



Unlocking the Secrets of Piney Dam

by Darl Black photos by the author

Piney Dam in Clarion County
may be best described as an
undiscovered fishing hotspot.

While other lakes in Northwest Pennsylvania receive high praise for their outstanding fisheries, Piney Dam apparently goes unnoticed.

In May of 1924, Piney Dam gates were closed on the Clarion River near the town of Clarion. A pool of water wedged between steep ridges began forming behind the dam. An area newspaper reported an end to the lumber raft era when logs had been floated down the Clarion River to the Allegheny River and on to Pittsburgh. In the next paragraph, the newspaper announced that the resulting hydro-electrical facility would generate power for 12 surrounding counties.

The above information I learned from an Internet search on the background of Piney Dam. I had driven over this river impoundment on I-80 hundreds of times in the past 40 years, but knew little about the lake.

From the high interstate bridge, the rich emerald-colored waters appeared inviting. I knew Piney carried a legacy of mine acid drainage. A Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission (PFBC) fisheries study from several decades ago noted little aquatic life in the reservoir. There were many other excellent fishing opportunities in the area, so I thought why waste time on a dead sea.

An area angler informed me that he was catching yellow perch and crappies at Piney Dam during the late spring. Interesting, I thought to myself. Then, my bass fishing buddy, Rob Genter, let it slip that he had enjoyed an incredible day of largemouth bass fishing on Piney Dam. My interest began peaking.

“Come on Rob, you let the cat out of the bag. Tell me more,” I prodded him.

“I’m a little hesitant to talk about it,” began Genter. “Few people are fishing at Piney Dam. It’s been nice to keep it a secret for a couple of years. However, I guess word is leaking out. A local bass club has been holding tournaments there.”

“The water quality of the lake has improved dramatically. I’m catching largemouth bass, jumbo yellow perch, many rock bass and even an occasional walleye or musky,” continued Genter.

“However, my fishing success isn’t consistent,” he said. “Sometimes the bass bite like crazy. The next day, I don’t get a bite. That was really puzzling. Then, I learned that the purpose of the reservoir was to generate hydroelectric power. So, I’m wondering if the better days of fishing are occurring during the times when the water is being pulled through the reservoir. That would make sense. When water is being drawn for hydroelectric purposes, the current in the lake typically activates baitfish which triggers gamefish into feeding, said Genter.”

Regardless of success, Genter makes the point that Piney Dam is a beautiful place to fish. The reservoir is tucked in a deep valley with forested hillsides dotted with large boulders, mountain laurel and rhododendron. However, the lake’s bottom drops quickly into very deep water—70 feet in the old channel.

“There’s an occasional tapering point and one shallow cove, but mostly you are limited to fishing the shoreline,” continues Genter.

He went on to explain that even on a good day, aggressive bass seemed to be tightly grouped around particular laydowns.

“The entire shoreline looks great with overhanging cover and lots of submerged wood and rock. But, I have not found bass to be evenly spread out. Instead, I’ll stumble on one partially submerged tree that holds a bunch of fish, catching maybe a dozen largemouths in the 10- to 12-inch range and a couple larger bass.”

Genter cautions anyone who will listen not to attempt fishing Piney Dam during a summer weekend. The lake is a very popular spot for water skiers, wake boarders and pleasure boaters. Wakes reverberate between the opposing shorelines making angling impossible.

Before I headed to the reservoir for a fishing trip, it was back to the Internet. On the PFBC website (www.fishandboat.com), I found the most recent report on Piney Dam. The first thing I learned? The actual surface acreage of Piney Dam is just 690 acres over a several-mile pool. Piney Dam is only 250 yards wide at its widest point. I also learned that Piney Dam has been regularly stocked with walleye and musky fingerlings since 1995.

The 2007 Fisheries Survey revealed excellent tiger musky growth, numerous sub-legal walleyes, low densities of largemouth and smallmouth bass, strong populations of yellow perch, rock bass and pumpkinseeds, along with some crappie and channel catfish. They even captured several large brook trout.

Wow, this was sounding good! I should get out more!

So, I persuaded an angling buddy it was time to fish Piney Dam. As it turned out, the impoundment was everything Rob Genter told me it would be. If you’re looking for a new fishing challenge, stop by Piney Dam and begin unlocking the secrets of this overlooked reservoir. □



In many areas, a thick canopy extends over the water. Underwater, the steep banks continue. Fishing for bass or panfish is usually tight to the bank.



Piney Dam anglers enjoy excellent walleye fishing.



Numerous encampments are found along sections of Piney Dam. There are some cabins, but many are simply a dock and picnic shelter.