

Spotted bass at Lake Perris once broke all the records, but now they are gone

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When Lake Perris first opened to the public in 1974, Ken Aasen, a fishery biologist with the Department of Fish and Game, had created a fishery in the new lake

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like none other in the state. This was back in the era when the DFG (now Department of Fish and Wildlife) was still interested in creating opportunities for fishermen and hunters.

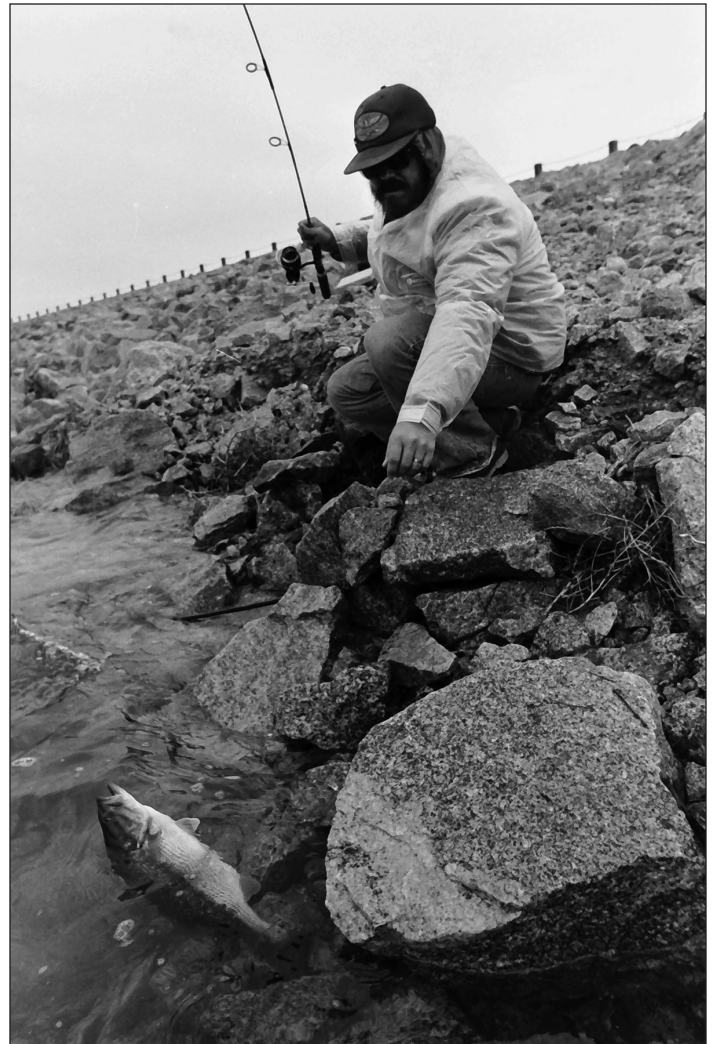
In January, 1974, Lake Perris was planted with 94 Alabama spotted bass caught via rod and reel from Lewis Smith Lake in Alabama. Aasen had

chosen Lewis Smith Lake because it was producing the biggest spotted bass in their native range, including five consecutive world records for the species. Green sunfish were also planted. No one whined about the DFG introducing non-native species into the state. They were being planted into a reservoir that was once farmland. There were no fish there and certainly no native fish. It was an interesting experiment for anglers.

The green sunfish and spotted bass had evolved together in the South, and Aasen was trying to replicate that unique fishery experience in this state. He was spot-on in his assessment. The fishery thrived. Between the green sunfish and an exploding crawdad population, Lake Perris' spotted bass thrived on an abundant food supply. In just five years, Perris starting producing monster spotted bass that were rivaling the existing world record of eight-pounds, 15-ounces.

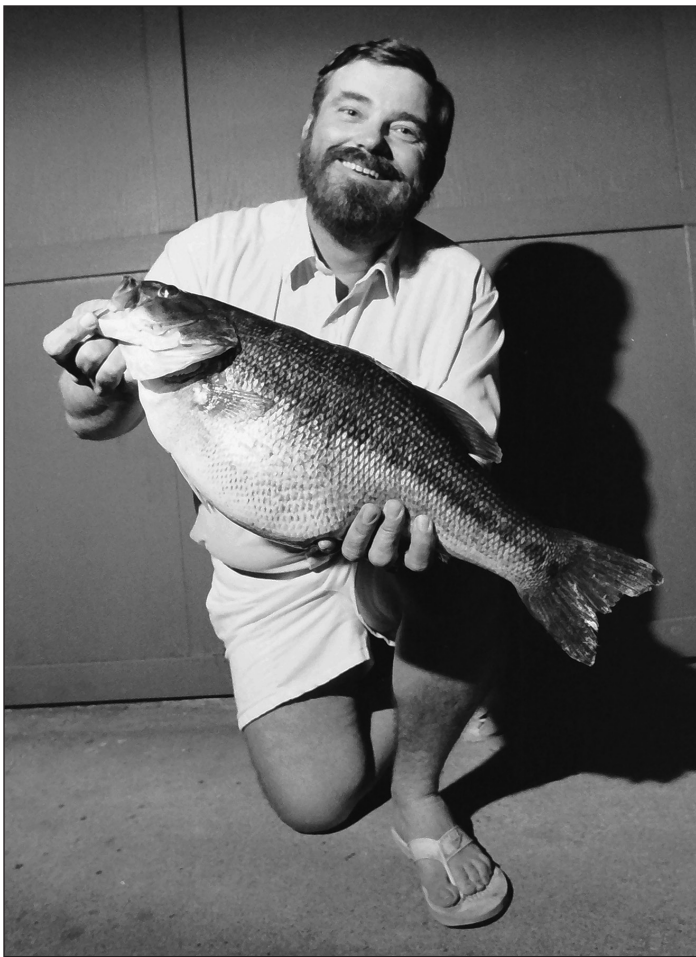
In Feb., 1977, Jim Tatum of Riverside caught a seven-pound, two-ounce spotted bass, and in Sept., 1979, Bob Nixon of Bloomington landed a bass he said weighed nine-pounds, two-ounces when it was landed – a new world record.

Unfortunately, the fish went into the freezer, waiting for the time when Nixon could afford to have it mounted.



Gil Rowe of Hesperia lands a nice three-pound spotted bass off the face of the Lake Perris dam during the peak of the spotty fishery in the late 1980s. Rowe did all of his fishing from shore and caught the then-world record and four line-class world records from the bank. Nixon also had no idea what the world record for the Alabama spotted bass was at the time, he just knew it was the biggest bass he'd ever caught.

By the time Nixon heard that he might have a world record in his freezer, it was nearly nine months later. He called the DFG, and Ken Aasen came to his house and officially identified and weighed the fish on a certified scale at seven-pounds, eight-ounces. Dehydration had sucked all the moisture and the world record weight right out of the fish. Aasen did identify the bass as one of the original 94 that had been planted in the lake because of a fin clip. Aasen couldn't certify the spot as a world record, he believed Nixon's story and was sure now the lake would break the record.



Gil Rowe (left) of Hesperia and Steve West of Riverside hold their world record spotted bass. Both fish weighed 9-pounds, 4-ounces and tied for the record. Both fish were caught at Lake Perris during its spotted bass heyday — West's fish in 1987 and Rowe's a year later in 1988.

It did so in spades. Within the next eight years, the world record for spotted bass would topple at Lake Perris a succession of times. All but one of the line class world records for spotted bass were also broken.

Gil Rowe, then of San Bernardino and now retired and living in Hesperia, held both the world record and four of the seven line class records at one point in time. As of today, he still has two of the line class records with spots from Lake Perris.

Rowe's then world record bass of nine-pounds, four-ounces (9-4) caught in 1988 was actually a tie with an identical bass caught by Steve West of Riverside the year before. Rowe came within .02 hundreds of a pound of tying the record again March, 1989.

(For the record freaks. The line class records from Perris were as follows. Two-pound test class: 6-5 by Gil Rowe in 1985. Four-pound test class: 7-5 by Gil Rowe in 1986. Six-pound test class: 9-4 by Steve West in 1987. Eight-pound test class: 9-4 by Gil Rowe in 1988 [and Steve West with his 9-4 until the IGFA added the six-pound test class]. Twelve-pound test class: 9.23 pounds by Gil Rowe.)

And then it was over.

By the late 1980s, when the biggest spotted bass

were being caught, Florida-strain largemouth bass had been introduced to the lake and were starting to take over. The fish probably came from live wells of bass anglers who had been fishing the San Diego City Lakes and thought the Florida's would be a great addition to the Perris fishery and get bigger than the spotted bass. This illegal Florida largemouth plant(s) and the addition Florida-strain bluegills put in the by DFG about the same time to add diversity to the panfish fishery were the death knell to the spotted bass fishery.

The DFG's Larry Bottroff, who was then in charge of monitoring the fishery at Perris, said in 1989 that he thought the largemouths would potentially eliminate the spots within in 10 years.

The DFG believed the largemouth would simply outcompete the spots for food and cover, but the spotted bass had been introduced into dozens of other waters in the state through the mid-1980s and early 1990s, and they were starting to thrive – in spite of largemouth bass, Florida strain or otherwise.

Under Bottroff, the DFG did some diving studies and annual sampling of the lake, and the spotted by population was in steady decline. By 1991, the spotted bass represented just nine percent of the bass in the lake.

Most of those fish were mature adults.

Rowe, who keeps detailed fishing logs, said his catches of three-pound or smaller spotted bass dropped from over 60 percent to less than 30 percent of his catch in just two years in the late 1980s.

The DFG estimated the first illegal plants of Florida-strain largemouth were probably made as early as 1982 (and probably from nearby Vail Lake when it was still open to the public). The first strong year-class of largemouths naturally spawned in the lake was noted in 1986, when over half of the young-of-the-year bass surveyed were largemouth.

In contrast, the April, 1990 survey turned up no young-of-the-year spotted bass, according to DFG unit fishery biologist Linda Pardy. The survey the previous April only had one young spot.

"This doesn't mean there were none at all," said Pardy at the time. "It's very likely they had already moved deeper in the lake than we can electro-fish. But overall numbers of spotted bass have certainly declined."

She was being optimistic.

Pardy said that most of the spotted bass in Perris were larger fish, very likely the fish from the last strong year class of spotted bass hatched in 1986 – ironically, the same year the largemouths were first noted in good numbers.

The survey data and catch-rate information was showing that the spotted bass were rapidly being replaced at Lake Perris with largemouth bass. In the September, 1989 survey, DFG staff captured only 13 spotted bass, most large adults, against 146 largemouths.

However, Dennis Lee, a bass expert and head of the DFG's warmwater fishery program in the early 1990s from its Sacramento office, didn't believe the largemouths were the cause for the entire decline. He said that when another bass species is introduced, the usual result is that the two adjust to some equilibrium, neither bass' individual population is as high as if the water was just occupied by the single species. But on the positive side, there would be a net increase in overall bass numbers.

"Spotted bass are just too prolific from what we've seen to be wiped out," said Lee in 1991.

At that point in time, the spotted bass had been introduced into 22 different lakes in the state, with the best fisheries in the western foothills of the Sierra and the Shasta-Cascade country in the northern part of the state. In many of those lakes, they were becoming the dominant bass.

So what else drove the Perris decline?

"Initially, everyone was pointing fingers at the tournament bass guys for bringing Florida largemouths to Perris in their live wells," said Gil Rowe. But he said it

was more likely the DFG plants of Florida bluegills in the lake that led to the ultimate demise of the spotted bass. Anglers had been complaining about the green sunfish never getting very big and not being very sporty. So the DFW planted Florida-strain bluegill that had proven very popular in the San Diego area lakes.

Rowe subscribed to the DFG's scientific journal, and he remembered reading a report about biologists doing dive studies along the dam at Lake Perris and documenting predation on the spotted bass spawning nests. The big Florida-strain bluegill were persistent predators on both the eggs and freshly-hatched fry, and the study found the spotted bass were not as diligent defenders of the nests as largemouth.

"After a while, the males just swam off the nest, leaving the bluegill to eat everything. That's what killed the spotted bass fishery out there," said Rowe.

The bottom line is that by the mid-1990s the spotted bass were gone from Lake Perris. Completely gone. The spotted bass story in California doesn't end at Lake Perris. While Lee said in 1991 that he didn't expect any of the northern and central California lakes would produce spots equal to Lake Perris' quality, but his predictions turned out to be way off base, especially at New Bullard's Bar Reservoir in northern California near Grass Valley. While several California lakes with spotted bass broke the world record set at Lake Perris, it was Bullard's Bar that set a new benchmark.

New Bullard's Bar was first planted with spotted bass in 1989 with a second, bigger plant in 2007. Still the total number of fish planted was just 185 spotted bass, but by the mid-2010s, it was cranking out big spots. In Feb., 2017, Nick Dulleck of Yuba City landed an 11-4 spotted bass to become the world record holder. His fish beat the former record of 10-6 caught two years before, also from Bullard's Bar.

There are two factors that are generally attributed to the growth of giant bass (regardless of species) in a lake or reservoir.

The first key factor is forage. The forage that led to the amazing growth rate of the New Bullard's Bar fish was kokanee salmon. New Bullards Bar Reservoir was created with a dam on the Yuba River and first filled in 1971. The DFW annually planted 50,000 kokanee fingerlings in the lake for years. That number was increased to 100,000 fingerlings starting in 2010. That number dropped to 81,000 in 2013, 99,500 in 2014 and 80,000 in 2015. The fingerlings and adult fish were spotted bass chow and the fish grew huge. At Lake Perris, there was an untapped supply of crawdads and green sunfish.

The second factor is how long the bass species has been in a reservoir. Usually the biggest fish are from the first, second, or third generations of fish spawned in

the new lake (depending on the size of the water). The belief is that these fish have virtually no competition for the feed and are able to grow to giant proportions that would be impossible as more and more fish are spawned and compete for food and space.

Both of these factors were in place at both Lake Perris and New Bullard's Bar when they were producing their biggest fish. At Perris, it was 10 to 13 years after the spots were first planted before record fish started being caught. The same is true for Bullard's Bar.

There hasn't been a big spotted bass caught at Bullard's Bar, or any other reservoir in California, since the 2017 world record. While all of the other reservoirs where spots have been planted in California remain ex-

cellent spotted bass fisheries, Lake Perris is completely devoid of spots. They have not shown up in a Department survey or in an angler's catch for over 20 years. "It's kind of ancient history," said Rowe. "It's sad in a way, but it's the way things change."

Still a regular at Perris, he admitted he missed them because of how hard they fought.

"Yea, they pull harder than a largemouth. I would compare them to a smallmouth. You could tell what you had immediately when you hooked one."

He paused for a long time, obviously remembering a different time and hard-fighting spotted bass from Lake Perris.

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