

# New Strawn District Fisheries News

Spring 2022

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## Blue Catfish Tagging Study at Coffey County Lake



Coffey County Lake, aka Wolf Creek Reservoir, is next in line for a blue catfish tagging study that will begin this spring. Similar studies have been conducted already on Milford Reservoir, El Dorado Reservoir, and Tuttle Creek Reservoir. Blue catfish populations are emerging in many of our larger impoundments and as their popularity increases so does our need to understand these individual populations in each lake. Each population is dynamic and generally not one management strategy can be used to manage blue catfish populations across the state.

The blue catfish population at Coffey County Lake is unique in that it is one of the oldest reservoir populations in the state as the first and only stockings occurred in the early 1980s. Consistent sampling did not begin until 1998 which coincides with when the lake became open to public fishing. Unlike other blue catfish populations in reservoirs around the state, this one has never been managed with a length limit, instead it has been managed only with creel limits. Initially the



population was managed with a combination creel in which both channel catfish and blue catfish counted towards a daily creel of 10. This may be because the population had 17 years to develop before any angling pressure occurred. The combination creel limit of 10 was changed in 2015, when the creel limit for blue catfish was reduced to 5.

I have been reluctant to implement a length limit on this population because it has done so well without one, but times have changed and angling equipment has evolved with advanced marine electronics such as live image sonar (Garmin Livescope, Lowrance Active Target, and Humminbird Mega Live Imaging) finding and targeting blue catfish, especially big blue catfish, has become easier. While it is generally thought that the smaller blue catfish are harvested more often than the larger ones, this is not a certainty but is one of the questions that we plan to answer with this tagging study. In addition, we are planning to obtain a good estimation of population size, gather age and growth information, and determine angler pressure and exploitation.

All anglers must check in at the gatehouse before entering the lake and check out when they leave. During checkout anglers fill out a survey card in which they identify which species they caught and released and which species they harvested. On the card will be blue catfish specific questions to help determine angler

pressure and angler preference. For example, did you target blue catfish? Did you harvest blue catfish, if so, what size was harvested? This will be valuable data that we weren't able to collect in previous studies.



The study starts this spring when me and several other biologists will be on a mission to tag a minimum of 2,000 blue catfish. During tagging we will collect length and weight data from the fish and take one of the pectoral spines to age the fish. After tagging the fish we will wait several weeks and go back to see how many tagged fish we can sample. From that data we will be able to determine a good population estimate. The angler exploitation data will take longer to obtain because tagged fish will continue to be captured throughout the year by anglers. If you are planning a trip to Coffey County Lake this year, be on the lookout for tagged blue catfish if that is your targeted species. The tag will be yellow and be located by the dorsal fin. Each tag will have a unique number and a telephone number for anglers to call and report the tag number. After reporting the tag number, length, weight, and general location of the fish the angler may choose to harvest the fish or release it. Anglers also have the option of reporting the tag at the gatehouse when they check out. Anglers that report a tagged blue catfish will receive some blue catfish swag and will be entered for a chance to win a Yeti cooler which will be donated by Evergy.



# Coffey County Lake Habitat Project



The largemouth bass population continues to struggle from the effects of the Largemouth Bass Virus which has decimated both black bass populations. Research suggests that the populations will rebound after a few years, but I'm looking for ways to speed up that recovery. The best way to do that is providing better shoreline spawning and nursery habitat that will help to promote more recruitment in the population. Cedar trees are perfect for creating fish habitat, they are bushy and generally plentiful anywhere you go. Coffey County Lake has a plethora of cedar trees along the shoreline all we had to do was pick a spot to focus on and figure out how we were going to cut 150-200 trees. Weston Fleming, Evergy biologist, had a great idea of reaching out to NRCS habitat specialist Derek Haines and he was able to come over and help us out. He made short work of cutting 200 cedar trees with his skidsteer and tree shear. He piled the trees near the bank where we could pull the boat right up and load them. We recruited some fantastic help when it came time to get the trees in the water. Weston reached out to the Twin Rivers Bass Club, and they were more than happy to help. Without their help, a project that only took about 5 hours to complete would have been more than double that if Weston and I were the only ones sinking the trees. So, a huge thank you goes out to them, and another huge thank you goes out to Derek Haines who was kind enough to show up on a Saturday and do a lot of the heavy lifting with his skidsteer moving trees around for us. We did not get an accurate count on how many trees we put in the lake, but a good estimate would be 150-160 trees. We had more trees cut and ready to go, but we ran out of concrete blocks. I picked

one area to focus on and all the trees went in that area. We made a continuous line of trees that stretched from 1.5 feet out to about 7 feet of water near an old creek channel and standing timber. The trees should provide a "highway" for fish to travel to and from spawning areas and smaller fish to move safely from shallow to deeper water. I'm excited to sample the area this spring and see how the fish are utilizing the new habitat.



## 2022 Crappie Outlook



Spring fishing season is quickly approaching, and most fair-weather crappie fishermen will be beating the banks trying to catch these great tasting fish. My district offers some pretty good crappie fishing opportunities, and a few lakes offer some opportunities to catch a trophy sized fish. When we are talking about trophy sized fish John Redmond Reservoir usually ranks high on the list. Even though the sampling data is still indicating a low population of adult fish, the opportunity to catch a trophy size fish remains like the 16" 3 pound "slab" pictured above that was sampled last November.

Angler's best chances for these trophy fish will be the spawning time frame which may begin early April and last through mid-May. Coffey County Lake is another lake that can offer trophy potential fish. I realize that crappies are not targeted a lot at Coffey County Lake because of the restrictive 12" minimum length limit and only 5/day creel, but anglers should be aware that the population density is trending upwards and lots of 10" + fish are currently available. Those fish should make 12" by the end of the year. Besides those soon to be 12" fish there is a fair density of crappie greater than 12" as we sampled a handful of 14" fish last fall and anglers reporting fish up to 15-16" is not out of the ordinary. If smaller lakes are more your style, lakes such as Lebo City Lake, Garnett City Lake North, Garnett Cedar Creek Lake, and Yates Center South Owl should be on your list to check out. Lebo City Lake and Garnett North Lake have great shoreline access and are currently producing some nice crappie populations. Lebo City Lake has good

numbers of fish over 10" and fish up to 14" have been sampled consistently over the past couple of years. Garnett North Lake is also producing good numbers of fish over 10", but numbers of fish over 12" are not real high. Cedar Creek and South Owl are bigger bodies of water with substantially less shoreline access than the smaller lakes, but anglers should still be able to have good success fishing during the spawn near the rocky shorelines. Both lakes have good populations of white crappie with lots of fish over 10" and fish up to 15" available at each lake as well.



14" white crappie out of Lebo City Lake

# Walk-in Fishing Opportunities



If you are bored fishing the same old lakes or ponds in your area, don't forget about the hundreds of Walk-in fishing opportunities available. KDWP's walk-in fishing program, recently renamed WIFA, provides some excellent angling opportunities for anglers looking to get away from the crowds or out of the city. WIFA is the sister program to KDWP'S WIHA program. KDWP pays landowners to allow public access to their pond or stream properties. There is 1900 acres of ponds and more than 70 miles of streams and rivers enrolled in WIFA. Properties vary widely in size with some ponds only being 1 acre and others being more than 50 acres. Some properties offer access to stream, or river reaches that can provide a unique opportunity for people who like to kayak or canoe. A creel limit of 2 channel catfish and an 18" minimum length limit and 2 fish creel on largemouth bass is in affect for the impounded properties. Kansas statewide fishing regulations and creel limits apply to all other species. So next time you are planning a fishing trip, pick up a Kansas Fishing Atlas and hit the road. If you want to do a little more research, an online map is available of all public access properties that allows you to view satellite imagery and be able to see what each property has to offer before hitting the road. [CLICK HERE](#) to go to the online map. If you have a property or know someone that may be interested in enrolling in the WIFA program, contact your local fish biologist if you are outside of Region 3 (Southeast KS) and if you are in Region 3, I would be happy to visit with you about the program.



# See You Out There!



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Questions or Comments?

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