

Event marks trail opening

REPORTER-HERALD, STAFF

The Morrison Loop Trail, located in the new Russ Crowder Area of the Devil's Backbone Open Space, will be dedicated on Saturday.

Larimer County Commissioners, Larimer County Department of Natural Resources staff, landowners, and members of the public will gather at 8:30 a.m. to officially open and dedicate the trail.

A guided geology hike will follow the dedication. Geology, wildlife and other informational booths will be at the trailhead from 8:30 to 11:30 a.m.

The loop, about eight-tenths of a mile in length, is wheelchair-accessible, with interpretive signs to highlight the geology of the area. The Loveland Disabilities Commission has given time to review the trail for accessibility.

The trail gives broad sweeping views of the Backbone in some spots, while allowing visitors to touch and feel the sandstone in other spots.

Land for the trail, almost 12 acres, was donated by the Crowder family of Loveland in memory of their son, Russ.

The educational components of the trail will be dedicated to Ann Dewey, the first education coordinator for the County's Department of Natural Resources, who died in 2007.

A grant from Colorado State Parks State Trails Program, memorial donations from the Friends of Larimer County Parks and Open Lands, and the Crowder family funded the trail construction.

REC'D - HERALD

7-14-10

Northern Front Range, CO

A Warm-water Sampler

By Mark Lance

“Three thirty. Okay.”

“Wait. Three thirty in the morning?” I asked. Maybe I had not heard correctly. Deep down, I was *hoping* that I had not heard correctly. I have never risen willingly at that hour, even to go fishing.

“Yep, I’ll pick you up at 3:30 in the morning,” Tim replied, his deep confident radio voice confirming the plan. “We want to be the first boat on the lake.”

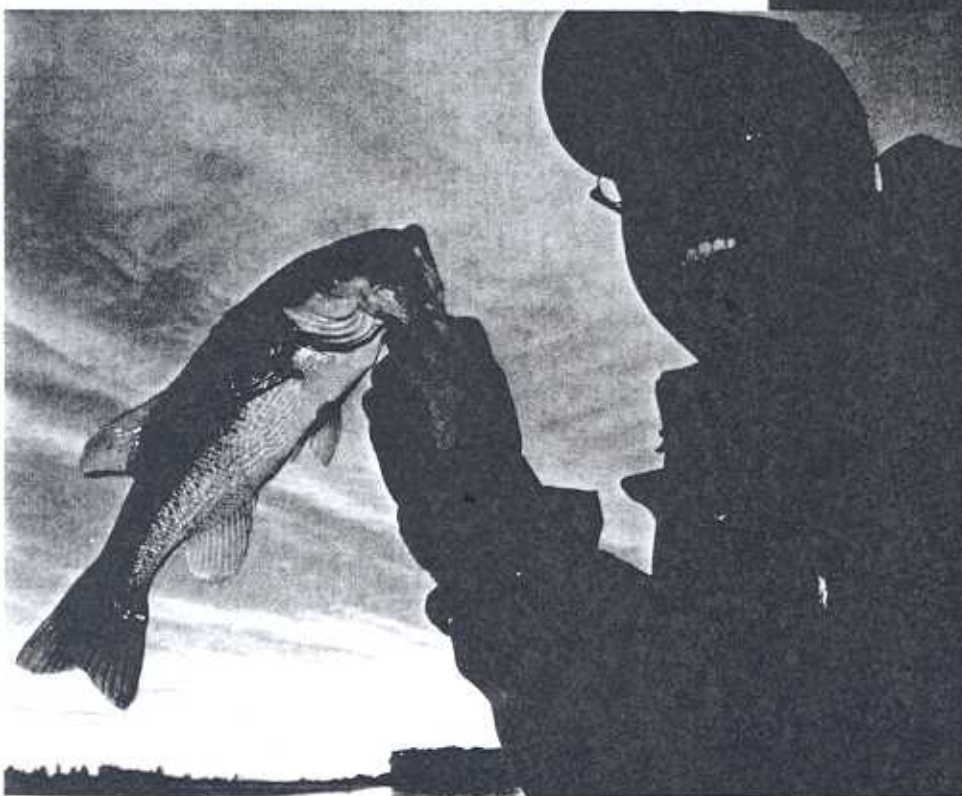
I had heard correctly.

“I’ll bring a thermos of coffee,” I added, attempting enthusiasm, not wanting to sound overly soft from my years of chasing late-morning Trico blizzards, midday PMD hatches, and evening drake spinner falls. If I wanted to chase bass and wipers at prime time, I would need to rise to the occasion. All the while, I questioned my capacity to even make coffee at such an absurdly early hour.

Matt Snider and Tim Emery from Fish Explorer Colorado were going to show me the fishing opportunities at three prairie reservoirs along Colorado’s northern Front Range. Their strategy had been devised to give us a fighting chance of hooking several warm-water species in a single day. This adventure was neither a contest nor a challenge among friends. No, this was simply a still-water fly-fishing sampler. Bass, wipers, walleye, crappie, and carp were all on the docket. I had grown up in Oklahoma and Texas, so fishing for bass and crappie was not new to me, but it was a long while since I had chugged a bass popper through



ALL PHOTOS BY MARK LANCE



A spectacular sunrise sets the stage for a great day of fly fishing for warm-water species along Colorado’s Front Range (above). Many of the plains lakes and reservoirs near Loveland and Fort Collins offer anglers an opportunity to catch largemouth bass, crappie, walleye, and wipers (left).



the weeds with a fly rod. The outing would surely be a welcome alternative to the “combat fishing” so often the norm on crowded Western tailwater trout fisheries and a sure cure for the high-water “run-off blues.”

The Lakes

The plains just east of the mountain front near Loveland and Fort Collins, Colorado, are peppered with natural lakes and ponds, flooded gravel pits, and irrigation project reservoirs. They form quite a bounty, really, as most of these waters are accessible and productive. Many of the lakes are managed by the Colorado Division of Wildlife as state wildlife areas to provide habitat for wildlife as well as to offer opportunities for hunters and anglers. Several of these fisheries are within state, county, and city parks. Popular spots in the Loveland and Fort Collins area include Carter and Boyd lakes, and Horsetooth, Lon Hagler, Lone Tree, Douglas, and Boedecker reservoirs, to name only a few. Many, many others are worth exploring.

By and large, these still-water fisheries have been largely overlooked by fly fishers who are more likely attracted to the famous trout waters cascading through the mountains just to the west. The local chambers of commerce do not exactly promote fly fishing for carp! Colorado Kodak moments are typified in photographs of dapper fly fishers standing knee deep in clear, cold streams rushing through verdant valleys surrounded by snow-capped peaks. This is the snapshot the tourist industry promotes. And it's just fine with a growing number of rabid fly fishers exploring the northern Front Range prairie for warm-water and “cool-water” sport fish.

Local Convenience

Several compelling factors draw fly fishers to northern Front Range lakes. First is the fact that all these still waters host, in varying percentages, healthy populations of a wide variety of species, including largemouth and smallmouth bass, crappie, perch, bluegill, and carp. Some impoundments contain walleye and wipers. The regulars,



Matt Snider enjoys a morning of field research from the deck of his Whaler (above). Crappie are present in most of the plains lakes along the Front Range (below).

Lone Tree State Wildlife Area

At 3:30 a.m. sharp, Tim and I were motoring north along the Interstate 25 corridor through downtown Denver, past the seemingly endless rows of automobile and motor home dealerships; past strip malls and factory store outlets, empty and quiet save for annoyingly bright fluorescent lighting; north past all-night gas stations and convenience stores; then, finally, into open space—farmland with only the occasional distant house and silhouette of windbreak trees to interrupt the table-flat horizon.

Matt already had his 17-foot Whaler tied to the

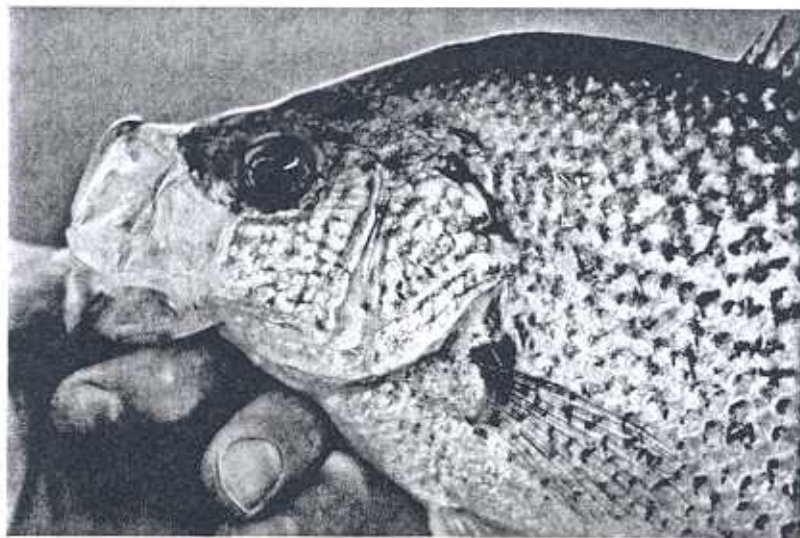
whether conventional-tackle anglers or fly fishers, have their favorite target fish and are dialed in to the dominant species swimming in any particular lake.

Another plus is that all of these species can be taken on flies. Shad are a primary food source for the larger fish, and most fly fishers know how to pull Clouser Minnows for large aggressive fish. There is something here for the dry-fly purists, too, even though the dry flies in question will be tad larger than your average Adams. When the water temperatures are just right, predatory fish will hunt down shad and unsuspecting amphibians or small mammals in shallow water. In many of the fisheries—mainly during the low-light conditions of early morning and late evening—wipers bust schooling shad at the surface and surly bass ambush top-water patterns.

Not “destinations” on the radar screen of globetrotting fly fishers, these waters offer the convenience of a local getaway. There is so much variety so close to Loveland and Fort Collins, that you can fish good water for a few hours after work. You can slip out on your lunch break or ditch biology lab if the bite is on. Anglers with young families might get out early on the weekends to fish and still be home in time for little league or to catch up on that list of chores that piled up during the week. These lakes and reservoirs are all in relatively close proximity to one another. If conditions are not panning out at Lone Tree, for example, a quick drive takes you to Lon Hagler, Boedecker or Horsetooth reservoir just up the road.

dock at Lone Tree State Wildlife Area west of Loveland when we arrived. After exchanging greetings, we loaded gear in the boat by the narrow rays of light from our headlamps and the faint glow of dawn in the east. Above our whispers, the only sound was croaking frogs along the shoreline.

Lone Tree Reservoir, covering 500 acres when full, is subject to drawdown when the call for downstream irrigation water comes in. There are no facilities beyond a boat ramp and an outhouse, but the reservoir is peacefully surrounded by cottonwoods, wetlands, and a few private homes. For anglers afoot, there is access at the boat ramp and from the main road near the canal inlet and outlet. The impoundment supports a large population of gizzard shad, which feed the appetites of largemouth bass, walleye,



and wipers. The reservoir also contains black crappie, bluegill, catfish, and yellow perch.

We crossed the lake to an area that Matt knew, from past experience, offered structure, channels, and weedbeds. The depth finder narrowed down the search for productive water and we got to work, fishing poppers over weedbeds and using 150-grain sinking lines to fish Clousers along the edge of channels and over subtle structure in 8 to 10 feet of water. Matt doesn't get too worked up over secret patterns and offered that his favorite streamer colors are olive-over-white, chartreuse/white, and at times, gray/white. He adds a few strips of supple Mylar to give the fly lifelike movement even when it is sinking. The heavy eyes lend the pattern a jiggling motion. Big Dahlberg-style patterns with dangling saddle hackle and Krystal Flash can also incite riot. Variations of the pattern routinely draw savage strikes from largemouth and smallmouth bass, walleye, crappie, and wipers.

The sun finally peeked above the horizon, lighting up distant clouds to saturated hues of pink, orange, and red. As if on cue, we began to get some action. A largemouth here, a walleye there. No clear patterns, just different predators in the same area doing the same thing—hunting. We landed a couple of nice crappie and a few more walleye and largemouth.

Then Matt got the big tug. "Wiper!" he yelled with no hesitation.

According to the Colorado Division of Wildlife, wipers were introduced to Colorado lakes in the 1980s. They are a sterile hybrid between white bass and striped bass. They have become a favorite target for fly fishers for good reason. They grow large—the state record is 34 inches long—and they are aggressive. They strike to kill and fight hard. And, when conditions are right, they can be caught near the surface on flies. Look for busting shad, boils, even gulls showing an interest. In this lake, like many others, shad constitute a key food source, so the size, location, and behavior of shad offer important clues to catching wipers. Sometimes, you have to go deep for them.

By midmorning, fishing had slowed. I was pleased to

have caught several species, including my first walleye on a fly. Clouds were already building to the west, so phase two of our strategy was to move quickly to Boedecker Reservoir while we had the midday sun's good light, which we would need to see carp working in the shallows.

Boedecker Reservoir

It seems that the warm-water movement among fly rodders has escalated to a point of redefining the conventional notion of sport fish. Take carp, for example. The lowly and much-maligned carp has certainly now reached cult status among fly anglers, even in "trout" Colorado. Ten or 15 years ago, few fly fishers sought this less-than-handsome bottom feeder.

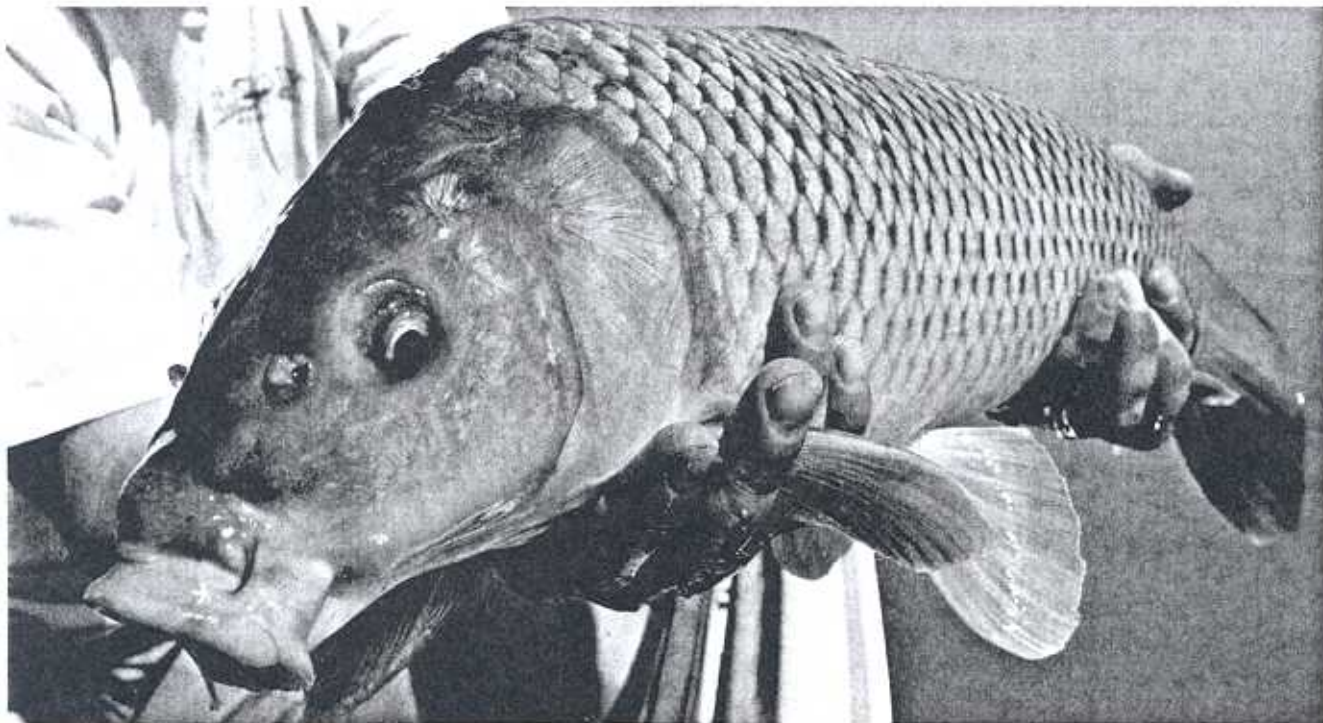
But even then, a handful of trout guides, perhaps driven mad by the trappings and stressful expectations of guiding on famous waters, took up interest in carp. They bolted hand-built poling platforms to aluminum john boats and snuck off to nearby backwaters where demanding clients would never find them—and where giant carp swam. You get the picture. Today, these anglers are probably offering high-dollar guide services to those very same clients. "Poor man's bone fishing," they say. "Landlocked redfish," they promote.

This change is understandable. Carp can be as persnickety as conditioned trout; they are selective in their own way, aware and clever when they want to be, spooky when it is in their best interest; they can tail like a

permit, and they pull like a bulldog.

I am generally enthusiastic to try something different, yet I had not made the leap, watching with interest from the sidelines as the attraction to carp brewed along the Front Range. Erroneously, some anglers are stuck on the singular vision of a critter that gobbles canned corn, dog food, cat food, and bread balls. In a recent blog post, a fellow, not a fly fisher mind you, had even recommended dough balls laced with strawberry Jello mix. Fly rodders who had challenged themselves to catch carp quickly learned that these fish eat normal stuff, for the most part, such as damselflies, crayfish, snails, and small baitfish.





Stalking and hooking a large carp on a fly is far more challenging than one might first imagine.

The reservoir at Boedeker State Wildlife Area, west of Loveland, covers about 300 surface acres when full. It has one weathered concrete boat ramp, but no dock. The lake is more or less lined with houses along its west and south shores. Some of the homes sport nice green lawns down to water's edge; some are more rural. Upon our arrival, a chocolate lab was making spectacular leaps into the lake off a private wood dock, chasing a Frisbee. We were not deterred. There is a lot of shoreline and Matt pretty much poled us around the entire lake from the teak platform he had added to the stern of his Whaler.

The reservoir was full and a bit off color from recent rains, but once our eyes grew accustomed to spotting the shadowy shapes and sizes of slowly cruising carp, we began to see more and more of them. Problem was, however, that they were just cruising, and they had absolutely no interest in our flies. After poling quietly across several hundred yards of seemingly good habitat, we finally spotted a stationary carp in about 2 feet of water. Well, not exactly stationary. It was displaying a subtle tailing action against a clump of young aspen shoots flooded by the high water. This carp was eating.

Now, suddenly, this whole carp thing had become quite interesting. I wanted to fool that carp! No vision of dough balls in my mind. I had complete faith in Andrew Spinato's Carp Slider. The pattern is an adaptation of features from a couple of familiar saltwater patterns, and crafted to hit the water softly; otherwise, carp would be in the next county in a heartbeat. Not only must this carp fly enter the water gently, but it must also sink slowly, at a rate that would cause no alarm. And, it has to, more or less, mimic a small crawfish without being intimidating in any way.

Bushes protruded from the water near the feeding carp, so the first cast had to be on the money or risk tangling. The rest is a bit of a blur, but I remember it more or less this way: the first cast was short. The second landed clean and began to sink less than 18 inches from the feeding carp. There was no hesitation, yet the carp displayed no sense of urgency. It moved deliberately toward the fly and about the time the fly should have reached the bottom, it disappeared. I didn't feel a thing, but took slack from the line and set the hook instinctively. I was fortunate to keep the creature out of the bushes

Andrew's Carp Slider

By Andrew Spinato



PHOTO BY EASTERN FLY FISHING

- Hook:** Standard streamer hook, sizes 6–10
- Thread:** Rusty brown waxed 140
- Tail:** Brown marabou
- Eyes:** Black bead chain
- Body:** Fine brown chenille
- Wing:** Brown Aunt Lydia's Craft and Rug Yarn
- Hackle:** Furnace hackle (add for spooky carp)

and comfortably away from my backing. The rod made a graceful deep arc well into the cork, telegraphing the size and bulk of the creature. The runs were not long, but after a worthy tussle, I had landed my first carp. All good fun—challenging and a rewarding introduction to hunting carp with a fly rod. We continued to look long and hard that afternoon for a similar situation, but eventually decided to move on to phase three of the game plan.

Horsetooth Reservoir

Horsetooth Reservoir inundates a narrow valley in the foothills just west of Fort Collins. The 6.5-mile-long reservoir is part of the Colorado/Big Thompson Water Project, delivering drinking water, irrigation water, and hydropower. The fishery is managed for both cold-water and cool-water species, with populations of rainbow and brown trout, lake trout, walleye, smallmouth bass, white bass, and yellow perch, each having cyclical populations based on the historical ebb and flow of the forage base.

Recreation at the reservoir is managed by Larimer County Resources. Entrance fees (\$7/day per vehicle and \$7/day per boat) are required as are motorized boat inspections for aquatic nuisance species. Annual Larimer County resident and nonresident permits for both vehicles and boats are also available. Visit www.larimer.org for more information and regulations.

On hot summer weekends, anglers will not be alone: jet ski and water ski enthusiasts are out in numbers during good weather. If you prefer peace and quiet, fish early and late in the day.

At Horsetooth, the last leg of our outing focused on smallmouth bass. Spring and early summer as well as fall are the best times for catching smallies here. The reservoir boasts many coves lined with rocky structure harboring smallmouth. Though most of the waterfront is public, a boat of some kind is advantageous for covering the west side, which is mostly steep and rocky.

Fishing reports had been favorable. The rocky shoreline habitat looked great. Early summer weather patterns had stabilized. The wind was not excessive. We covered miles of shoreline thoroughly, retrieving proven forage

FRONT RANGE WARM WATER NOTEBOOK

When: Best early spring–late fall.

Where: Northern Colorado Front Range. From I-25, head west on CO 60, US 34, or CO 68.

Headquarters: Berthoud, Loveland, Fort Collins, and other Front Range cities. *Information:* Fish Explorer, www.fishexplorer.com; Larimer County Natural Resources, (970) 498-7000, www.co.larimer.co.us/naturalresources; Colorado Division of Wildlife, <http://wildlife.state.co.us/fishing>.

Appropriate gear: 4- to 8-wt rods depending on species; floating, sinking-tip, and sinking lines; 6- to 15-lb. leaders depending on species.

Useful fly patterns: Forage fish, frog, mice, crayfish, and damselfly imitations, including variations of the Clouser Minnow, Clouser Swimming Nymph, Woolly Buggers, leeches, Bunny Fly, Whitlock's Near Nuff Crayfish, popping bugs, Andrew's Carp Slider.

Necessary accessories: Polarized sunglasses, sunscreen, hat, water, seasonal clothing, and rain gear for inevitable afternoon showers.

Nonresident license: \$9/1 day, \$21/5 days, \$56/annual, plus \$5 Colorado Wildlife Annual Habitat Stamp.

Fly shops/outfitters: *Boulder:* Front Range Anglers, (866) 994-1375, www.frontrangetanglers.com; Rocky Mountain Anglers, (303) 447-2400, www.rockymtangler.com. *Fort Collins:* Angler's Roost Fly Fishing Company, (877) 377-3785, www.anglers-roost.com; St Peter's Fly Shop, (970) 498-8968, www.stpetes.com. *Longmont:* Laughing Grizzly Fly Shop, (303) 772-9110, www.laughinggrizzlyflyshop.net.

Books/maps: *Flyfishing with Barry Reynolds: From Bass to Walleye* by Barry Reynolds; *Currier's Quick and Easy Guide to Warmwater Fly Fishing* by Jeff Currier; *Colorado Atlas & Gazetteer* by DeLorme Mapping.

fish and crayfish imitations over rocky structure and along ledges. We searched the rocks and weedbeds relentlessly with poppers. We were on the verge of declaring that an outbreak of "tight lip" had come over these smallies, when finally, as the early evening shadows overtook the lake, a feisty smallmouth crushed Tim's popper as it twitched and paused near brush growing out of the rocky shore.

We managed to stave off the skunk at Horsetooth and laughed that we "should have been here yesterday." All in all, it had been a grand day, despite the insanely early start. The experience rekindled fond memories of warm-water fishing during my youth, but also the day served as an introduction to overlooked fisheries close to home. ➔

Mark Lance is the Rocky Mountains field editor for Southwest Fly Fishing magazine.

