

# MISSION: POSSIBLE

**W**AITING JUST ONE more day would have turned the effort into a Mission Impossible experience. Still, rescuing nearly 300 fish from a lake losing water challenged the ingenuity and mettle of crews from the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources.

“The lake at Big Bone Lick State Park was already down three feet, and they were dropping it by 10 inches a day,” said Fisheries Biologist David Baker. “The banks were that kind of soupy mud that comes from years of sediment.

“We took a look at it and thought, this is going to be bad.”

Ironically, the state park in northern Kentucky draws its name from the Ice Age mammoths, stag-moose, bison and mastodons whose bones were recovered from the ancient swamps and salt licks of the area. Fortunately, that collection will not include the bones of the Kentucky Fish and Wildlife crew or their shocking boats – although the mud surrounding the park’s 9-acre lake did give its best effort.

Without a ramp on the Boone County lake, the crew had to pick a spot on the exposed banks to launch the two electro-fishing boats needed to collect fish. “As soon as the boat trailer hit the mud, it sank all the way to the boat’s transom. We had to plow mud with the back of the boat to get it into the water,” Baker said. “We nearly sunk the boat trying to launch it. If we had waited one more day, we probably couldn’t have pulled this off.”

The effort in early July came

## An extraordinary effort to rescue fish from a lake losing water

Story by Dave Baker  
Photos by Obie Williams

about with the discovery of a leak in the dam. Getting at the problem area would require dropping the lake level significantly, with the possibility of having to drain it entirely. Kentucky Fish and Wildlife worked closely with the Kentucky Department of Parks to collect fish then move them to another lake in need of bigger predators.

For the task, personnel from the Central Fisheries District, Transportation and Fishing in Neighborhoods sections worked

together to pull it off.

The muddy banks were not the only difficulty encountered. “The challenge for us was there wasn’t a developed access road to the lake. So we had to drive our trucks pulling the shocking boats up a hiking trail,” Baker said. “The trail goes up the back side of a 70-foot dam, and we could not get the fish hauling truck up there. So we had to shuttle fish in a side-by-side from the lake to the truck parked below.”

Recovering the boats proved just as challenging. Fisheries crews picked their launch site carefully – realizing they would likely have to winch the trucks and trailers away from the bank, they picked a spot with a good-sized tree to attach a winch cable. Even the oversized truck winches strained at the effort to recover the equipment.

Crews worked quickly to reduce stress on the fish as the heat index climbed past the 100-degree mark. Workers recovered nearly 300 fish, specifically targeting larger predators, such as bass and catfish. These fish ultimately reached their destination at Benjy Kinman Lake in Henry County.

“We usually get 2-5 inch bass from the hatchery for stocking, but most of the bass we got out of Big Bone Lick Lake were 11 to 14 inches,” Baker said. “So Kinman Lake got a boost of larger fish that should get on the shad pretty quick.”

A survey of Kinman Lake afterward revealed all but one fish survived despite the heat and stress of the move. Mission accomplished. ■







## Stuck in the muck.

The gooey mud along the banks of the rapidly dropping lake produced a major challenge for the intrepid fisheries team. Trailers sank past their axles and created a steep angle that nearly sunk boats at water's edge. Retrieving the boats and their buried trailers required a heavy-duty truck winch attached to a stout hickory tree.



## Moving fish.

Fisheries crews transferred lake water into a large tub placed in the back of a side-by-side utility vehicle. This acclimated fish gathered by the shocking boat for the transfer and helped keep them alive. The utility vehicle made several trips down the back side of the dam to a fish stocking truck waiting below.

