

Field & Stream

FEBRUARY 1958 35¢

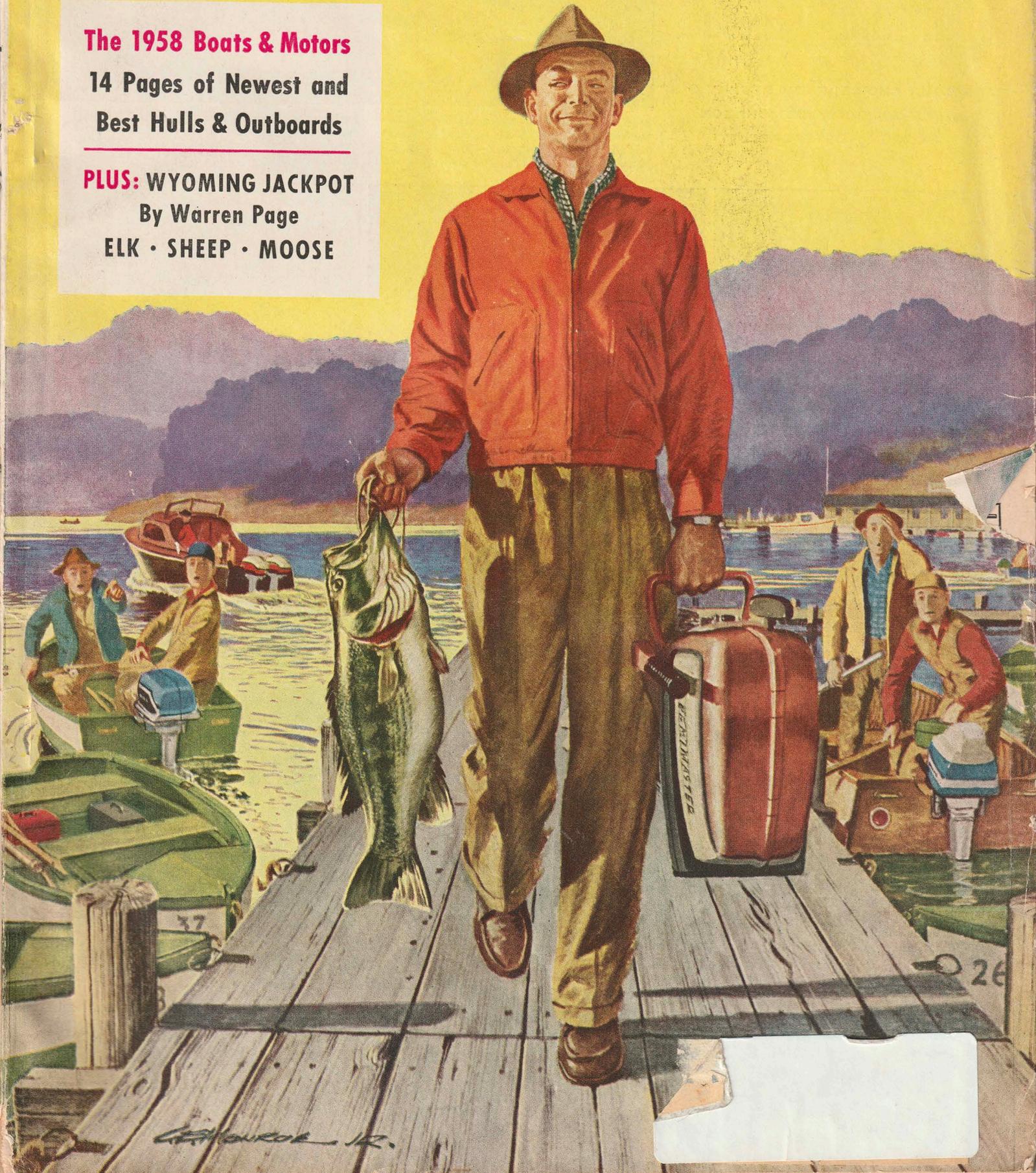
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Fisheries biologist Vern Hacker explains marking of trout by fin clipping to Ray Walker and Augie Kopplin

Miracle of Green Lake

By ERWIN A. BAUER

ON THE 4th of July, 1952, Augie Kopplin enjoyed the finest fishing trip of his whole life, and thereby started an amazing chain of events. Fishing had been slow at Green Lake, and Kopplin had gone out to escape a holiday crowd. When he returned to the dock only thirty minutes later, he had a lake trout larger than anyone in the Green Lake region had ever seen before.

There was such a stir over Augie's trout—taken from a Wisconsin lake which had never produced many lakers before—that he couldn't stop thinking about it. "Wouldn't it be grand," he asked fellow sportsmen, "if any fisherman could catch trout like that here in Green Lake? Why can't we do something so they can?"

The sportsmen were more than willing to try, and Kopplin went into action. What followed is a story that should inspire conservationists and outdoorsmen in every corner of the land. It's a remarkable story of perspiration and intrigue, of underwater investigation even in the dead of winter, of fantastic fishing and of scientists who never admitted defeat, of unusual cooperation between sportsmen and their governments. It was even a detective story with more than a little suspense that began, actually, about seventy years ago.

By coincidence, it was about July 4, 1886, that the first lake trout were released in Green Lake, the deepest body of water in Wisconsin. They were adult fish seined in Lake Superior and transported to Ripon in ice-packed railway tank cars. Then they were carried from Ripon to the nearby lake by horse and wagon. An eccentric millionaire with a palatial summer home on the lake, but with no interest in fishing, picked up the tab for the whole deal.

Time and again in years following, thousands of lakers or laker fry were released in Green Lake. Sometimes they came unheralded in milk cans from a hatchery in Bayfield, but more often a politician who just happened to have some odd axes to grind would have them delivered with appropriate ceremony. This continued sporadically for fifty-eight years, until 1944, when the Wisconsin Conservation Department finally stopped it completely.

"It was like flushing them down a drain," one official said, "because none of those trout were ever caught by hook and line." But when a few were captured in test nets, the dream of laker fishing in Green Lake stayed alive.

Now we come to the detective-story phase. It was early in 1952 that an Army officer, a Major Turnbull, arrived at the lake. No one knew anything about him, and he always fished alone. That caused no particular interest until it was discovered he was catching lakers

almost daily. Not only was he catching lots of lakers, but most of them were jumbos. Since he never appeared in public and talked with no one, the big question everyone was asking—"How?"—went unanswered for several weeks.

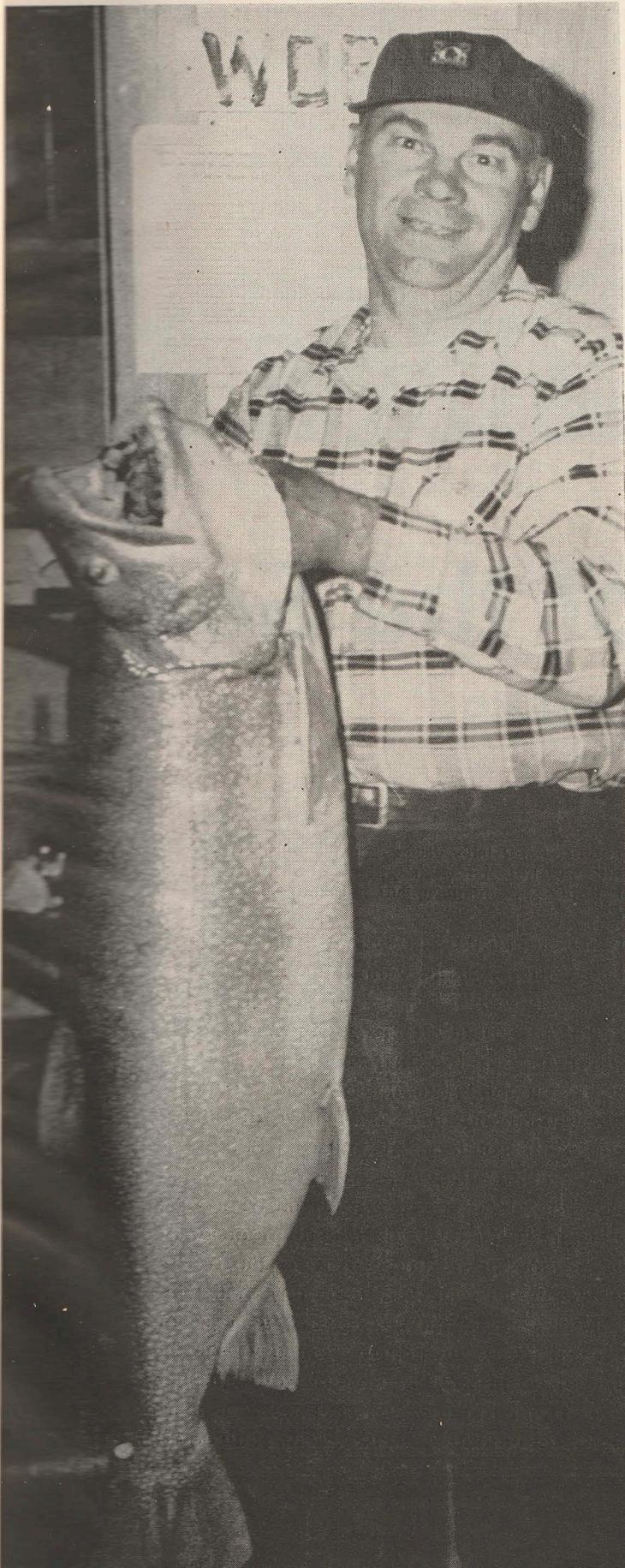
The major quickly became the center of cloak-and-dagger-type investigations. Fishermen on shore watched him through binoculars and spotting scopes. Fishermen on the water would try to edge close to him, but then the major always stopped fishing. On several occasions he even cut his line when anglers pulled right alongside. Soon local sportsmen were certain that he was using an illegal rig of some sort. A few even hinted that he had discovered a magic chemical attractor. Somebody said he was an electronics expert and he was using an electronic lure. Only one thing was certain: he trolled slowly by rowing because the law prohibits trolling with a motor in Wisconsin.

About the time sportsmen couldn't stand the suspense any longer, one of them made a strange catch. He reeled in a length of line to which was attached a tissue-thin, spoon-type lure of the kind used in New York's Finger



Duke Jones of Ripon, Wisconsin, nets a 30-pounder for Green Lake guide Bob Walker after 3-hour fight

There were big trout in Wisconsin's Green Lake. The trouble was that there were no young ones, and if the fishing was to last something had to be done



Lakes. It would "work" when trolled slowly, whereas heavier spoons would hang motionless. Also attached to the line were a keel, a heavy sinker and a series of flashers or attractors known variously as "cowbells" or "sleighbells." Evidently this was a rig that Turnbull had abandoned when someone came too near. In any case, the finder tried it and was in business immediately.

As soon as other fishermen could buy or make similar rigs, everyone on Green Lake was in business too. From the very beginning, they enjoyed the sort of lively sport that should happen to everybody. During a three-month period in 1953, for example, over 700 lakers were taken! They averaged 16 pounds and 33 inches. Some weighed up to 34 pounds; none were under 6½ pounds. Considering that this is not a particularly large lake, here was probably the fastest fishing for lakers ever known—anywhere.

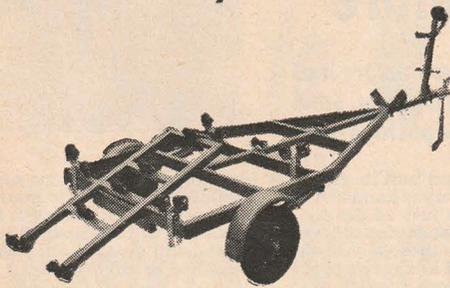
Almost overnight, laker fishing gave the dozing village of Green Lake a new lease on life and twice as many summer visitors. Sportsmen poured in from Chicago and Milwaukee after the newspapers there described the fishing. Half a million dollars' worth of new motels and cottages were built to accommodate the newcomers. Many local fishermen found it profitable to become full-time guides. Business in tackle was so brisk that at some docks you couldn't buy a trolling outfit because it was more profitable to rent them at (Continued on page 118)



Winter diving operations by the Midwest Amphibians discovered the serious mud-puppy predator problem

This 35¼-pounder, caught by Joseph Goetz of Milwaukee last June, is the largest fish to come from Green Lake

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A few seconds later he cut loose with his .30-30, slipped his kayak into the sea and paddled swiftly into the mist. After a while he fired again, and when I heard the second shot I knew he'd picked up the makings for still another seal poke.

All the rest of that day and through most of the night we struggled on the homeward trail. Pootuk's seal pokes had weighted the sleds until the dogs couldn't haul them. He and I had to push and tug with every ounce of our combined strength to make any headway. When we finally dragged ashore at Nome I was completely bushed. One of my mukluks was filled with sea water. My face was burned black from the fierce sun rays reflected off the glistening ice. My eyes smarted with snow blindness. I was dirty and whistled, and I smelled like one of Pootuk's sea pokes. I hoped nobody would know me.

But we hadn't made a city block when one of the town wags spotted our caravan and recognized us both. "Hiya, Pootuk," he bawled loudly. "Who's your flunky?"

I'll be grateful forever for what that little Eskimo said. "No plunky," defended Pootuk stoutly. "Him good poy. Him partner."

MIRACLE OF GREEN LAKE

(Continued from page 57)

a nominal dollar a day. All through 1953 the fishing was amazing.

It was at this point that Vernon Hacker, a dedicated young wildlifer, entered the picture. A graduate of the University of Washington in fisheries biology, Hacker had had considerable experience with the salmonoid fishes in Alaska and elsewhere. Back home in Wisconsin, he became intensely interested in Green Lake. He quickly concluded that, since none of the lakers being caught were small ones, there was little or no natural reproduction in the lake. All those lunkers were probably the results of past planting. Unless—well, unless something was done soon, this splendid sport would eventually evaporate.

Hacker was quickly placed in command of a Conservation Department project to learn these things: 1. Are there any small trout present? 2. Do lakers spawn in Green Lake? 3. If so, when and where? 4. If they spawn, how come no small trout are caught? 5. Is natural reproduction possible? The way Hacker handled his research is surely one of the top achievements in modern fisheries' work.

Late in November 1952, a concentration of adult lakers had been taken in the Sugarloaf Bar area about a hundred feet below the surface of Green Lake. Many were ripe and apparently ready to spawn. This was a lead for Hacker, especially when, a little later, more trout in the same location were found to be spawned out. Nets placed elsewhere around the lake revealed no potential spawners; so it was evident that this Sugarloaf Bar alone was the spawning site for the lake. Hacker wisely decided to concentrate right here.

Bottom dredging revealed a mixture of silt, blue clay and egg-sized gravel, none of which seemed especially suitable for spawning. Hacker knew that

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the best laker spawning grounds in Canada and Minnesota consisted of coarse rubble and boulders or very hard clay; so the Green Lake bottom became an important clew. It probably wasn't satisfactory, but he had to find out for sure. Perhaps it's well to mention here that lake trout spawn simply by broadcasting eggs at random over a selected area. They neither build nests nor pair off. Eggs need 175 days to hatch under normal conditions.

Nets set out under the ice in the winter of 1952-53 failed to catch a single laker under 6 pounds. In the following April, small fin-clipped lakera were released, and when fishermen began to catch a few of them it was pretty well settled that although fish had been spawning, their eggs were not hatching.

Hacker tried every conceivable method to find successful conditions for spawning. In 1954, for instance, he lowered boxes containing favorable spawning material like rocks and rubble to the bottom of Sugarloaf Bar. This one trial paid off tremendously, for one box collected a few fresh eggs. It also contained something else—mud puppies. And that practically solved the case. Examination of the mud-puppy stomachs revealed trout eggs that had been fertilized and living when eaten.

Traps were then set about the spawning ground, and several hundred mud puppies taken; of them, almost 70 percent had eaten lake-trout eggs. The champion glutton was a mud puppy that had gulped 85 eggs.

Continued trapping pretty well proved that mud puppies were eating all or nearly all the eggs. The lack of eggs, though, in mud-puppy stomachs in other parts of the lake further pinpointed Sugarloaf as the only spawning area.

One factor remained undiscovered, though—whether adequate currents and oxygen existed on the bottom to permit hatching, even if the eggs were protected from predation by good spawning beds. To find the answer, a fully screened box containing gravel and several hundred live fertilized lake-trout eggs was dropped to the bottom on the spawning ground. When lifted 39 days later, in February 1955, the box contained 205 live lake-trout fry and only a few dead eggs. This was proof positive that trout *could* spawn—that physical conditions in the lake were satisfactory except for a deficiency of rocks containing egg-hiding crevices.

Fortunately for fishermen, the paths of Vern Hacker and Augie Kopplin crossed and Vern explained the problem. "Then we'll just build a spawning ground," Kopplin, a construction boss, announced. This was the chance he'd been waiting for ever since that 4th of July fishing miracle, and now he had a logical idea. Soon he was moving men and mountains.

First, Kopplin enlisted the local Rotary Club on his side, and then he tackled the county board of supervisors for money. It's doubtful that anyone without the drive and energy of Augie Kopplin could have sold his unique idea, but the supervisors finally donated 210 tons of crushed granite. Working around the clock, Kopplin himself hauled it to the water's edge, and Conservation Department personnel lugged it out onto a 6,000-square-foot area of ice above Sugarloaf Bar. When the ice melted, a new spawning area settled

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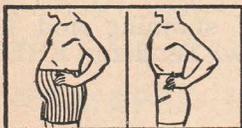
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into place. Lakers used it for the first time in November 1955.

In March 1956, a man who resembled something from outer space emerged from a hole in the ice crust on Green Lake. "There are thousands of eggs," he said breathlessly. "No, there are bushels of them!" He was Chuck Stanley of Kenosha, a skin-diving member of the Midwest Amphibians Club. He'd heard the Green Lake story and he'd volunteered the help of his entire group, plus all their equipment free, in the investigation. That help included expert fresh-water divers like Gene Swartz and Fred Rogerson of Waukegan.

Not only did the Amphibians find eggs, but on their fourth diving expedition in May 1956 they brought four newly hatched laker fry to the surface! These were the first ever seen in the history of the lake. Strange as it sounds, natural reproduction had been created artificially. The discovery was all the more remarkable because of the almost impossible diving conditions. The weather was extremely raw and cold. High winds prevented the divers from anchoring a boat, but still they probed and photographed along the bottom. It's hard to overestimate the importance of the information these divers provided.

The Amphibians were not the only cooperating group. Local guides helped handle test nets gratis during the winter. Guy Teeter and the Green Lake Rotary spent hours on the job. So did Henry Eaton of the Green Lake Property Owners' Association. The Ike Waltons gave some assistance too, and a special pat on the back must go to Ray Walker. The most successful guide on the lake, he provided invaluable data

for Vern Hacker by personally taking scale samples of every single fish (about 2,600) that came in to his dock, plus hundreds of stomach samples. This material, which otherwise would have cost thousands of dollars or perhaps have been unavailable, revealed the growth rates and diets of Green Lake trout. All this was necessary to sound future management. Walker also kept charts of trout whereabouts, depths and other catch data.

Then there still was Augie Kopplin. He hadn't finished yet. Kopplin felt that the community could supplement the natural laker population with hatchery trout—and do it inexpensively. This time he didn't have so much trouble wheeling the money from the county supervisors, and after several setbacks in finding a site, and fighting through endless red tape in Madison, the state capital, he just dug a big well on his own property. Then, with Conservation Department plans, he built six 30-foot raceways, each four feet deep. Trout eggs were obtained from state sources and by local gill netting. To date, 150,000 lakera from 6 to 11 inches have passed from the raceways to Green Lake. The goal is 100,000 a year. Each was fin-clipped so that Hacker can keep track of them. Fin-clipping this many fish is an arduous chore.

Right now the citizens around Green Lake are looking forward to more and bigger trout. Ask anyone and he'll say there are far bigger lakera in the water than have ever been caught. Duke Jones of Ripon hooked one that merely cruised around in circles for better than an hour. Duke wasn't able to gain more than ten or fifteen feet of line when a



Lepper

knot failed. The record fish for Green Lake is a 34½-pounder taken by Dennis Walker. Guide D. D. Carver once had a possible record escape right at the boat; so when his customer allowed a second big one to become unhooked only a few feet away, Carver went in after it. Came up with it too.

Ray Walker remembers days when it hasn't been any harder to hook a bragging-sized laker than it is to hook a farm-pond bluegill. The winner of a week-long tournament last summer was a Milwaukeean on his first fishing trip. A pair of schoolteachers from Joliet hooked a 30-pounder. With neither gaff nor net to land it, they towed it to shore.

One day, though, residents of Green Lake should take a short holiday from fishing. That day they should have a testimonial dinner and erect a monument, maybe out on Sugarloaf Point, and dedicate it to men named Hacker, Kopplin, Walker and Stanley. It's the least they could do.

DEATH TOLL

(Continued from page 55)

thought the house was burning down. I think sure the old lady is burning me out and ringing the dinner bell to celebrate."

He explained that she'd threatened that morning to do just that unless he mended his ways. "And I'll ring the bell while the house burns," she had threatened as he drove away to get wood.

Another time, while McCutchin and Hamilton were belling a fox, a hunter's hound took up the fox trail behind them. "We scuffed out the fox trail with our boots for a mile in an effort to throw the hound. To this day, I've never seen a dog like that one. He could smell right through. We finally had to whip him back."

McCutchin still bells a fox once in a while just for fun or to prove that it can be done. He takes one man with him to handle the bell. Upon locating a fresh fox track the pair follow it. The man with the bell immediately begins to toll.

Long before the fox jumps from its bed, it knows the bell is on its trail, and this excites its curiosity. There is no element of surprise, and the fox leaves its nest leisurely and not in a burst of fright. Its natural wariness is blunted by a desire to know just what sort of thing this is that is following it. It moves away at about the same pace as the pursuing bell-ringers. Often, its tracks show, it stops to look back. It may lope a short distance but it soon drops back to a walk. It feels no menace, whereas in other forms of hunting, a surprised and frightened red fox may run swiftly many miles straight away.

As soon as the tollers see that the fox has fallen back to a walk, the man with the bell stops where he is but keeps the bell tolling. The fox is then likely to stop, too. The other hunter cuts a wide circle and comes in on the fox from behind for the kill. Often reynard becomes so curious he backtracks to see what the bell looks like.

If the man with the gun is not successful in cutting off the fox, the pair start the whole tolling process again.

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