often packed with jet skis and power boats.

More history:Historically low lake reveals remnants of Old Detroit

Searching for fish in transformed reservoir

Henry’s boat was powered by a set of small wooden oars. We got the fishing setup ready: an ounce of sinker, six inches of line, then a flasher or dodger (some bling to attract the fish), then a foot of leader and a wedding ring or hoochie lure baited with nightcrawlers or



Henry Hughes carries his 100-pound Jon boat through the stumps and mud of Detroit Lake to access the historically low water level and go fishing. ZACH URNESS / STATESMAN JOURNAL

corn soaked in tuna oil.

We placed the rods in two rod holders and set off, focusing on where to find fish in a reservoir of such extreme low water.

It was a bit tougher than expected.

The first area we tried was on the north side of Piety Knob, the big island, where Tumble Creek drops into the reservoir.

The fish weren’t biting.

After 20 minutes or so, we got a little worried, given this was a hotspot where we’d caught a ton of fish a few weeks prior.

Then we saw what was wrong. The reservoir was so low Tumble Creek was dropping not into the lake itself, but a newly exposed mudflat, pushing huge amounts of sediment into the water.

The water was murky, and probably not a fun place to be if you were a fish.

The onslaught begins

To get away from the muddy water, we rowed around to the south side of Piety Knob.

From almost the moment we came around the island’s point, the fish began hitting.

The two rods went berserk, twitching and bending with life. We reeled in a few small ones, then landed a nice 12-13 inch rainbow and put it on ice.

The fish hit so consistently that it became impossible to get both lines baited. As soon as you put it out, another fish hit. Henry stopped rowing and

grabbed one rod, while I brought up a fish on the other line.

It was madness. And really fun.

We tossed back the smaller fish and targeted the larger ones so we wouldn’t waste our limit — five fish per person.

After a string of smaller fish, we rowed into deeper water but the fishing slowed west of Piety Knob.

An ancient riverbed, and the day's largest fish

After hours in a tiny boat, we stopped on Piety Knob for lunch and to stretch our legs.

From the shore, it was striking how much Detroit Lake looked like the river it once was.

The edges of the reservoir dropped steeply, hundreds of feet, cradling the gray water. If you looked at it just right, you could almost see the water flowing downstream.

In black and white photos of Old Detroit, you can see the North Santiam River rolling fast and narrow past the buildings of the town. But it’s hard to imagine that wild river in this sea of mud and stumps.

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“It is striking to think that, yes, this was once a river, and a town, and there were people that were displaced. I think it’s important to keep that in mind,”

Henry said. “However, it is a reservoir and I am happy to use it. The great thing about Detroit is that it encourages people from all walks of life to come here and catch fish.”

Henry also pointed out all the wildlife we could see — birds of every type flying overhead, sometimes eating the same fish we were targeting.

After lunch we counted seven fish on ice, meaning we could keep three more. It wasn’t hard to catch them — the only problem was deciding which ones to keep.

As I rowed, I watched the rods dance as Henry brought up fish after fish. Finally, with nine on ice, we headed back toward shore with the idea of getting our last keeper on the way home.

Henry took out a spinning rod and tossed out a jig and got a big hit. After a lively fight, he brought in a beautiful 13- to 14-inch fish, the biggest of the day.

The price for this red-hot fishing at Detroit Lake is steep during this unique low-water event — and it includes a very dirty boat and waders. But the reward is red-hot fishing among the stumps and mud, on the shadow of a submerged river.

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