The Miracle of Lake Elsinore

JUSTIN KERR
SoCal’s latest bass phenom

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There may have been a sprawling shallow lake along the trails then used by Native Americans or maybe the padres found nothing but a dusty lake bottom. That’s a logical assumption because some of the earliest maps of the region refer to the spot as Laguna Seca, or dry lake. Indeed, such wet and dry cycles have plagued the area for centuries and more recently as the early 1950s. Then, beginning in the late 1960s and following at roughly eight-to-10-year intervals, there have been high water events accompanied by sudden bass and crappie fishing booms. Then the seemingly inevitable drought would bring oxygen depletion and devastating fish die-offs.

Of those singular events, the media may have not been so quick to report 100-fish days by bass anglers, but they never missed an opportunity to showcase miles of shoreline bathed in dead fish carcasses. It’s that kind of imagery that sticks in the public mind and even serves as fodder for some friendly taunts among local residents. I refer to a cheer advanced by one valley Scout Troop:

“Elsinore, smell some more Dead fish on the shore, Pick ’em up, take ’em far. Drop ’em off in Wildomar.”

Yet, those days of 100 bass are probably gone forever. And the carp (which made up so much of those ghastly fish kills) are still present. So where’s the miracle?

The miracle is that Lake Elsinore is a unique, viable, stable and probably more diverse fishery than any other in the lower half of the Golden State. Certainly by local standards, where progress has often been marked by wooden-spoked wheels, recent efforts to enhance and maintain the lake are truly miraculous.

And wouldn’t you know it? It was all about the money. As valley residents finally figured out, when you want to clean up a lake, you can’t just call a pool service. In fact, you couldn’t just treat the lake, you needed to address the entire 700-square mile watershed that drains into the San Jacinto River and ultimately Lake Elsinore.

While the story is almost as vast as the watershed, in fine it began when the local water agency entered into an agreement with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation for a near $40 million loan in the mid-1980s. That funded the development and construction of the inlet channel and dike which now form the southern boundary of the lake.
Since 2000, the creation of the Lake Elsinore & San Jacinto Watersheds Authority has led to a host of cooperative ventures for lake improvement. Included were the installation of five large floating turbines to help mix oxygen throughout the water column, extensive summertime aeration through compressed air hoses lake-wide, funneling nearly 5 million gallons of reclaimed water into the lake each day to counter annual evaporation, instituting annual carp seining to improve the rough fish/sportfish ratio, as well as limit that fish’s tendency to stir sediments that feed algal blooms. And, finally, the stocking of non-reproducing, hybrid striped bass or “wipers” to keep the threadfin shad population in check, which has provided a bonus species as entertaining as any found in the West.
Natural Lake Phobias

For a lot of Californians, however, Lake Elsinore is a scary place. There is no dam. There are no points or islands. The hazard buoys actually mark hazards. Bass anglers, in particular, who think 10 feet deep is shallow water, and who spurn raising their outboards for anything but highway travel, get nervous here. Bass hiding in brush patches or along fence lines in less than five feet of water are just too extreme.

Fortunately, the north end, though actually the lower end of the lake (relative to the main tributary) has water suitable for sonar — sometimes 12 to 20 feet deep. But rather than islands or creek channels, Lake Elsinore’s varying bottom topography is made up of submerged marinas, launch ramps, jetties and a significant peninsula that was part of the State Park grounds back in the 1950s.

All of these structures tend to hold black bass from time to time, not to mention crappie, catfish and the highly mobile hybrids that will also roam in and over the existing structures. For this reason, it’s not unusual, depending on the lure or bait used, to catch two or three different species while barely moving locations or changing one’s approach. Bass fishermen scoff at such incidental catches, but people who just like to catch fish welcome the opportunities.

The only thing anglers should recognize about the wipers is they were not introduced purely as a recreational fish, but rather to enhance the overall fishery and water quality. Therefore, the limit is a strict two-fish, 18-inch minimum per day. While that limits the meat, it doesn’t limit the sport, since you can catch and release all you want, and most of the wipers tend to run from three to six pounds.

While the brush lines (now more widely inundated due to this winter’s rainfall) are an obvious black bass magnet from the spring through the late summer, they should be approached with caution. Fish that spinnerbait with 15-pound line or heavier — and don’t try to finesse your way out of the briar patch with your drop-shot rig. Even a two-pound bass can get the best of you in the dead stuff and if one of those six- to 10-pound wipers grabs your spinnerbait in a thicket, you may need to tap out.

From jumping bass to hungry crappie, Lake Elsinore is a complete fishery. The hybrid white bass/striped bass known as the wiper was introduced to improve water quality, but has also improved the quality of the fishing. This Lake Elsinore sunrise shows that Elsinore can also provide a quality experience on the water. The town of Lake Elsinore is booming and is home to happy angler and author George Kramer.

The Modern Era

Although private facilities have long dotted the shore of Lake Elsinore (the largest being Lake Elsinore Marina and RV Resort in the northwest corner), Cal Boating did provide a grant for a public launch ramp with parking on the east side of the lake called Seaport Landing. Together, these facilities tend to host most of the visitors, with very large boats more suited for the city’s ramp.

Camping is also available around the lake, including the Elsinore City Campground (formerly State Park on Riverside Drive), and there are motels near the intersection of the I-15 freeway and Diamond Drive (which leads to the ballpark of the San Diego Padres affiliate, the Storm). Where once there were only stop signs at the town’s main intersection on Highway 74 (known as Four Corners), in the valley you can find just about everything from mariachis to minestrone, Wal-Mart to Guess.
For the shorebound angler there are obvious limitations, but access has been provided in several locations around the lake from the free public beaches marked on the east side, as well as the entire dike (including the west side of the inlet channel). Other locations charge for fishing on private premises.

There is no denying carp are still the most readily available species from shore. Sort of like the way they view soccer, most Americans don’t realize the carp is the most popular sport fish worldwide. Doughbaits, small hooks and light line are part of the package that regularly delivers fish in the two- to five-pound class.

Also, catfish stocking in the last decade has really changed the angling dynamic. While reports of a higher ratio of bass to rough fish could be debated, there is no question that Lake Elsinore is loaded with the fattest channel catfish you’re likely to fillet — many ranging from three to six pounds. As you would expect, the catfish respond to all the usual cut baits and concoctions, but bass fishermen regularly tell tales of their wintertime encounters fishing spoons in the deeper water.

So that’s Lake Elsinore. And who would have known? It’s a miracle.

The big, noisy blip on the fish radar.

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