



Wednesday, December 17, 2003

## Mackinaw need thinning out at Priest Lake

By Dusty Routh  
Fishing and Hunting News

- [Check out our newest feature: Interactive fishing maps!](#)
- And to search for a navigational chart, [click here](#)

COOLIN, Idaho — Back in the 1970s, Priest Lake in Idaho's Panhandle region was known as a trophy Mackinaw lake.

The fish were few, but they were big, including the 57.8-pound Idaho state record taken in 1971.

But with the passing of leisure suits and disco music, so too passed the decade of big lakers at Priest.

"Lake trout aren't indigenous to Priest Lake, of course," said regional fisheries biologist Mark Liter.

"They were introduced in 1925. Over the course of their lifespan in the lake, they ate up just about everything in sight and grew very large."

But now the opposite is happening. "Whereas before they weren't too plentiful, and they were spread out all over the lake (Priest is huge, at 23,700 acres of water), they attained super sizes."

"But now they're really plentiful, there's tons of them, and they're getting smaller."

Lake trout are accomplished predators. They're like a toothy, freshwater shark. All they do is swim, eat and make little sharks.

They can flat consume just about everything in a lake.

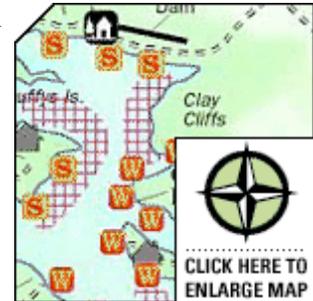
Unfortunately for Priest and adjoining Upper Priest, that's included native fish like cutthroat trout and big bull trout.

The mega-quantity of lakers also ate up all the kokanee.

"We stocked Priest heavily through the 1980s with kokanee, and I think that's why the lake trout were able to spawn and reproduce so well. They had plenty to eat in all those kokanee," Liter said.

He goes on to say that the kokanee may be making a rebound, however. "One of our samples counted 3,000 spawners in the sample areas," he said.

"That's up from 1,200 two years ago." Kokanee fishing is still closed on Priest for the time being, until these fish can re-establish themselves.



CLICK HERE TO ENLARGE MAP



**It's a mackinaw and in Idaho's Priest Lake, you can still catch a lunker, too.**

But the most damaging dent put in the fish populations have come on the native cutts and bulls.

"Priest used to be known for incredible cutthroat trout fishing. Just incredible."

"At one time there was a limit of 25 trout a day. But the lake trout have really dwindled their numbers. And the big bull trout are the same way."

Liter said he's seen some of these bull trout attain 30 inches in length. "They can get really big," he said.

Big lakers still possible

But the dwindling size of lake trout in Priest is relative.

Consider that Oregon's and Washington's state records are barely over 40 and 35 pounds, respectively.

Priest still kicks out bigger Mackinaw than any of Idaho's neighboring states.

One gentleman who guides on Priest Lake, said he's taken two 48-plus-pounders there.

He estimates that on a typical outing he'll catch between eight and 20 fish, with a 3 to 10-pound size range.

But, he's quick to add, there are plenty of fish caught between 10 and 20 pounds, and still plenty more that can hit the 25- to 40-pound mark.

Liter said that he considers the average Priest Lake laker to be 22 inches, and around 3 pounds.

The lake is full of fish of this size.

To ease some of this lake trout congestion, Idaho Fish and Game removed all slot limits on lake trout and upped the daily take to six fish, any size.

We're gonna need a bigger boat

One of the hard facts of life about fishing for Priest's big lakers is that you'll need fairly specialized equipment in order to regularly score on big fish.

Liter points out that the anglers who catch the most and biggest fish have big boats, because it's a big lake, and expensive electronics and downriggers that are connected to their bottom finders.

This is so that downrigger balls will automatically go up and down over uneven bottom terrain, staying within 6 feet of the bottom.

"With manual downriggers it's just not possible" to stay in the strike zone consistently, Liter said.

You've got to be within that 6-foot zone near the bottom, which sounds easier than it really is.

The wind can blow, the bottom's uneven and there's plenty to hang up on.

As a rule of thumb most of the laker action takes place in the southern half of the lake.

At a glance

Fishing and Hunting  
News

**What:** Exciting winter lake trout fishing at one of the last unspoiled lakes in the Western U.S.

**When:** Fishing is open year-round.

Priest Lake rarely freezes over, although some of the bays can freeze and provide excellent ice fishing.

**Where:** Most of the

In the springtime, from March to June, the hot area is restricted even further, down to the lower southern section of the lake.

This is because the current flow in Priest runs north to south, and vast schools of mysis shrimp are corralled into the lower quarter near Outlet Bay.

The big lakers gorge themselves on the shrimp, said Liter.

"In some of the samples we've taken, the stomach contents are just bulging with shrimp," Liter said.

Some of the very best areas of the lower lake are around Outlet Bay and Bartoo, Kalispell and Eightmile islands.

There are vast flats between these islands that you have to search for with your electronics, and lakers will often be up on those flats or just off them, slinking around in adjacent deeper water.

While jigging can be done on flat, calm days when you've found a bunch of lake trout in an area, like on a flat, most of the fishing on Priest is done by trolling.

"A very small percentage of anglers jig for lake trout," Liter said. "If you know where to jig, though, if you can find what I call a 'lake trout nursery,' you can limit out in no time."

For trollers, flashers and dodgers trailing hoochies is one of the most popular rigs.

A local fly called a "Priest Lake Fly" tipped with squawfish meat, a strip of perch meat or sucker meat is also used behind the flasher or dodger.

And some anglers go with big body-baits, like massive Rapalas, FlatFish and Kwikfish.

### Spawning and life cycle

Lake trout are fall spawners. They usually start in late October and finish up by early December.

They spawn at night in deep water, 20 to 60 feet. The females broadcast their eggs over rocks and boulders, and the males fertilize in the same way.

Neither parent builds a nest or watches over the eggs or fry.

Lake trout can live a long time, said Liter. "One fish that was tagged when she was 7 pounds, we got her back 34 years later, and she was 24 pounds."

### Good eats

One of the reasons to fish for Priest's lakers (besides thinning out the herd, the excellent fight qualities and the chance at a huge fish) is that they're yummy.

"What's so unique about the Priest fish is the flesh quality," explains Liter.

"Lake trout in many parts of the state have meat that's flesh-colored, like your hands, and the meat can be oily."

action is in the southern half of the lake, particularly around the islands.

**How:** Trolling hoochies and flies tipped with squawfish, perch or sucker meat, staying within 6 feet of the bottom.

### Contact:

Bait and tackle is available at Max Grocery (208-448-1155), which is on Highway 57 just off Highway 2.

Priest Lake Marina can be reached at (208) 443-2405.

"A lot of people don't like to eat lake trout. But these fish are unbelievable. The flesh is a vibrant orange, as vibrant as any sockeye you'll ever see."



*Material from Fishing & Hunting News  
published 24 times a year.*

Visit them at [www.fishingandhuntingnews.com](http://www.fishingandhuntingnews.com).

---

**ESPN.com:** [Help](#) | [Media Kit](#) | [Report a Bug](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Tools](#) | [Jobs at ESPN](#) | [Supplier Information](#) | Copyright ©2005 ESPN Internet Ventures. [Terms of Use for our Site](#), [Terms of Use for ESPN Motion](#) and [UPDATED Privacy Policy](#) are applicable to you. All rights reserved.