

Lake Ogallala Trout

Something Special

By Daryl Bauer, Fish and Wildlife Program Manager

As far as trout fishing goes, it doesn't get much better than Lake Ogallala in Nebraska. A by-product of Lake McConaughy's Kingsley Dam, it provides the habitat needed by trout – water that is both cold and well-oxygenated.

The North Platte River begins high in the Rocky Mountains of north-central Colorado and Wyoming. Trout anglers ply North Platte waters all the way through Wyoming, and find quality trout fishing along its length in Wyoming. However, when water and habitat conditions are right, which happens to be the case right now, some of the best trout fishing found anywhere along the North Platte is in Nebraska!

Nebraska's largest reservoir, Lake McConaughy, sits on the North Platte River in west-central Nebraska. Years ago, McConaughy itself was able to support rainbow trout year-round, but as time rolls on reservoirs age, and the accumulation of sediment and nutrients in Lake McConaughy eventually squeezed out the cold, well-oxygenated habitat needed by trout until none was left. Nebraska Game and Parks Commission fisheries biologists knew a long time ago that eventually "Big Mac" would not have the habitat to support trout, but all along they had a backup plan.

Big Mac was created by the building of Kingsley Dam on the North Platte River, and the huge earthen dam was largely created by the excavation of

fill material immediately downriver of the dam's location. The big hole in the ground created by the excavation soon filled with water and became Lake Ogallala. Although the habitat in McConaughy no longer supports trout during the summer, it does supply water cold enough to support trout in Lake Ogallala, and the water is also aerated as it passes through the dam, providing the base habitat needed by trout – water that is both cold and well-oxygenated. A trout fishery created by cold water released from a large

dam is referred to as a "tailwater" trout fishery. Lake Ogallala is typical of tailwater trout fisheries that can be found throughout the United States; it is, however, unique to Nebraska.

Tailwater trout fisheries typically produce outstanding trout fishing because they have excellent water quality and incredible productivity. That is the case at Lake Ogallala under the best of conditions, but there are occasions when the quality of the water leaving McConaughy is less than ideal. For example, in 1984 the installation

of the hydro-power plant where water enters Lake Ogallala altered its release and has resulted in less oxygen in the water during mid- and late-summer. In addition, the recent multi-year drought caused extremely low water levels in McConaughy, resulting in warmer water entering Lake Ogallala in late summer and early fall of those drought years. Fortunately, Lake McConaughy returned to full pool in 2010 and 2011, and its water releases have been favorable for trout production since then.

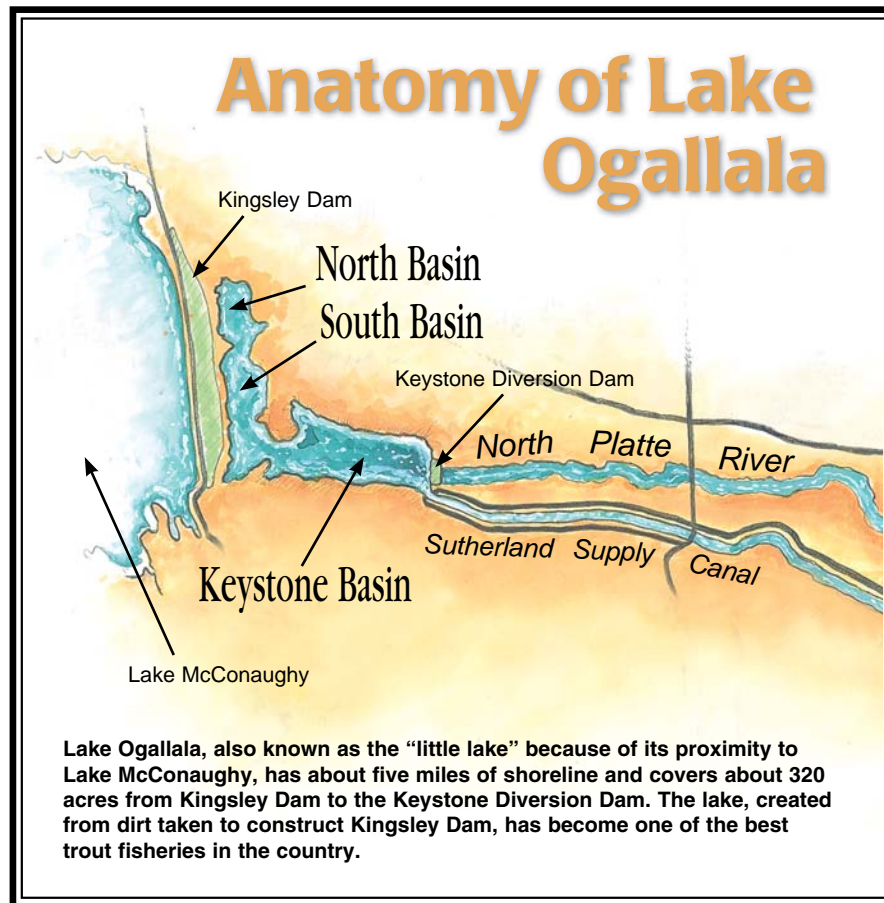


Lake Ogallala is also home to Lake Ogallala SRA. At this SRA, there is a modern campground with 82 pads, 62 with electrical hook-ups. In addition, there are 180 non-designated campsites, perfect for those looking for a camp/fish combo.



A view from Lake McConaughy's Kingsley Dam reveals one of Nebraska's most exciting fisheries - Lake Ogallala. With trophy rainbow trout in its waters, this lake has become a destination fishery for many anglers in the region.





There is one other challenge that fisheries managers have to deal with to produce the high-quality trout fishery Lake Ogallala is capable of: rough fish such as carp and suckers.

The bottom of Lake Ogallala, especially the relatively shallow south basin, is often covered with a carpet of submerged aquatic vegetation that hosts a mind-boggling amount of aquatic insects and other prey items that trout love to eat. Without competition from common carp and suckers, Lake Ogallala’s trout gorge on a smorgasbord of aquatic insects, crayfish and baitfish, and can grow at a phenomenal rate of up to one inch per month. Unfortunately, there is no way to prevent carp and suckers from entering Lake Ogallala as they come downstream from McConaughy, and over time the rough fish increase to the point where they outcompete trout for prey and destroy aquatic vegetation as they root up bottom sediments. As a result, periodic rotenone renovations



There is more than one way to catch a trout, as seen by these spinners and small crankbaits. In addition, trout can also be caught by fly and bait anglers using various rod and reel combinations.

have been a necessary fisheries management tool in order to maintain the high-quality and very popular Lake Ogallala trout fishery.

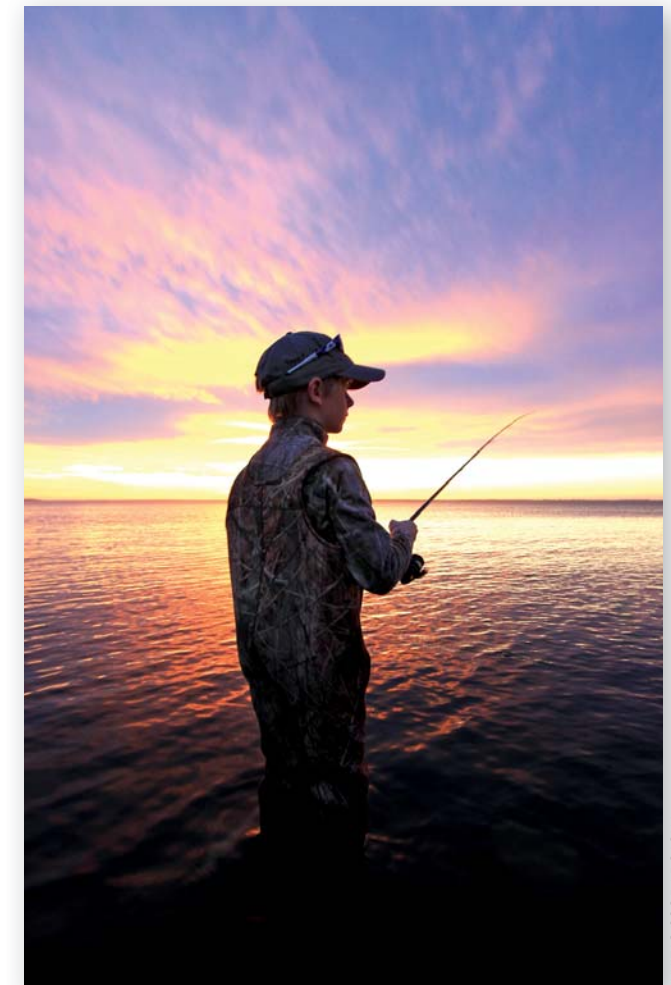
Rotenone is a fish-killing chemical that is applied to the water. When fisheries biologists apply rotenone they usually eliminate all fish in a given body of water and then re-stock with desirable species. Rotenone renovations have been accomplished at Lake Ogallala in 1969, 1997 and 2009, after which the lake has produced trout fishing as good as can be found anywhere in the North Platte drainage until the carp and sucker numbers peak again. Following the most recent rotenone renovation, restocking of 10-inch rainbow trout started in the winter of 2009-2010. By the following spring, anglers were already experiencing excellent trout fishing in Lake Ogallala and associated waters downstream. The largest of those trout are now much larger than 20 inches and are attracting anglers from all over Nebraska and surrounding states.

Because there is no natural trout reproduction in Lake Ogallala, all its trout are stocked. When water and habitat conditions are favorable, approximately 40,000-50,000 trout are stocked there each year. Those fish are the same as the 10-inch catchable trout stocked in the fall, winter and early spring in a number of urban and parks waters around Nebraska, but whereas those are put-and-take fisheries, Lake Ogallala is a put-GROW-and-take fishery capable of producing trophy trout. For that reason, fisheries managers have chosen to manage Lake Ogallala differently than other trout fisheries in the state: Special harvest regulations have applied to Lake Ogallala trout in the past, and the statewide daily bag limit of only one trout larger than 16 inches is now in place to enhance the production of big trout in Lake Ogallala.

The productivity of Lake Ogallala and abundance of trout prey means that the trout feed on a variety of prey items and can be caught using a variety of baits, lures and presentations,



Bank anglers can also take advantage of the excellent trout fishing at Lake Ogallala, including this walkway near Kingsley Dam.



Blake Steinke fishes for trout on an early spring morning at Lake Ogallala with spinning gear.

Catch & Release

Trout are coldwater fish, but they are not necessarily more fragile than any other fish when caught and released properly. Here are a few tips:

- **Circle hooks** - I have experimented with circle hooks while fishing with nightcrawlers and similar baits for trout. The hardest part is finding circle hooks small enough for trout. Owner circle hooks are the ones I have used: www.ownerhooks.com. Even with nightcrawlers, most trout end up hooked right in the corner of the mouth.
- **Landing nets** - Many companies make landing nets specifically for the catch and release of fish. Those nets are oversized and made of knotless mesh. For trout I prefer the rubber-mesh landing nets.
- **Minimal handling** - Land the fish with a net in the water. Remove the hooks, take a quick picture, and release the fish with a minimum of handling and stress on the fish. Handled that way, trout are no more delicate than any other fish.

not only in the lake itself, but also in the canal and a short stretch of the North Platte River downstream that the trout migrate into. There are no gear or bait restrictions on Lake Ogallala so all anglers, from beginners to expert fly fishers, enjoy fishing its waters. For those who want to toss out a rod and relax, Lake Ogallala rainbows can be tempted into eating a variety of natural and prepared baits. The old favorite, a nightcrawler, can be still-fished on the bottom or drifted with split shot, and that bait and rigging has resulted in lots of trout from Lake Ogallala's waters. Prepared baits now on bait shop shelves such as PowerBait, GULP! and a variety of

Holly Byler poses with a rainbow trout caught at Lake Ogallala with a beadhead nymph imitating a midge larvae.

others often work just as well or better than 'crawlers. At times trout cruise along the bottom, but fishing off of the bottom will usually get the attention of more trout. A couple of small marshmallows added to a hook will float baits off the bottom or an angler can use a floating jig-head. Floats and bobbers are another very effective method for presenting baits off the bottom to cruising trout, and fish that pull a bobber under are a lot less likely to be deeply hooked.

At times, especially during the cold-water periods of the year, there is an abundance of cold-stressed alewives that drift out of Lake McConaughy. When stressed alewives are present, Lake Ogallala rainbows, especially trophy-size fish, become "meat-eaters" and anglers toss a variety of shiny artificial baits that imitate alewives. Heavy spoons such as KastMasters and a variety of spinners work well, and so do crankbaits (e.g. Countdown Rapala). Some anglers will throw jigs with marabou, bucktail or plastic bodies to imitate the alewives, and swim baits that match the size and color of that baitfish will catch trout too. Since trout are naturally curious, shiny artificial baits can be used to cover water and catch some trout almost anytime on Lake Ogallala and associated waters, even if cold-stressed alewives are not present. Casting is an excellent way to cover water and catch some fish, but boat anglers also troll a variety of artificial baits to catch trout in Lake Ogallala.

A plethora of aquatic insects upon which trout stuff themselves can also be found in the lake. On summer evenings midges can be thick enough to choke a person, and all of those bugs spend most of their lives below the surface where they are a favorite trout food. Fly anglers find plenty of action on Lake Ogallala and downstream waters, especially when trout are feeding on the aquatic midge larvae. A variety of nymph patterns that imitate midge larvae usually work best, but other nymph and wet fly patterns will also catch fish. When alewives are present, big white streamer patterns can fool some big fish. Fly anglers

most commonly use 3-, 4- or 5-weight rods on Lake Ogallala and downstream waters; floating fly lines are usually the only lines that are needed.

Fish populations are dynamic, always changing. There is no doubt that eventually the Lake Ogallala fishery will swing back towards more rough fish and a variety of other cool and warm-water species. When that time comes it will be time to repeat

the renovation and trout re-stocking cycle. For now, anglers can ride the wave of quality rainbow trout fishing in Nebraska, and that truly is something special. ■

For additional information regarding the fishing and camping at Lake Ogallala SRA, visit OutdoorNebraska.org.

The author with a Lake Ogallala trophy trout.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF DARYL BAUER