



LURING

*Families
Outdoors*

By Ron Wilson

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Organizers of a program in Bismarck designed to get kids outdoors are fishing for like-minded participation in other communities around the state.

In 2007, the North Dakota Game and Fish Department introduced Family Fishing Days at the OWLS Pond located adjacent to the Department's main office. From June through August, fishing equipment and guidance from Game and Fish staff and volunteers were made available on Wednesdays and Saturdays to anyone who wanted to fish.

"The idea is to make going fishing as simple as possible," said Jeff Long, Department education coordinator. "With the Family Fishing program, you show up at the OWLS Pond with no equipment, no money in your pocket and no experience, and you can be fishing in no time."

(Note: Anglers ages 16 and older need a North Dakota fishing license.)

Family Fishing Days kicked off in 2007 during the state's free fishing weekend in June, and will do the same in 2008. "Last year we had 250-300 people show up on that opening day ... the turnout was tremendous," Long said. "We provided hot dogs and refreshments, which is something we'll do again this year."

A number of communities around the state, Long said, offer similar OWLS Pond-like venues – small lakes or ponds with fish already in them. "While those waters are getting utilized, we'd like to get a group, organization or wildlife club to spearhead the program by getting out there, say, one or two days per month to hand out equipment and get anglers started," he said. "If you have the water and volunteers, we'll provide the fishing equipment and the training to get you up and running."

From what Game and Fish Department organizers have seen in Bismarck, there is a demand for such a program. In 2007, the small OWLS Pond – home to trout, bluegill, bass, catfish, crappie and perch – averaged about 62 anglers per day on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

Long said he understands the challenges for a parent living in an urban environment in getting their kids on the water. Not everyone has a boat, lake cabin, or even the fishing know-how. "Family Fishing Days is a way to keep people connected to the outdoors, and it does it in a way that doesn't require expertise, money and a lot of time," he said. "The program removes barriers that prevent some people from fishing."

An outing at the OWLS Pond is basic fishing. No electronic depth or fish finders, underwater cameras or the like. "There's nothing complicated about it because it doesn't need to be complicated," Long said. "Provide someone new to the activity with a rod, reel, sinker, bobber and bait and they're fishing."



Getting families outdoors and fishing is the goal of a North Dakota Game and Fish Department program that launched last year in Bismarck.

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According to Game and Fish staff and volunteers, Family Fishing Days in 2007 attracted an assortment of anglers, from kids who made their way to the pond on bikes, to day-care providers with their young charges, to single parents with little or no fishing knowledge but a desire to seek help and learn.

“We had people who didn’t have the first idea about how to get started fishing, or said it had been so long since they wet a line, it was like starting all over again,” Long said.

At the OWLS Pond parents need to be aware that while adult staff and volunteers are in the area to answer questions and check out fishing equipment, there is little or no direct supervision. If kids aren’t old enough to be on their own, they should have an adult with them. “Our volunteers are wonderful, very helpful, but they can’t watch everyone,” Long said.

The design of the program is to get more families outdoors experiencing nature. Fishing is simply the lure to get people outdoors where frogs lounge in the shallows, songbirds build nests and deer leave heart-shaped tracks in the soft ground. “The outdoors provide an important escape from the structure of our busy, daily lives,” Long said. “If the idea of maybe catching a fish tempts families to step outside and experience something a little different, then this program is a success.”

The Department is always in need of volunteers for Family Fishing Days and other programs. Individuals over age 18 with an interest in teaching kids to fish should contact Long at 701-328-6322. Also call Long for more information about starting a fishing program on your home water.

OWLS Pond is open to fishing year-round during daylight hours. There are no bait restrictions, but anglers must practice catch-and-release. On those days when the Family Fishing program is not in operation, anglers must provide their own fishing gear.

The area is designed for wheel chair accessibility, yet users are reminded that it’s fairly primitive, as there are no restroom facilities or running water.

“We have a great fishery and your odds of success will likely go up during the Family Fishing Days with staff or volunteers on hand to provide tips,” Long said. “If some of these kids are going to continue on with fishing as a life-long activity, we want them to be successful, to experience the outdoors in a way many of them never have before.”

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.



Chris Grondahl, Game and Fish Department outreach supervisor, talks to young anglers about a fish caught from the OWLS Pond.

Getting Started

To start a Family Fishing Days program on your home water, call Jeff Long, North Dakota Game and Fish Department education coordinator, at 701-328-6322.

The pilot program in Bismarck runs June through August. Department staff and volunteers are on hand to offer guidance and hand out fishing equipment free of charge on Wednesdays (9 a.m. – 7 p.m.) and Saturdays (9 a.m. – 5 p.m.).

While the Bismarck program provides the mold, other programs can be tailored to meet the needs of the volunteers and the community. “If you were to do this the first and third Saturday of the month from June through August, for example, you’re not talking about that many days or people to pull something like this off,” Long said.





RON WILSON

Skip Balzer, Bismarck, logged nearly 150 hours as a Family Fishing Days volunteer in 2007.

Hours of Help

Skip Balzer is a big reason the Game and Fish Department's Family Fishing Days program is successful.

"Without Skip and other volunteers, our fishing program wouldn't be what it is," said Jeff Long, Department education coordinator.

In 2007, the retired Bismarck man put in 146 hours at the OWLS Pond handing out fishing gear, baiting hooks, giving tips and trying to coax the fish into biting. Balzer has worked with all ages – 2 through 91 – and gets a kick out of them all. "It's great to see them have fun and catch fish," he said. "Some of them get so excited ... some of them don't want to touch the fish when they do catch one."

Some days, Balzer will get 100 anglers or more visiting the pond. Other days, maybe only 30 show up. When he has the time, he'll wet a line in hopes of hooking up with one of the OWLS Pond's catfish. "If I hook one, I'll let one of the kids reel it in," he said. "They just have a ball with some of the bigger catfish."

Fishing for cats is something Balzer knows something about. As an avid angler, he spends most of his fishing time on Missouri River backwaters drowning a worm for catfish. "If you clean them right, they are wonderful to eat," he said.

Balzer was given a nice filet knife, perfect for cleaning catfish, as a reward for putting in the most volunteer hours on the pond in 2007. "I haven't used it yet," he said, "because it's too nice."

Balzer said he volunteers his time because, well, he has the time to do so. But there's more to it than that. "I like the idea that some kids are getting out here and fishing rather than watching TV or playing on the computer," he said. "The OWLS Pond and the program are a plus for some of them because they've never been out fishing before."

Some will learn from the experience and come back, Balzer said, and some won't. "We do whatever it takes to get them into fish," he said. "But some days the fish just aren't biting."



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