

## **YUBA...RECENT HISTORY...AS OF MARCH, 2009**

(By TubeDude)

Near the end of a long drought, about 2003, Yuba was drained down to a few carp filled mud puddles, to allow work on the dam. Some of the other fish species (walleyes, pike, catfish) escaped upstream in the Sevier River and survived until water returned to the lake in 2004.

Once the lake had water, trout were planted to provide an "instant fishery" until other species could rebuild their populations. No walleye, pike or catfish were planted. But, through the combined efforts of Rocky Mountain Anglers and DWR, a bunch of perch were planted, both to provide future angling potential and to become a food source for the walleye and pike. They also installed some artificial structure at key points in the lake to assist spawning during low water.

When the lake was drained, it removed all the predators. Fathead minnows from the Sevier River found Yuba a great place to live, unmolested. Their population exploded and they filled the lake. You could see big clouds of them everywhere in the shallows.



*A swarm of fathead minnows, seeking refuge from trout, perch and pike by hiding in a pocket of rocks near the bridge area in the fall of 2005.*

*Anglers who wanted minnows for bait had only to scoop them up in their hands.*

*The big rainbows caught at that time were all barfing up large numbers of the minnows, and there were sometimes boils out in front of the rocks.*

The newly planted rainbows ate lots of fathead minnows and grew big and fat...fast. The 'bows were already 14" – 16" at the end of 2004. By late fall of 2005 we were having 20 to 30 fish days on trout from 4 to 6 pounds...with some pushing 8 pounds. Fantastic.



*A fat 24" Yuba rainbow, weighing 6 pounds. It was taken in late October, 2005, on a day that produced over 20 rainbows...all over about 3 pounds.*

*These trout grew large, fat and fast on a plentiful supply of fathead minnows...before the exploding perch population ate up all of the fathead minnows..*

In the fall of '05 we were also catching lots of small pike...in the 16" to 20" range. Evidently a few big spawners had survived in the river and had done their thing in the spring of 2004. These were two year old fish. A few perch were showing up too, especially for folks fishing for trout near the bridge. Schools of fathead minnows were everywhere and the perch and trout were glutting. The small pike were in the same area, feeding on fatheads and small perch. They were hitting the lures being fished for rainbows. There were no walleyes showing up for anglers yet.



*18" northern pike taken on a spinner being fished for trout in the fall of 2005. Many anglers chucking lures for trout along the rocks near the dam were surprised when they also caught these mini water wolves.*



*A large "holdover" walleye taken in the DWR survey nets in the early part of 2006.*

*Large spawners like this produce many eggs, but there seems to be poor recruitment due to heavy predation on the young by perch and on older walleyes by the northern pike.*

In the spring of 2006, a few walleyes showed up in the DWR netting survey. A few were big walleyes...holdover fish from the big drain. There were also a surprising number of perch. And, anglers fishing for trout were now catching smaller trout and more perch. In fact, trout fishermen complained that perch were becoming pesky. Anglers trolling at mid depth over deep water were having 7 inch perch hit their trout gear.

By late summer of 2006, the perch were everywhere around the lake, and there were fewer and smaller trout. The fathead minnows were also disappearing and were hard to find anywhere. The exploding perch population was apparently sucking up the last remaining fatheads and the trout were having a tough time making a living. In October and November, when there had been a great run of BIG trout the year before, about the largest 'bows caught might be 17" to 18"...and they were skinny and covered in anchor worms.



*Rainbows caught in 2006 were much smaller on average than the big fish caught the year before. That fall they were shorter, thinner and many had anchor worms on them. This fish was larger than average in 2006. It also had anchor worms, but most were on the other side of the fish and this side was more photogenic.*

On one exploratory trips in September 2006, prior to the RAC meeting at which it was lobbied to get perch fishing opened a year earlier than scheduled, over 200 perch were caught in only a couple of hours. And, to put a punctuation mark on it, some perch had been feasting on the latest planting of trout fingerlings (see pics). So, first the perch ate all of the trout's food (fathead minnows), then they ate the baby trout. DWR declined to open Yuba for perch until 2008.



*This is a 10" perch that spit up a 4" trout when caught in September, 2006.*

*It is suspected that a high percentage of all trout fry planted since 2005 have merely gone to feed the predators in Yuba.*

In the meantime, the carp population has exploded too. Bazillions of those ugly buggers and they are actively competing with perch and walleyes for the available forage (baby perch).



*Yuba is overrun with carp. Many are about this size and they compete aggressively with perch and walleyes for the baby perch upon which all the lower end predators must rely for food.*

*This carp hit a 3" plastic twister being fished for perch or walleye. They hit all kinds of lures and are not just herbivores in Yuba.*

The walleyes have had a tough time establishing the huge populations they did in the past. The northern pike population seems much larger, in proportion, than it has been in former times, and big northern pikes eat small walleyes a lot. So, the walleyes are getting it from both ends. The other fish eat their groceries and the top predators in the lake eat the walleyes.



*Walleye taken during the DWR netting survey on Yuba Lake in the spring of 2008.*

*These walleye were all of a similar size and all appeared to be healthy and well fed.*

*As long as the walleyes have plenty of food (baby perch) they will be more difficult for anglers to catch.*

It will be interesting to see what the results of the DWR netting surveys are each year. But, based upon angler reports and conversations with biologists and Yuba specialists, one can make a couple of rash predictions.

1. The perch population is big, and seems to be at least holding its own in producing enough offspring to feed the masses...without crashing...YET.
2. The northern pike population is probably bigger than the walleye population...and will get bigger this spring with the high water flooding the brush for them to have a good spawn.
3. The walleye population is not as large as anglers would hope. There are a lot in the lake, but as long as there is a good forage base, they will be more difficult to catch in numbers. The biggest hauls of walleyes in the past have been during the years just before a big crash...when the food supplies were almost gone and feeding was very competitive.

The apparent good news is that it looks like Yuba is going to be full for all of the upcoming spawning activity. Good for the perch, walleyes, pike and catfish. Unfortunately, more water and more shoreline cover is also good for the carp.

Those who have fished Yuba through several boom and bust cycles have come to know that you have to take advantage of the abundance when the lake is healthy, but to not be surprised when a drought year...or greedy water users...drop the water levels and start the bust cycle.

Yuba is a big mud bowl, with little natural structure. All of the fish rely on the water getting up into the weeds and brush that grow in during low water periods. A difference of a few feet in overall lake depth, at spawning time, can make a major difference in the health and ecology of the lake.

That is the short-term situation. The long-term one remains to be seen.