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by Margery Pepiot

When you pull in a nice trout or other fish from one of the many lakes and streams that make the northwestern states a mecca for fishermen, do you ever wonder about that fish? As you gently release it and watch it streak away with a flip of its tail, do you wonder how it came to be there to provide you with the excitement of sport fishing? Or fishing waters where you may keep what you catch, as you take the fish from the hook, do you wonder at this prize that not only provides you with pleasurable recreation, but will be mighty fine eating later?

Every hunter who takes to the field is aware of game management programs, whether his quarry is upland game birds, waterfowl, or one of the larger game animals. The United States can lay claim to having the finest wildlife conservation system in the world. This includes fish management. Most fishermen know of the network of state and federal fish hatcheries, staffed by fish biologists and scientifically trained personnel. We know lakes and rivers are "stocked" annually with hatchery-raised fish—but how it is done, and why, remains somewhat of a mystery to most of us.

In the April 1979 issue of the *NORTHWESTERN SPORTSMAN,* we told how spawn was taken from brood fish at the State Hatchery at Big Timber, Montana; how the eggs were incubated and the hatch cared for. We mentioned briefly that stocking was done with three-month old fingerlings, in this case, young Yellowstone Cutthroat trout.

All of this made me wonder how these fingerlings, raised in a scientifically control environment, adapted to life in the wild where the environmental conditions were unpredictable.

I had an opportunity to find the answers to my questions when Thurston Dotson, manager of the Big Timber station, asked me to accompany him on a stocking trip. He told me they would be loading the fish early Saturday morning.

When I arrived at the hatchery, Dotson and his assistant, Darrel Hodges, were already preparing to transfer the young fish from the hatchery tanks to a specially equipped pickup truck. The first part of the operation was to weigh the fish to determine how many there were in a pound. It had been determined to take 1300 fish on this particular run.

To find the average number of fingerlings it took to make a pound, twenty pounds of water were put in a bucket hanging from a scale. Five pounds of fish were added to the bucket of water, then the fish were counted and the count recorded. Three counts were made—the average was found to be 7.9 fish to a pound. The fingerlings measured 7¾ inches in length.

Accurately weighing the fish as they were dipped from the tank, Thurston and Darrel carried the fish in buckets of water to the aerated tank on the bed of the pickup. When 1300 fish according to weight, had been dumped into the truck's tank, we were ready to go. Our destination was Cooney Reservoir in the Beartooth Mountains.

While the fish are in transit, the oxygen supply is monitored constantly by means of dials and controls in the cab of the truck. A few miles after starting the trip, Thurston stopped the truck and inspected the fish visually. They appeared well, and we continued on. When I asked him what the procedure would be if he had noted signs of illness, he replied that more oxygen would be pumped in, and the trip completed as quickly as possible.

He also told me the fish are not fed 24 hours prior to shipping. They can get sick from motion if they have been fed during this period.

The drive up to Cooney Reservoir was reason enough for me to go along

Yellowstone Cutthroat trout swim in the tank at Big Timber before being taken to Cooney Reservoir.

Cooney Reservoir, south of Columbus, Montana, is stocked annually with rainbow and cutthroat trout by the State Fish & Game Department.

on this stocking expedition. The rolling hills along Route 10 east of Big Timber were a lovely silvery-green, tinged with violet shadows in the hollows. Baby calves froliced in the fields, and foals, walking on stiff little legs, kept close to their dams. Spring in Montana has to be experienced personally. Words and pictures can only hint at the subtle beauty as the season advances.

South of Columbus, the road climbs steadily. A few miles from Cooney, as the truck crested a rise, a spectacular view of the Beartooth and Absaroka ranges came into sight with breathtaking suddenness.

It wasn't much farther to the plant site. We parked the truck at the water's edge, and Thurston carefully cracked the lid of the tank a few inches, letting in a small amount of light. He explained that this was done so as not to excite the fish. After a few minutes, he raised the lid completely. I couldn't help but be impressed at how the welfare of the fish is kept always in mind.

Cooney Reservoir is a popular pot for camping, fishing and picnicking. In spite of it being early in the season, fishermen could be seen casting from the shore. Being an irrigation impoundment with no natural spawning ground, it is an ideal lake for "dumping" excess brood fish. The State Fish and Game Department of Montana is very careful to put these fish where they will not affect a wild spawning population. Stocking the lake with rainbows and cutthroats provides Montanans and out-of-staters with plenty of good fishing.

The Big Timber station is not the only hatchery that stocks Cooney. The Bluewater Springs Hatchery at Brid-

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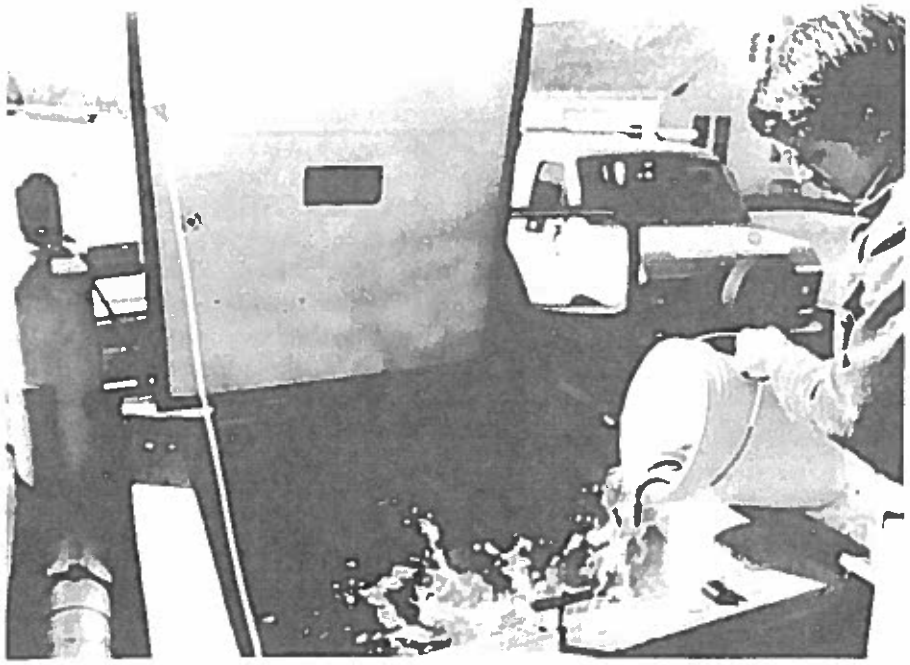

Darrel Hodges transfers young trout to the aerated truck tank.

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ger also plants fish there. Both hatcheries use the lake to dispose of adult brood stock. This creates a lot of excitement among fishermen anxious to land a big one.

The Big Timber hatchery will plant 475,000 cutthroat trout in the lakes and streams of Montana during the spring and summer of 1979, with most of them going to lakes along the Beartooth and Absaroka ranges, and the Gallatin and Madison rivers. Hebgen lake, near West Yellowstone, will receive 250,000, making this the largest plant. Hyalite Reservoir near Bozeman, received 40,000 cutthroats this year. They do so well in this lake that there is danger of the area being overused. Primarily, trucks are used to transport the fish, but where it is impossible to reach a site by land transport, fixed wing aircraft and helicoptors are used.

While I had been looking around, Thurston had pulled on waders and connected hoses and a slide (sort of a sluice) to the fish tank. Again, to prevent stress, water from the lake was slowly pumped into the tank, while the tank water was draining out. This exhange of water eases the fish into their new environment.

Suddenly the sluice was opened, gushing water and fish. Thirteen hundred fingerling cutthroat had a new home.

Thurston Dotson, manager of the Big Timber hatchery, gets ready to exchange water in tank with lake water.

Dotson checking the fish in the tank prior to opening the sluice.