Freshwater Trout

A Recfishwest Feature Article
October 2014

TROUT fishing has a surprisingly long and colourful history in Western Australia.

The annual freshwater season in our South-West opens each year on September 1, and is keenly anticipated by a healthy group of trout enthusiasts, offering a significant boost to tourism and local economies.

Fly fishing is the time-honoured way of catching trout around the world (Figure 1), but they can also be caught easily on traditional spinning tackle, just be aware that you need to have a freshwater fishing licence to catch them.

Figure 1 Trout on fly can be enjoyed when the weather warms a little and the water levels are spot on

The Beginning

Although brown and rainbow trout are not native to local waters, they have been part of our inland aquatic environment for more than a century. The arrival of trout can be traced to the late-1800s and the desire of English settlers to recreate some of the sport and game opportunities of the motherland. Of course, it is will documented that some of these initiatives have backfired spectacularly – consider the ill-considered introduction of rabbits and foxes – but stocking trout has largely been a success with no significant environmental impacts and some very positive impacts for communities across the country.

William Savelle-Kent (WA Fisheries Commissioner 1893-95) was one of the founders for relocating fish from other states to WA to help stock local rivers and streams of recreational species. He suggested that Murray Cod, Golden Perch, along with Brown and Rainbow Trout would thrive in WA water ways such as the Avon, Swan, Blackwood, Margaret and Preston rivers. William negotiated a contract with the Fisheries Board at the time, for the supply of 10,000 trout and 5,000 'salmon trout' at £1 per thousand fish in 1893.

During the winter of 1894, a site for a hatchery had been selected on the Preston River near Picton Junction with the facility being ready for that September. The fish ova set off from the Plenty hatchery in Tasmania and were re-packed in ice in Melbourne by the Director of the Melbourne Zoo and transhipped to the *Oraya* for the voyage to Albany. The Tasmanians could only supply 10,000 fish ova but over 90% were alive and well when Saville-Kent collected them from the ship and carried them to the hatchery.

With the help of the Bunbury enthusiast E.M.Clark the ova were separated from their moss packing and spread out in trays. Within a hour the first little fish made their debut as the first-born Western Australian salmon trout. Over the next few days hatching continued and a healthy brood grew so well that during the spring, consignments were released in seven rivers throughout the south. Unfortunately hot weather in December killed many of the young fish held at the hatchery and the remainder were released into the Preston; the first trial was so encouraging that Saville-Kent recommended future introductions of the Murray River crayfish (*Astacopsis serratus*) and the Tasmanian Blackfish (*Gadopsis marmoratus*) together with more trout. (Source: Saville-Kent, *The Naturalist in Australia, 1897)*

Tour stocking has certainly been an important part of recreational fishing in WA. Early stocking attempts, including around Albany, were haphazard and it wasn't until Pemberton became the base for a dedicated trout hatchery in the 1930s that it gained traction.

There was great joy when a 5kg rainbow trout was captured in East Brook a short time later, signalling that the stocking program was working.

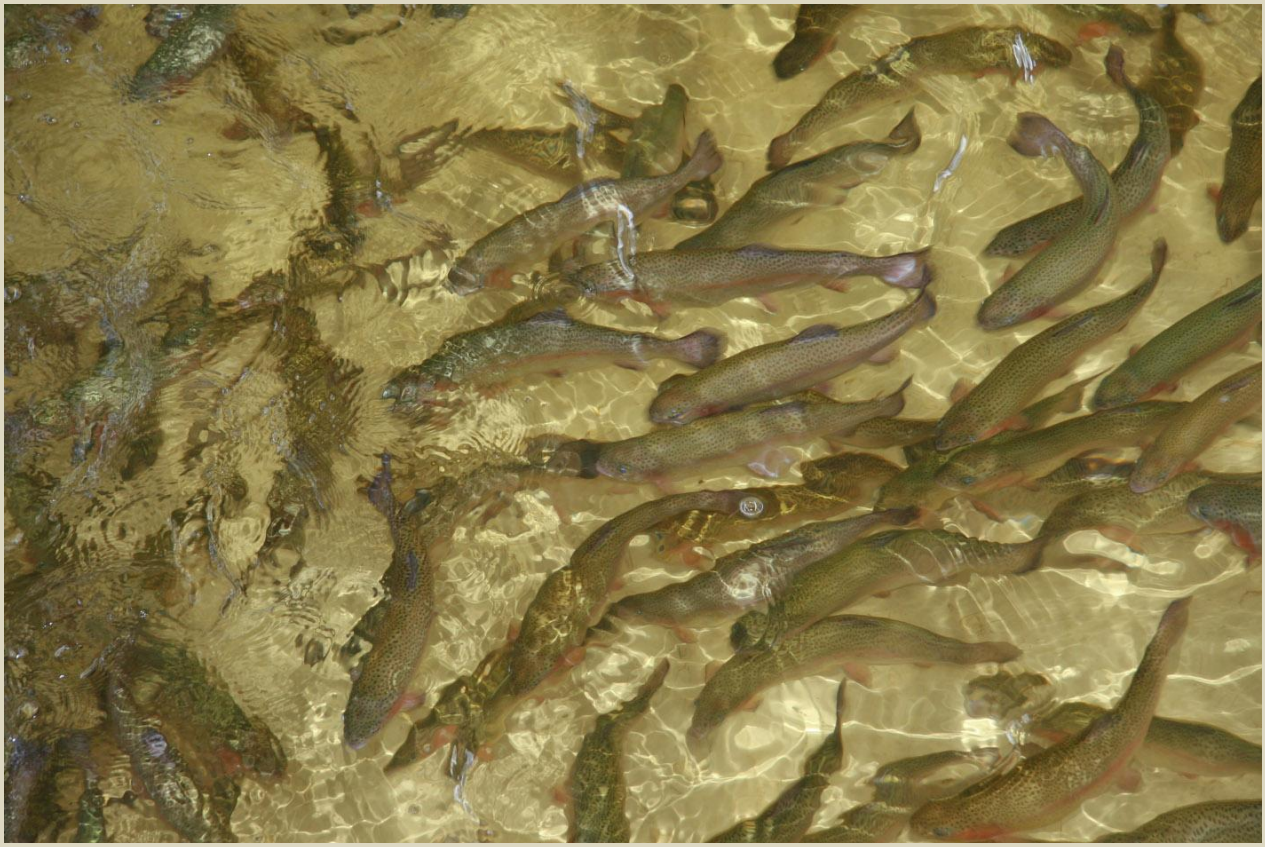

Figure 2 Trout at the Pemberton Hatchery facility today

Figure 3 The Pemberton Trout Hatchery today holds the key to great trout stocking numbers of South West WA waterways *(photo courtesy of WA DOF)*

Pemberton Trout Hatchery

The current hatchery (Figure 2 and 3), run by Tony Church under the guidance of the Department of Fisheries, was built in 1952 and continues to breed stock that is distributed throughout the South-West.

Trout bred locally have international significance, as they have evolved to have a longer temperature tolerance than elsewhere in the world. In the light of climate issues, this characteristic is attracting international researchers to the trout hatchery.

The vast majority of fish that are stocked in WA are rainbow trout (Figure 4) and these provide most of the local fishing opportunities.

Figure 4 Rainbow Trout ready for release

Figure 5 A solid Brown Trout

Figure 6 The Warren River is a prime spot to try your hand for some Trout

In 2014, over half a million trout from the historic Pemberton hatchery have been stocked through southern waterways. The size of fish released varies from tiny fingerlings through to big ex-broodstock (Figure 5) that are no longer needed for spawning purposes by the hatchery.

The fishing these days is as challenging as it has been for some time, due to changing environmental conditions, access restrictions and reduced stocking locations. Nonetheless, there is still some good fishing

to be had in various streams, rivers and lakes and the stunning bush scenery of our southern forests means a day on the water is never wasted (Figure 6).

Figure 7 The big broodstock fish are about 2-3kg in size

Stocking Locations

A quick look at the latest stocking list will help narrow down the likely spots and potentially save you a lot of wasted effort in an area where fish weren't released.

One of the most popular locations for trout fishers these days is Harvey Dam and with good reason. It is the most heavily stocked location in WA, with around 8000 rainbow yearlings and some ex-broodstock released in 2014. There were also 1000 brown yearlings and some big ex-broodstock browns released into the dam. With so much fishable water, there are plenty of opportunities around Harvey to try your luck from shore, or even from a kayak or small boat.

Figure 8 Catch and release freshwater fishing maintains trout populations for future fishing trips

Some of the biggest trout caught in WA each year come from Harvey and are usually the big browns from the hatchery, often bigger than two kilos (Figure 7).

There has been some great fishing there from kayaks in recent years, and trolling small minnow lures around structure for trout, and also redfin perch, during the day can be very productive (Figure 8).

Working the grassy banks at sunset can also be productive. Shore anglers can also do well by fly or lure (Figure 9) casting in the shallows as darkness falls.

Figure 9 Using spinners or minnow hard body lures on light spin sticks are also a great way to target Trout

One of the great things about Harvey Dam is that it is not too weather dependant and the fishing conditions don't change too much, even after heavy rain.

Stillwater fishing is not for everyone though, and many freshwater anglers prefer to try their luck in the rivers and streams of the South-West.

The three most heavily stocked rivers are the Warren, Donnelly and Blackwood and they offer the chance to cast a line while savouring some fantastic forest scenery.

The Warren is probably our most reliable trout river, and tributaries such as the Lefroy Brook, which runs through Pemberton, are ideal early season fishing spots.

The Murray River is once again part of the stocking program and is also worth a try, and Big Brook Dam (Pemberton) is usually popular. Waroona Dam, once WA's best trout fishing dam, received 500 yearlings.

Around 45,000 triploid rainbow trout fry were also released into the Collie River below Wellington Dam, and these fish could provide some exciting action once they grow to legal size over the next few years.

Overall, more than 350,000 tiny rainbow fry were released into WA waters in 2014, including big numbers of fish in the Warren and Donnelly rivers.

When it comes to the start of the season, much depends on water levels and it can actually be hard work early in the season if heavy rains have swollen the rivers and streams.

Small floating minnow lures are a good bet for spin anglers, as are large wet flies.

If catching a wild trout seems like too much hard work, many holiday retreats have private dams stocked with fish. The West Australian Trout and Freshwater Angling Association also have access to several private dams stocked with trout.

A regular bycatch when fishing for trout are redfin perch (Figure 10). Another introduced species, with striking colourings, redfin are a voracious feeder and considered feral (Figure 11). They are not to be returned to the water, but the good news is they are first-class eating, with sweet white flesh.

Figure 10 Redfin Perch are well known to smack a range of lures presented to them

Figure 11 Redfin Perch give fishers another freshwater species to target

A freshwater licence is required to catch trout, costing $40 for 12 months and available online at www.fish.wa.gov.au or at WA Fisheries offices.