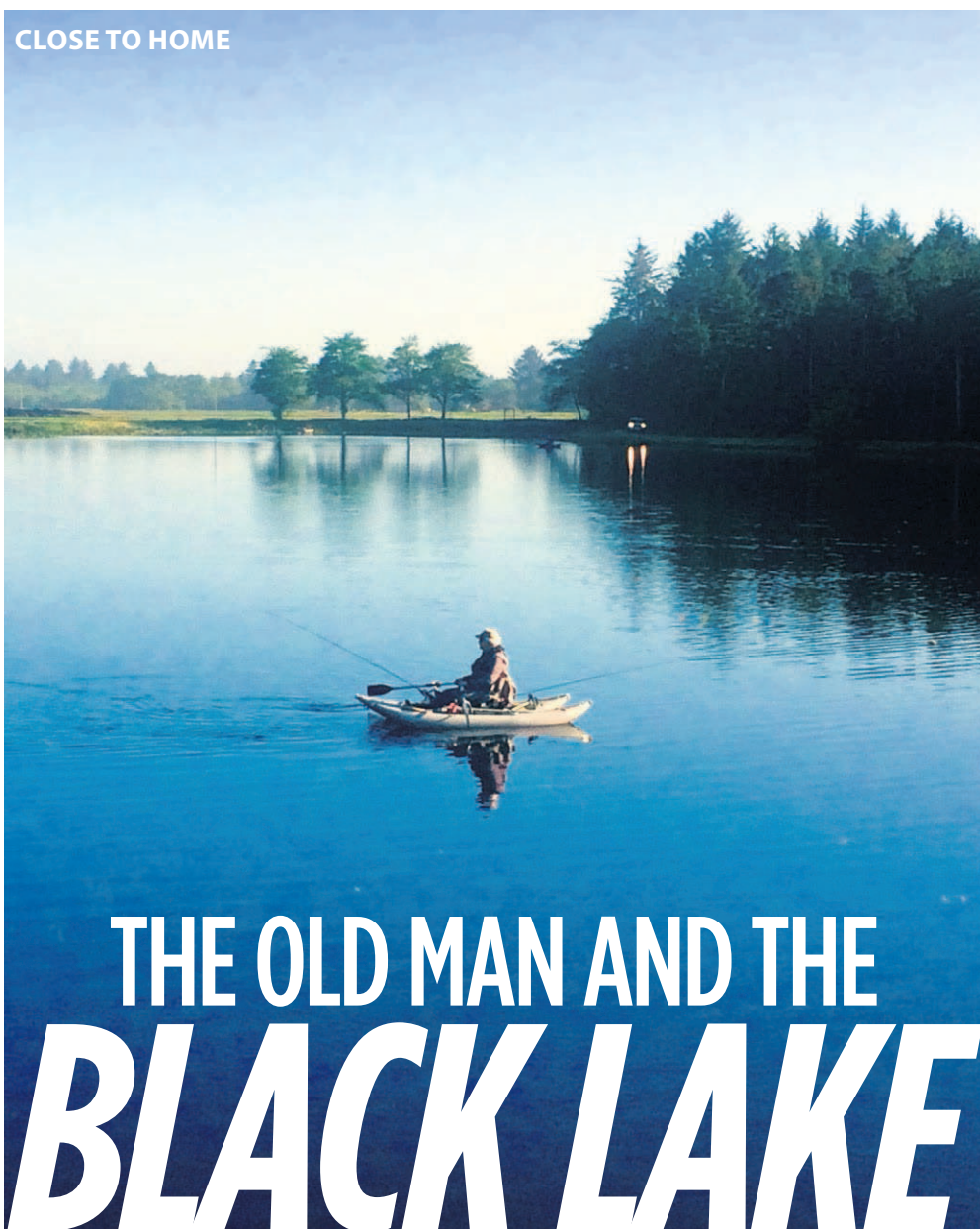


COASTAL LIFE

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CLOSE TO HOME



THE OLD MAN AND THE BLACK LAKE

PHOTO BY DAVID CAMPICHE

Black Lake, the old reservoir for the city of Ilwaco, is stocked with rainbow trout.

By DAVID CAMPICHE

It's 5:30 in the morning, and the phone rings. I stir from bed, fumbling with my footsteps and the black plastic receiver. The synapses between brain and body seems lost in shadowland. Coordination has flown south.

"Mornin' champ. Up to some clammin'?" Phil's voice races through the back roads of my brain. My mouth is dry. I can't yet spit out my words succinctly. "Wha...? Oh, yeah. Now?"

"Not tomorrow, cowboy. Perfect tide, perfect day. Looked out the window yet?" I admit that I haven't. "Well," says Phil, "time's a wastin'."

Fifteen minutes later we're on the beach, and Phil is dead-on right. The beach is as close to perfect as landscapes can be. The sun is rising,

caressing the soft, white-hatted surf. A spangled mirror reflects the robin-egg sky back on the still salt water that has settled behind the sand bars on the east side of the ocean as the tide pulls out. Blue sky on blue water. Blue velvet.

Sleep has evaporated from my eyes. As I walk toward the clam beds, an eagle of huge size floats effortlessly over my head, no higher than a flag pole. I think of this as a good omen. Around us, the clam holes are scattered like polka dots on a party dress. Many a day we have grubbed and drubbed for the bivalves. We have stomped and thumped and worked the surf like prisoners on a chain gang.

Not today. This is a turkey shoot. In 10 minutes we are washing the clams and circling



PHOTO BY DAVID CAMPICHE

Rainbow trout from Black Lake.

the truck. The clams are big and fat, the best dig of the year.

"Still time to go fishin'," says Phil. I argue but not for long. Already, it is 60 degrees on the beach.

Off we go to Black Lake, the old reservoir for the city of Ilwaco, recently stocked with lovely rainbow trout. I'll be honest, I never bothered to fish it before, preferring the wilder steelhead streams that abound in Pacific and Clatsop County, and of course, all that ocean and the silver-backed salmon. But rumor has it that Nancy Allen, Phil's wife, has just landed a 4-pound trout. There was no denying the excitement.

A group of retirees has gathered on the small wooden dock that the city built: Norm and Dan and Arlie, seniors for sure. On the surface, it appears that this fishing event has more social implications than gaming for meat. Stories stumble out like the tide rising: fishing in Idaho, Montana, on the Deschutes and on the Salmon. Steelhead fishing, bass, salmon, pike and trout — if it swims they caught it. But the prize was in the telling: talking, smoking, exaggerating and, yes, bending the truth, if only a little bit. Fudging, so to speak. It's okay, apparently, in fishing.

Phil brings out a jar of PowerBait. I twist it onto the hook and cast away. Quickly enough, the pole begins to twitch. Gently, I seize up on the line. This is no salmon, just a small trout perfect for pan-frying. I salivate thinking of trout

almondine. Soon we have six.

Across the lake, a giant trout is skirting the placid water, an acrobat dressed in a quicksilver pants. I watch it admiringly. It jumps again, and I realize — suddenly, shockingly — that it is attached to my hook, and running toward me. I tighten the 6-pound test line, and the battle is on. The fish looks too big for the gear. We — all the men on the dock — coax it in, offering advice like a ticker-tape moment. The fish jumps, runs, tugs and pulls, demonstrating a boatload of trout trickery. The line holds. Minutes blur by.

Finally, one of my new-found friends goes below the dock to net the beast. Another offers a plastic ice chest before the trout is even landed. Photos on a half-dozen cell phones (man's new best friend) click away like a train thumping on the rails. I'm smiling, 12 years old again. Everyone is smiling.

A car pulls over and a man jumps out and greets the boys with an enthusiastic, "Wow! Are there

fish in this lake really this big?" No need to answer that question. In the grass the trout glistens like a newly minted coin. At 6 pounds, it looks like a lost salmon.

The air is warm and annealing. A golden orb rises, higher and higher in the sky. Shadow and light mingle, ancient friends. This lake and all those trout, big and small, are but a five-minute drive from Long Beach. They are waiting for you. As is this magical day, and so close to home.

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