

Montana Outdoors

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DEPARTMENT OF FISH, WILDLIFE AND PARKS

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FISH PLANTING BY AIR
by
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As the airplane changed our society, it also changed the way fish are planted in rugged, inaccessible terrain. From the early attempts of Dick Logan and Herman Hendrickson flying bi-planes, the airplane has completely displaced "the cream can and pack mule method" of stocking high mountain lakes. We have progressed from the early flights when fish were poured over the side to airplanes and helicopters outfitted with remote control release mechanisms. On board oxygen metering devices permit fish to be hauled to the limit of the aircraft's range.

Each year, the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks air plants about 80 lakes requiring approximately 150,000 fish. A typical lake that is stocked by air is small, requiring from 500 - 2,000 fish.

Lakes in every mountain range in the state have benefited from these airborne pack mules. Most species of trout stocked in Montana waters have at some time or other taken an airplane ride to their new home. Today, rainbow trout, westslope and Yellowstone cutthroat are the most frequently airplanted fish, with Yellowstone cutthroat making up over half the fish that are stocked by air. In 1981, 112,000 Yellowstone cutthroat were planted by air in 51 lakes, with most of these stocked in the Beartooth Absaroka, Gallatin and Madison ranges.

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Fish from newly hatched fry to four inches long can be air plant With the use of ice to cool the water and oxygen metered into the tanks, two pounds of fish per gallon of water can be transported by air. That number is not impressive in itself but with the airplane carrying 50 gallons of water, over 36,000 two inch fish can be planted during one flight. For a long flight the number of fish are reduced to minimize stress.

At release, the airplane is about 300 feet above the surface of the lake at an air speed of around 90 mph. This altitude is low enough to prevent the fish from drying out during descent and to enter the water with minimum impact. The department has established four inches as the maximum size that can be safely planted with an airplane, because smaller fish can survive the fall. The lower and slower capabilities of the helicopter permit larger fish to be stocked.

Good weather conditions are a must to air plant fish in the mountains. When a pilot flies fish into a small cirque lake, rock walls are on three sides and at 300 feet above the water he has only one way out. Most air plants are completed in the early part of the day when the air is cool and calm. During seemingly calm days when cross country flying would be pleasant, thermal currents can create hazardous conditions for the low and slow flying required for air plants.

Obtaining precise figures about the survival of air planted fish is difficult. We do know they survive in sufficient numbers to maintain good populations in lakes that have adequate trout habitat. Research biologists determine the restocking frequently to maintain a healthy population. Size of the lake, amount of natural reproduction, and food are analyzed along with other factors to arrive at a restocking cycle for a

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particular lake.

The next time you catch a nice cutthroat, rainbow or brookie from one of Montana's alpine jewels, stop and reflect for a moment about the exciting ride that fish may have had before he made his way to your tackle.