

# Pass Lake, WA

## Washington's First Fly-Fishing-Only Lake

By Mike Benbow

**W**hen the first fly fishing club was formed in Washington state, in 1939, among the first things it did was to ask that Pass Lake become the state's first lake designated for

fly fishing only. And ever since January 9, 1940, the day the Washington State Game Commission followed the request of Seattle's Washington Fly Fishing Club, Pass Lake has been a hot spot for fly fishers, attracting them with strong insect hatches and its idyllic setting in Deception Pass State Park.

"I positively enjoy Pass Lake," says Chuck Morrison, a fishing buddy of mine from Marysville. "It's a beautiful place if you get far enough from the road that runs along the side of the lake. It's a fun place to be, and you can see eagles, otters, deer, coyotes, osprey."

For myself and many of my friends, Pass Lake has been a living laboratory—a place to experiment with different fly patterns and to see success in the form of a nice rainbow or big brown trout.

Jack Gobel of Mukilteo started fishing the 95-acre lake in 1978, not long after he moved from California and joined the Evergreen Fly Fishing Club in Everett. "That lake at times was absolutely wonderful," he says. "I learned so much about fly fishing."

Gobel started carrying a small dip net to the lake, collecting and studying the various Chironomid varieties that form an important part of the forage base for trout. "I was always curious about [body] tapers, gill filaments, differ-

ent segmentation, and ribs," he says of studying the many Chironomids in the lake. "That's what I was looking at. I learned from that. I figured if I could out-snooker the fish in a lake where they could look at things carefully...."

He copied what he saw in Pass Lake, developing a series of Chironomid patterns that he coated with clear fingernail polish to make them more durable. The flies were frequently successful. He also developed techniques that helped him feel fish when they grabbed the hook. He started keeping the line straight and tight and fishing with his rod tip close to the lake's surface so that "I could feel the takes before the strike indicator went down," he says.

Gobel took his Pass Lake patterns and techniques, as well as his little aquarium net, on lengthy trips to big-fish lakes like Sheridan and Dragon Lakes in British Columbia, and Crane Prairie Reservoir and Hosmer Lake in Oregon. He was ahead of his time, developing flies and techniques that would soon become commonplace on still waters throughout Washington and beyond. They served him

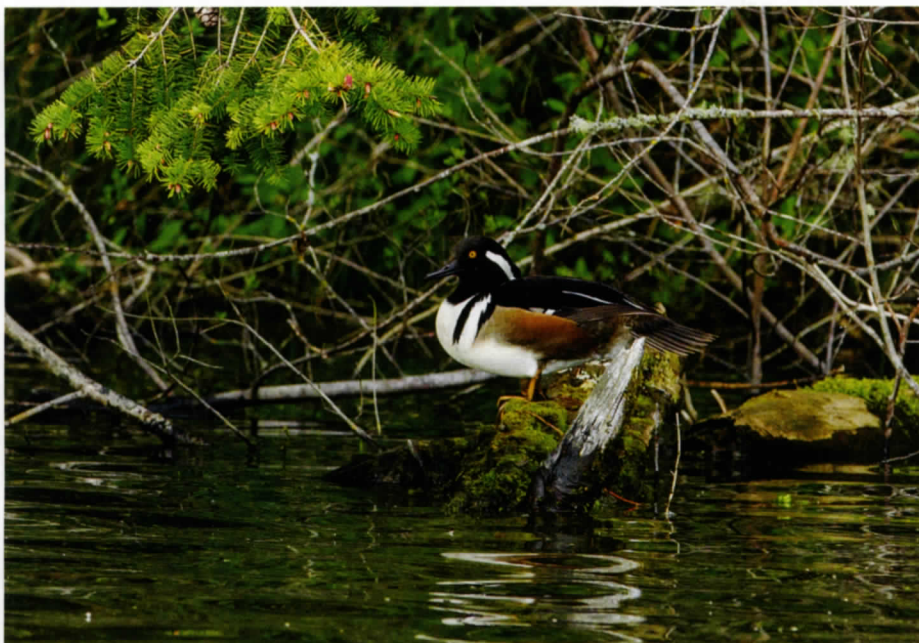
well throughout the Northwest. Now, at age 83, with failing eyesight, Gobel doesn't fish Pass Lake anymore, but it has left him with a passel of good memories.

The lake has remained something of the standard bearer for Washington fly-only waters, though not without occasional adjustments to regulations and management. In



ALL PHOTOS BY JON LUKE

*Ben Luke releases a Pass Lake rainbow caught on a Red-Ribbed Chironomid during April (above). During idyllic early morning calm, an angler patiently fishes Chironomid patterns suspended off the lake bottom. April is the prime time for Chironomid fishing at Pass Lake (left).*



This drake hooded merganser found a perfect lounging spot along Pass Lake's wooded bank. These small diving ducks nest in old tree cavities, such as those excavated by large woodpeckers.

2015, for example, says Larry Daniels, inland fish manager for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), the Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission agreed to allow people with the appropriate license to use two rods on Pass Lake. The commission also approved an update on the materials allowed on fly-fishing-only waters: anglers can use up to two flies, each with a barbless single-point hook, not to exceed 0.5 inch from point to shank, and a conventional fly line or conventional Tenkara-style fly line. Anglers may not use fixed-spool reels, bait, or weight attached to the leader or line. Only knotless nets (which are much easier on fish intended for release) may be used to land fish. And anglers possessing a special-use disability permit may fish in fly-fishing-only waters with spin-casting gear and a casting bubble, and may use an electric motor.

### The Fish and Their Food

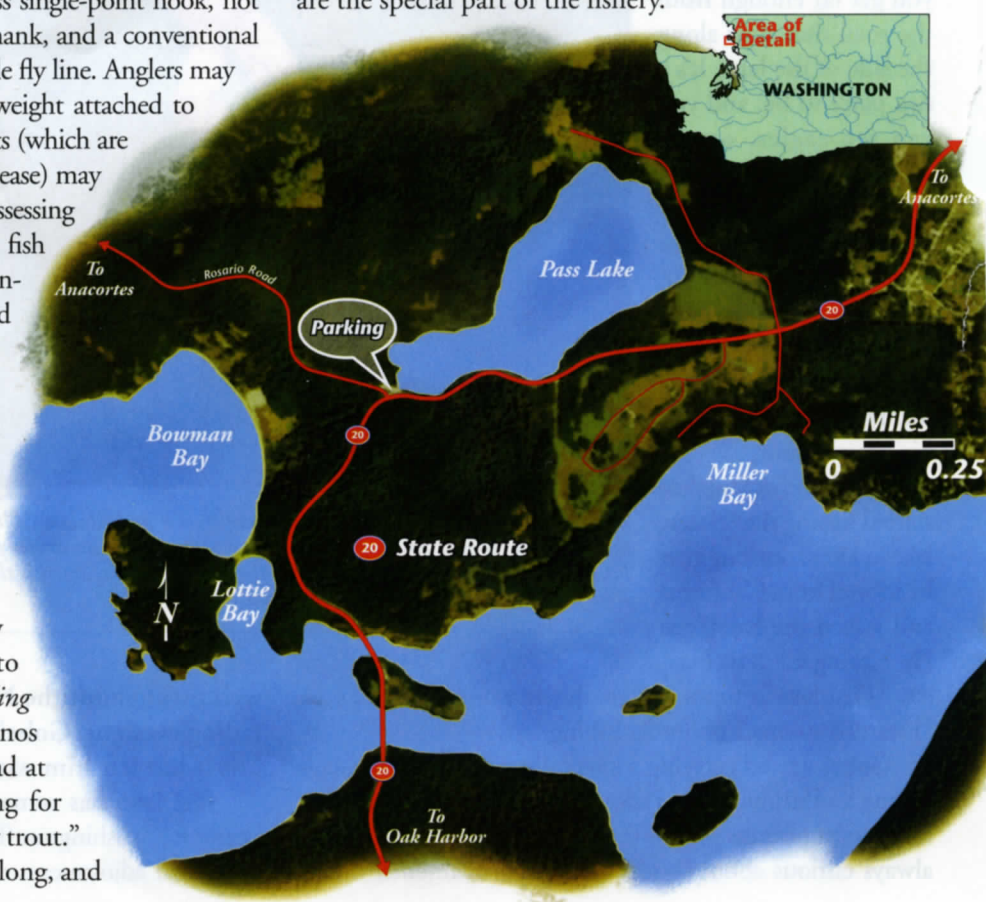
Over the years, WDFW has varied the fish-stocking strategy for Pass Lake. In the early years after the lake was first designated as a fly-fishing-only water, it was stocked with rainbow trout that quickly grew plump and came readily to flies. In his book *Northwest Angling* (1969), the late outdoor writer Enos Bradner recalled that Pass Lake had at first provided "superlative angling for prime two- to five-pound rainbow trout."

But, he said, that didn't last long, and

the fish dwindled in size, prompting the state to poison the lake in 1946 to start over on creating a productive fishery. The effort killed 1,500 trout and some 500,000 undersize perch. The game department restocked the lake with plantings of cutthroat trout that grew quickly to impressive size. In addition to cutthroat in those early years, the lake was later stocked again with rainbows and with Atlantic salmon. More recently, however, WDFW has stuck with the rainbow and brown trout that are in the lake now, a pairing that officials believe is the right combination.

"Pass should definitely be on your bucket list," says Justin Spinelli, the regional fisheries biologist for the area. "There are only a couple of fly-fishing lakes in Region 4 [northwest Washington], and Pass Lake is by far the best of them."

For Spinelli, the brown trout in Pass make the lake unique. "This is the place for people who want to catch a 20-inch brown trout in our area," he says. "The browns are the special part of the fishery."



Browns can grow up to 28 inches in the lake, fattened by abundant crayfish and fathead minnows. The minnows and crayfish also beef up the rainbows, which peak at about 18 inches. "That's a pretty good rainbow," Spinelli adds.

Even though it's open all year, I think of Pass Lake more in terms of two expanded seasons defined by the fish and their favorite foods.

Both trout species eat their share of Chironomids, especially in late winter and spring, which is when Bruce Freet enjoys fishing the lake. Freet, the president last year of the Fidalgo Fly Fishing Club in Anacortes, lives about 20 miles from Pass Lake and has fished it for the past 15 years. That's helped him learn the

location and progression of the lake's hatches. He starts in February, waiting for a spurt of warmer weather to kick things off. "There is a progression of Chironomid species," he says. "I know the sequence that comes off. There are small populations in different places."

Freet explains that February through April is prime time for Chironomid fishing, starting when the water temperature is about 45 to 48 degrees and continuing through when it warms to 56 degrees or so. After that, says Freet, "You'll see damselfly, mayflies, and leeches get more active."

The lake's *Callibaetis* mayfly hatch starts at the end of April or the first of May and lasts only about three or four weeks. The mayflies don't blanket the lake the way they do in some places. "You've got to be in the right place, on the right day of the year, and in the right area," says Freet. The mayfly hatch is a favorite of Danny Beatty, also a member of the Fidalgo club, who has assembled a history of Pass Lake on the club's website, [www.fidalgoflyfishers.com](http://www.fidalgoflyfishers.com) (click on "History"). Beatty has also interviewed old-time Pass Lake anglers for an oral history project by Western Washington University (WWU), <http://content.wwu.edu/cdm/search/collection/ffoh/page/2>. He says he used to "enjoy fishing

heavily in the 1950s. "Yes, it was full of cutthroat and we'd go out there and so many of the guys would be out casting dry flies to fish that were plopping all over the place," he says in the WWU fly-fishing history project. "But actually the way to really take fish then was to mooch the fly down deep and get to the bottom."

the evening mayfly hatch along the shoreline between the big weedbed and the ranger's house. This hatch would occur around Mother's Day and extend into June. Pass Lake always offered the chance to get a big trout, which is why the fly fishers love it so much."

While many of the spring and summer anglers at Pass Lake focus on fishing Chironomids with dry lines, long leaders, and strike indicators to catch both rainbows and brown trout, others use mostly sinking lines to fish the lake bottom, which is maybe 25 feet at the deepest point. That's been the case for years, as evidenced by an interview with the late Warren Erholm, who fished the lake

Morrison says there doesn't appear to be a perfect technique, but he frequently uses a fast-sinking line if he's in deeper water. "Everyone seems to have developed their own way to be successful," he says. "Some use Chironomids. Some use a sinking line with aggressive stripping."

The lake also seems to have what amounts to two different shifts for anglers, based on the target species. Early-morning anglers are more likely to fish Chironomids and catch more rainbows. A second shift shows up in the late afternoon and fishes the lake into the evening, focusing on the browns. The split shift may be partly due to the fact that the parking lot is frequently full

at Pass Lake by midmorning, then eases up in the afternoon. But it's more likely that anglers pursuing big brown trout take the second shift because browns are nocturnal feeders and come out of the depths to feed as the day darkens.

## Blue Dun Chromer

By Jerry Brown



PHOTO BY NORTHWEST FLY FISHING

- Hook:** Daiichi 1760, size 12
- Thread:** UTC, 70 denier
- Butt:** Wine-colored thread
- Body:** Blue Dun-colored thread
- Thorax:** Black thread
- Gills:** Antron yarn
- Rib:** Fine black wire
- Body coating:** 1 coat Loctite brushable Super Glue, finish coat of Sally Hansen clear fingernail polish

## Peacock Callibaetis Nymph

By Denny Rickards



PHOTO BY NORTHWEST FLY FISHING

- Hook:** TMC 3761, sizes 12-14
- Thread:** Black, size 8/0
- Tail:** Lemon wood duck flank or dyed mallard
- Body:** Peacock herl
- Hackle:** Burnt orange
- Rib:** Copper wire
- Wing case:** Lemon wood duck flank or dyed mallard



*Abundant aquatic insects and baitfish provide ample forage for browns to grow big in Pass lake (above). Fall is a great time to cast and retrieve streamers in tight to the banks (below).*

## Changes and Challenges

While Pass has been known through the years for plump, aggressive rainbows, things have been changing in the past few years. Freet's fly-fishing club considers Pass Lake its home water and regularly works on enhancement projects. In 2014, club members conducted fish checks, recording the number of fish caught and their sizes. They discovered something strange: older fish were getting longer, but not fatter.

Some 190 fish were counted, with 66 percent being rainbows. The rainbows averaged 14.8 inches and weighed 17.8 ounces. The browns had an average length of 15 inches and an average weight of 19 ounces. "The browns haven't suffered, but the rainbows have," Freet says. A similar survey at Lone Lake on south Whidbey Island, also a quality fishery, showed that the average rainbows there were fatter and longer.

"We found that as the [Pass Lake] fish got larger, they got skinnier, which is not what we're looking for," says Spinelli. "We want big and healthy fish, since there is no harvest pressure. We were running with a high density of fish that was stretching the food resources. Now we're going to cycle the densities from low to medium to high density to drive the fishery."

The plan is to reduce the number of fish planted in the lake from about 10,000 to fewer than 4,000 in 2016 and 2017, with about 2,600 rainbows and 1,300 browns planted each year. The plants will increase in subsequent years, and Spinelli will keep an eye on the fish through sampling via gillnetting. "We will track them for the next five years," he says.

"We've got a lot to learn that's potentially beneficial."

In addition to concerns about overstocking, I've heard at least one report of a sunfish caught in Pass Lake recently. If sunfish numbers grow, that could force state officials to poison the lake and restock it so the trout don't have to compete for food with sunfish, which are notoriously prolific when they become established.

Freet would like to convince the state to allow angling clubs to pay for the stocking of some Kamloops-strain rainbows in Pass, which he says would provide anglers with a different experience. "When you hook a brown trout, it's going to go down," he says. "The rainbows do the same thing. The Kamloops trout like to go airborne. People who don't go to British Columbia can have a different experience."



Because Pass Lake is relatively shallow, it is one of many lakes in Washington that have problems with algae in the summer and fall. The issue turned serious in 2015, when Skagit County health officials closed the lake for nearly three weeks due to high levels of a blue-green algae toxin. The toxic algae isn't particularly damaging to fish, but it can cause rashes in contact with humans or even liver damage if you swallow enough of it. Since people can't keep and eat fish caught in Pass Lake, the health problem is related more to swimming in the lake or drinking the water. Boaters should avoid areas with algae scum and should also keep an eye on their dogs. "You don't want to bring a dog and throw a stick in the lake," says Freet. "It [the algae toxin] is deadly to dogs."

Jack Hartt, manager of Deception Pass State Park, says the algae has been an issue for the past eight years or so and reached a peak last year. The lake is monitored regularly by health officials and will be closed if algae levels become dangerous, he adds. He says the real problem comes from ingesting the algae. "That can come from falling in or swimming in the lake or even just getting some on your hand and touching your lips," he says. "You need to pay attention and don't be licking your fingers."



## Pass Lake NOTEBOOK

**When:** Year-round. The best fishing begins when the lake starts to warm up a bit in February and continues until it gets a little too warm in summer. Fishing improves again in September and can be good into November.

**Where:** Alongside SR 20, 9 mi. south of Anacortes, in Deception Pass State Park.

**Headquarters:** Anacortes. Gas, food, and lodging are available on SR 20 en route to the lake.

**Appropriate gear:** 4- to 6-wt. rods; floating, intermediate, and sinking lines; 4X-5X tippets; leaders up to 20 ft. for Chironomids.

**Useful fly patterns:** Pass Lake Minnow, Muddler Minnow, Ribbed Chironomid (black, silver, red), Blue Dun Chromer, Peacock Callibaetis Nymph, Parachute Adams, black flying ant, Woolly Buggers (olive, dark green), brown Mohair Leech, black Bunny Leech, Pregnant Scud.

**Necessary accessories:** Pram, float tube, or pontoon boat; 2 anchors for

Chironomid fishing; depth finder; life jacket; polarized sunglasses, hat, sunscreen.

**Fly shops/guides:** *Bellingham:* The Confluence Fly Shop, (360) 312-7978, [www.theconfluenceflyshop.com](http://www.theconfluenceflyshop.com). *Lake Forest Park:* Avid Angler, (206) 362-4030, [www.avidangler.com](http://www.avidangler.com). *Mill Creek:* Pacific Fly Fishers, (425) 742-2402, [www.pacificflyfishers.com](http://www.pacificflyfishers.com).

**Books/maps:** *Flyfisher's Guide to Washington* by Greg Thomas; *Fly Patterns for Stillwaters* by Philip Rowley; *Morris & Chan on Fly Fishing Trout Lakes* by Skip Morris and Brian Chan; *Moon Washington Fishing* by Terry Rudnick. Stream Map USA, (215) 491-4223, [www.streammapusa.com](http://www.streammapusa.com); *Washington Atlas & Gazetteer* by DeLorme Mapping.

While State Route 20 runs along the east side of the lake, there's no development except for a ranger's cabin on the east side. That means there are some fall days, when only a few anglers are on the lake, that still evoke that time more than 75 years ago when this west-side favorite was chosen to be the state's first fishery set aside just for fly fishers. ➤

*Mike Benbow is a freelance writer and photographer who lives in Tulalip, Washington.*

### A Second Season

While Freet likes fishing Pass in the spring for the aggressive rainbows, I've shied away from that fishery. That's mostly because the lake has grown increasingly popular, especially on weekends. I'd much rather fish the lake in the fall, when the crowds dramatically diminish. I usually start in mid-September and fish through November, weather permitting. The hatches diminish significantly then, so your focus should be fishing baitfish patterns near the shorelines and along the reeds. The key is to find an area where the fish are feeding.

"You need to find the right location in the fall," says Morrison, who has fished Pass Lake for 30 years. "The fish can be right tight to the reeds or they can be 30 yards out. I don't know what drives them."

Sometimes, finding fish is simply a matter of careful observation. If you see a few minnows leaping frantically into the air, followed by a big surface swirl, you want to get your fly to that area as quickly as possible. "It's kind of a combination of hunting and fishing," Morrison says of the fall fishing in Pass Lake.

Fishing for browns is generally better early and late in the day, but a cloudy day in fall can also be just the ticket. Morrison landed his biggest Pass Lake brown, a 25-incher, at midday in shallow water inside a clump of reeds.