

Human-assisted fish transfer all in slippery day's work

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Advocate staff

MIRROR — The floundering fish didn't know what hit them.

First they're scooped in a net, then they're plunked in a bucket. The startled Buffalo Lake pike end up in human hands with their fins clipped, their nether regions squeezed, and their lengths measured before being released into Spotted Lake.

The slippery task was all in a day's work for 30 volunteers who ended up manually transferring 125 pike Friday to upstream spawning grounds.

While the thrashing fish had no way of knowing it, the man-handling was for their own good, contends Roger Packham, a Red Deer Fish and Wildlife technician who marked, sexed, sized and tossed pike over a railing.

With a steel fish ladder unable to route the finned creatures to upstream waters that are two metres higher, he believes a physical transfer over a dam-

like structure on Parlbay Creek was the only way to ensure a new pike population.

Spawning pairs will be few, Mr. Packham admits. Thousands of other pike are finding their upstream journey to Spotted Lake blocked by a concrete wall erected in the late 1980s to facilitate seasonal flooding to farmer's fields.

But some spawners are better than none, he reasons. "This just ensures that some fish get through. If no fish did, they'd be a much smaller population."

By mid-morning, fish and game association members and area sportsmen donned hip-waders, grabbed fishing nets, and prepared for what could be the biggest catch of their lives.

"I couldn't get any more wet unless I fell right in," said a laughing Don Shepherd who got a face-full of spray from the flipping tails and fins caught in his seine net.

The large net hauled 200 suckers for each pike in the early afternoon when water was too chilly for many pike to surface.

Nicknamed "bugle mouths," suckers are too resilient to worry Fish and Wildlife Services. Mr. Packham notes a 1992 survey indicated the grey fish were more likely to make it up the ladder, so suckers were released from nets in favor of pike.

Volunteers had better luck scooping a few speckled pike from a mass of suckers with hand-held nets.

"Come here you miserable fish," snapped Les Lattery, while trying to grip a slippery target.

Volunteers from Red Deer, Lacombe, Alix, Bashaw and Mirror met at Parlbay Creek out of concern for declining fish counts.

Many recalled catching their limit of fish as youngsters. But the pike population has dwindled in the past five years to the point that "you can fish all day and not catch a thing," said John Richardson.

The welder said he came to help "because I'd like to be able

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Photo by BRAD BARNES/Freelance

Wildlife officer Roger Packham sets pike free above ladder

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