

# Free Sammy

## A GFP Facebook Exclusive

The wind blows quite often on the prairies of South Dakota. Whitecaps on the big lake known as Oahe are as common as cornfields around these parts.



One of 5,000 fingerlings released into Lake Oahe.

That being said, I didn't really comprehend the statement, "We are going to stock some fish today, if it isn't too windy. You wanna come along and shoot some photos?"

If you're like me, you are asking yourself, "Self, how can it be too windy to stock fish?"

But, always up for an adventure and a trip afield, I threw my camera over my shoulder and hopped in to Cleghorn Springs State Fish Hatchery Manager, Will Sayler's stocking pickup.

"Where we going, and what are we stocking Will?", I said as I slid over for Fisheries Program Manager Geno Adams to hop in as well and we sloshed away from my Foss Building office in Pierre.

"We are going to try and stock about 5,000 salmon fingerlings in Spring Creek on Oahe,"

Will smiled.

Will is always smiling. Besides being a happy dude, he is an unbelievable cook too.

Salmon, if you didn't know, spawn in the fall around here. Well they don't naturally spawn in Oahe at all. They have a "spawning run" per se', but there isn't any habitat in Oahe to allow them to naturally reproduce. The GFP maintains a spawning station in Whitlocks Bay, near Gettysburg. The station has a ladder, which extends out into the lake (water levels pending, of course). During the October spawning run, the Chinook salmon, which were initially stocked in Oahe in 1982, swim up the ladder, their eggs and milt are harvested and mixed together by fisheries staff, and the fertilized eggs are taken by old smiling Will, back to Cleghorn in Rapid City to hatch and grow.

Once a Chinook salmon is mature, they make a spawning run and they die. That is kind of a sad fact, and it makes keeping a fishable population in a lake a fairly labor intensive process. You don't have carryover from year to year of bigger fish. Salmon grow fairly fast, mature, reproduce (or at least make the effort) and then swim off to that big lake in the sky.

But back to the wind. When stocking small fish, big winds can be a problem as the power of waves can wash the little guys ashore and can even disorient them to a certain extent. Huh, who knew.

As we backed down the boat ramp at Lighthouse Point, (north of Pierre about 18 miles) the big lake looked FULL. As you may know, Lake Oahe has gone from record lows to very healthy, high water levels in the span of about 2 years. 15 foot cottonwood saplings are barely sticking out of the water. It is an amazing sight.



Bob Hanten with a net full of Chinooks.

We met up with Bob Hanten, a fisheries biologist who is the son of a fisheries biologist. Bob has spent so much time on Lake Oahe studying (and fishing) its fish, that I SWEAR he permanently smells like the big lake.

Will, Geno and Bob determined that it wasn't too windy for the fingerlings and went to work getting the truck ready to release fish.

Bob explained what we were doing out there in the wind. "We haven't stocked salmon into Spring Creek for probably twenty years. We are trying to see what sort of effect stocking fish closer to the dam, will have on survivability of these fish and what it will do for angler's catch rates on salmon.

A little background, during the summer, a majority of salmon fisherman fish the area near the Oahe Dam. The thought process behind putting these fish at Spring Creek was to see if these little (and presumably tasty and bite sized) salmon, will have a better chance to make adulthood. There are places to fish salmon outside

of the dam area, it is just that area is the most popular and probably has the best congregation of fish.

Clear as mud? Ok, good.



Smilin Will and Bob get the truck ready to roll.

"Stocking fish," said smiling Will, "isn't rocket science. Getting em to the lake is the toughest part."

The tube was attached to the truck,, and Hanten flipped the switch. Instantly 2,500 2-5 inch salmon were sprung free. Battling the waves, jumping for joy (actually filling their swim bladders, but it sure seemed like they were kicking their heels up like a spring colt), and getting acclimated to their new home.

The second tank was emptied and the four of us stood on the dock and watched the fingerlings slowly make their way to the depths.

The fish that were now swimming all around us had been eggs the previous October.



Release the HOUNDS!!

Pulling away from the dock I couldn't help but wonder how many of these fingerlings would make it to adulthood. Walleyes, pike and other salmon all love to eat the bite-sized, oily dudes, so the odds aren't all that great. On the other hand, anglers catch a pile of salmon over the course of a year on Oahe, and all of them have been raised in the hatchery, made the truck trip, been stocked as a little shaver and survived, so maybe the odds are better than you would think

They hatched in early December. Will explained that for the first couple weeks, those baby salmon aren't fed anything, they are absorbing the rest of their egg sack.

Around Christmas, the hatchery staff begins feeding the fry (small fish are called fry...they start out as fry and with any luck from an angler, end up as fried...talk about full circle...insert groan there...) and they grow like weeds. By this fall, these little guys and gals will be around a pound. By next summer, many of them will be 3-5 pounds. A pretty impressive growth spurt.



A salmon jumps for joy with new found freedom!