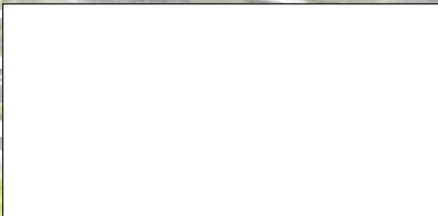


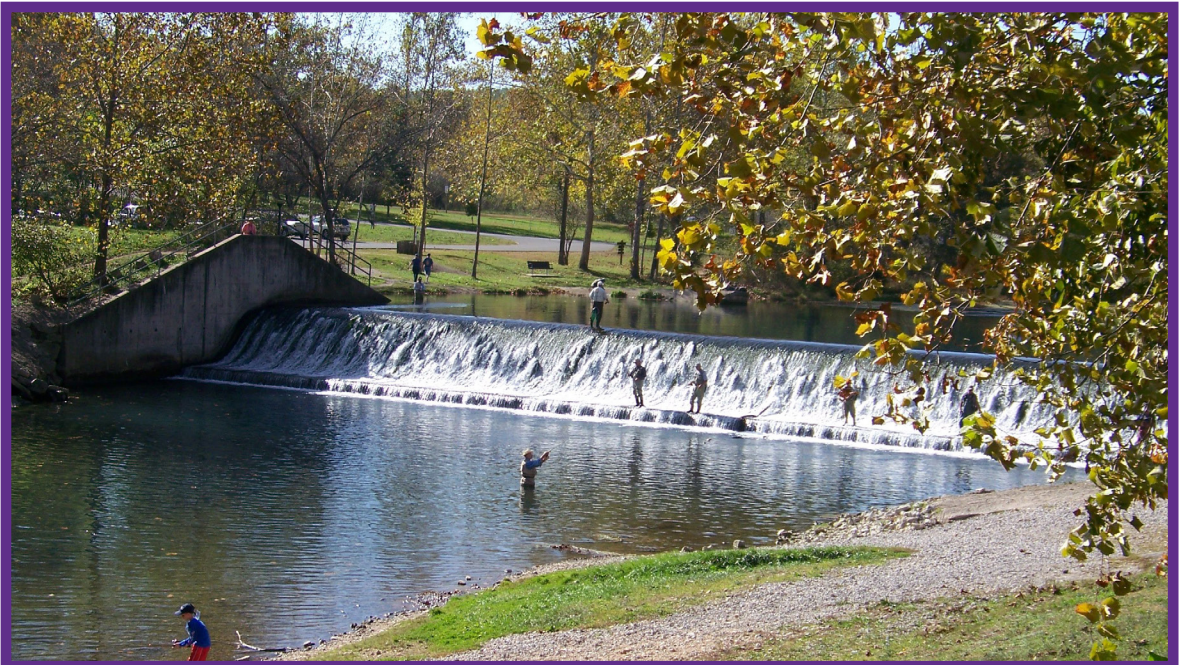


Trout

Talk

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Opening Day

Nearly 2,400 anglers fished at Bennett Spring on March 1

CHRIS RODEN • FOR TROUT TALK

Roger Reynolds of Orrick, Mo. came to the Opening Day of trout season at Bennett Spring State Park for two reasons.

"Chaos and the fun of it" has brought Reynolds back to the park on Opening Day fifteen times.

The chaos was probably limited to finding a parking place or a suitable patch of grass nearby in which to park and the few seconds after Jim Smith, the "whistleblower" sounded the siren at 6:30 a.m. on March 1.

That is when thousands of flies and lures broke the surface to entice the trout to do their part.

They complied and gave 2,376

daily tag purchases a strong chance of getting their daily possession limit of four trout.

Vince Wilson from Republic, Mo. caught his four in about 10 minutes.

"Fishing has been good, and fish size has been great," Wilson said.

He was impressed by how well everyone got along despite being elbow to elbow in places and by the quiet in the park when over 2,000 anglers and, in some cases, their families filled the park.

"Someone had mentioned that this morning, that it was eerily quiet. There wasn't a lot of chatter and the usual banter going on. It was nice," Wilson said.

Many had purchased their daily

tags the day before.

"We had folks yesterday lining up to buy their daily tags and actually sitting on lawn chairs around the Park Store," Zack Knerr, one of the park's assistant natural resource manager, said.

At 6:45 a.m., some 15 minutes into the new season, Ben Havens, hatchery manager said the tag count stood at over 1,800 tags sold.

"This is the biggest opener I've had since I've been at Bennett in my last five years here, so this is awesome," Havens said.

Opening Day falling on a Sunday with pleasant weather enthused some anglers who had fished in the past in weather that allowed ice to form on

their poles and moustaches.

Havens said the Park Store was busy through Saturday night, selling tags to eager anglers.

"This is like the Daytona 500 of trout fishing. It starts off with a bang here," Havens said.

Havens said he and his son had plans to fish Sunday afternoon.

"The best part of my job is getting a healthy product out the door stocked in the stream and getting to watch these guys come from far and wide to catch them. That's the best part of my job. That's why we do what we do is to provide that opportunity. Honestly, that's the most rewarding part of what I do," Havens said.





He was excited to see the number of anglers in the park and noted the parking lots were full and people were parking on the grass.

Tom Kruze from Windsor, Mo. said he had been coming to the park for Opening Day for over 30 years.

"I don't know what it is. The first time I came down here, I thought I wasn't going to like this, but it got under my skin and here I am 25 or 30 years later. Hooked me right in the jaw, I guess," Kruze said.

Bob Dean from Holden, Mo. brought his mother, Gladys, with him. She lost her husband last year and decided to celebrate her anniversary in the same locale as her honeymoon 68 years ago. They were spectators on Opening Day and just enjoying being a part of the excitement but with plans to fish later in the week.

"I've got a lot of friends I've met over the last 57 years down here that fish a lot. We kind of have a reunion down here," Dean said.

Gladys said the first time Bob visited the park he was a pre-schooler so excited to be in the park that he ran across the CCC bridge to the spot where a lone evening angler stood and fell in the water. The angler fished him out.

"I was a lunker that year," Dean said.

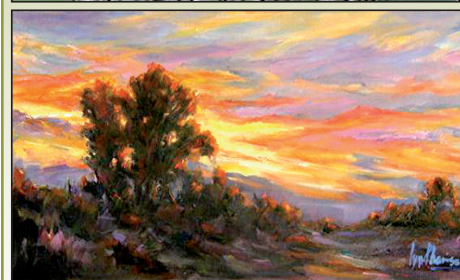
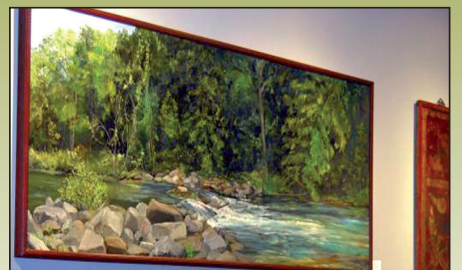
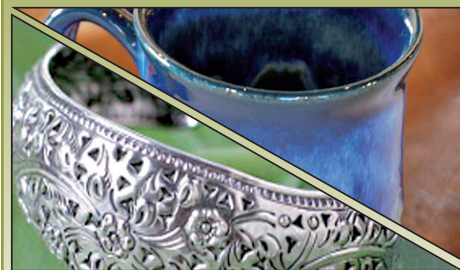
Doug Staple from Lake Sherwood, Mo. shared a bench with the Deans while he geared up.

"This is the prettiest park in Missouri. I fish every park in the state, and I fish all the rivers for trout. I fished all winter for trout," Staple said.

He planned to meet up with his kids at the park for a family reunion of sorts. However, he said Opening Day provided another version of a family reunion.

"That's what this day is like. You see a lot of people you know, and you don't even know their names, because you fish here all the time," Staple said.

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Jeff City man honored to kick off Opening Day

CHRIS RODEN • FOR TROUT TALK

Jim Smith estimated he has heard the starting whistle or siren for 55 Opening Days at Bennett Spring State Park.

This year, Smith, a Jefferson City resident, was the whistle blower who triggered the launching of thousands of flies and lures into the stream.

He is happy he was selected.

"It's something I've thought about for many, many years, so it's really a big honor. There's a bunch that goes down with me all the time for the last 30 or 40 years. They've been wondering when I was going to blow the whistle, so now they got their wish," Smith said.

Smith has noticed a change in the reason anglers come to the park to fish.

He said he encounters more and more people who enjoy filling their freezers rather than the camaraderie that he remembers being a staple of trout fishing.

Trout fishing was not the type of fishing Smith first experienced. As is the case for most boys, his early fishing habits were influenced by his father.

"Back when I was a pup, we used to fish the ponds around for blue gill and brim and the creeks for rock bass and stuff like that. I probably started when I was five or six years old doing that, and then it just gradually got up to where Dad got interested in trout fishing and he took me along," Smith said.

Catching a huge number of trout is not what makes trout fishing in Bennett Spring State Park enjoyable for Smith.

"My favorite part is going down and getting in the water and fishing and seeing if you can

fool one every once in a while," Smith said.

He is not interested in eating his catch, although he enjoyed smoking them and barbecuing them in the past. Smoking the trout took a little time and required some early luck.

"We used to take the smoker down, and everything you wanted to eat for supper on the opening night, you had to have up to the cabin by 10:00 so we could have it on the smoker and have it ready for supper that night," Smith said.

Although he enjoys opening day, he is more of a fan of fishing once warmer weather arrives.

His favorite times of the year to fish are spring and fall when family vacations to the parks are few and kids are not a distraction.

"They're always running around, wading and behind you and everything, and it's kind of distracting. You've got to watch out for them too. It's just easier if they're not there," Smith said.

However, he enjoys the ones who develop a real interest in fishing and passes on some fly fishing knowledge to them.

You will rarely find trout on his stringer.

"I like fishing. I don't care too much for catching anymore. Anything I catch, I release. It's just the solitude and stuff where you get away from the daily drag of everything. You're down there on the creek by yourself a lot of the time," Smith said.

Consequently, Smith said opening day has been more enjoyable for the last five or six years with fewer numbers than in the past.

"There's quite a bit of difference between now and back (then)," Smith said.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 9



Submitted photo

This year's whistleblower, Jim Smith, takes a break from fishing on a previous opening day at Bennett Spring State Park.

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March showers flood Bennett Spring State Park



CHRIS RODEN • FOR TROUT TALK

Ben Havens, hatchery manager at Bennett Spring State Park, got a surprise March 19.

“The Weather Service called for a half inch of rain when I went to bed last night (March 18). That’s what they were forecasting. When I woke up, we already had an inch and a quarter, and I knew it was going to get out. I just didn’t know how much,” Havens said.

Havens said the first January flood reached over seven feet that was followed six days later another flood of

4.68 feet.

That week’s flood topped it at 4.75 feet to come in second place.

“We’ve got the crew here, and they’re working ever so diligently through this, through coronavirus, through whatever. There’s no days off if they want us to keep the trout safe,” Havens said.

He said the water from the 1.5 inch rain on March 14 that came from the valley above the spring did not bring as much debris since it did not rise above the earlier flood level.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 11

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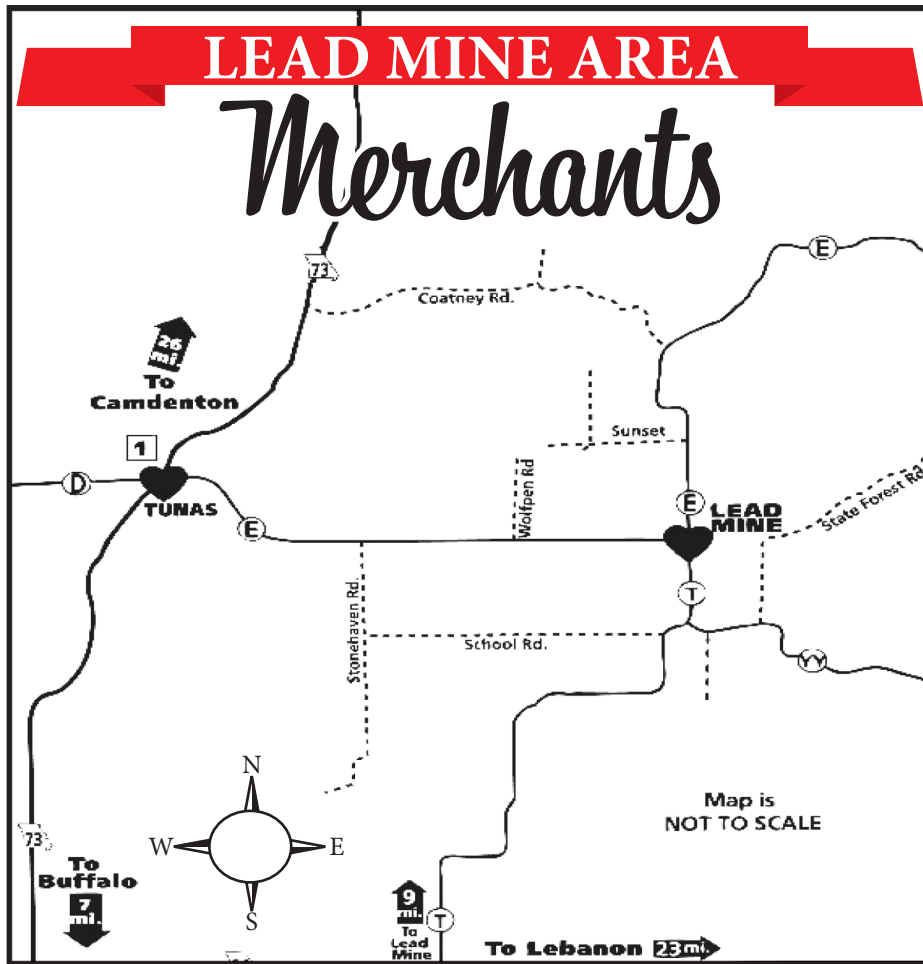
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Whistleblower _____ from page 5

Since he is a catch and release angler, Smith uses barbless hooks and does not carry a net.

"When I catch one, I just play in it, reach down and you can just pluck that fly right out of their mouth and don't have to shake them or anything else. It just pops out as soon as you release the tension on it. The fish never leaves the water," Smith said.

Smith said even the big lunker he caught years ago never left the water. He did get a picture of it before releasing it.

He did some spinning rod fishing "way back in the old days" but has used a fly rod most of his fishing career.

He prefers interpreting the seriousness of a bump to a fly over a hard strike to a lure used in spinning rod fishing.

"It's a lot more fun when you fool one of them that way than it is when you're just sitting there with a coffee grinder," Smith said.

He said he does not trout fish for notoriety.

"People go down there and count how many they hooked that morning or how many they got out of this hole or that hole on this bug. That's part of it for some people, but not for me," Smith said.

Smith said he uses different flies for different holes. He uses marabou jigs, gnats, wooly buggers, leeches and salmon egg flies.

"It's always an experiment," Smith said.

Smith, 79, worked for MoDOT before he retired.

"I started out in the construction end of it and wound up in the planning end of it. I was in construction for about nine years of it, and the rest was in planning," Smith said.

As with all trout anglers, Opening Day is one of Smith's favorite times of the year with its promise of warmer days to come and plenty of trout willing to bite the right fly.

"I always look forward to Opening Day," Smith said.

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BENNETT SPRING STATE PARK AND SURROUNDING AREA



Flooding

from page 7

Two days later, the spring itself increased and clouded before leveling out. The usual clear water has been replaced by brown flood water.

"There's probably an extra almost two feet of water going over the waterfall right now," Havens said.

He said he had not lost any trout yet. "We've got all our fish in the lower fish complex, the lower raceways. The good thing about floods this early is they're dirty, but they're cold, so the water is still not rising temperature wise. We're still in the low 60s, which is perfect for trout. The fish don't get too upset by that," Havens said.

He said a June flood with its warmer water entering the trout's habitat would have different results.

"I'm loaded to the gills with fish right now for the season. We're crammed and our densities are high, capacities are high as they should be to get through the season. If this (flood) were in the

summertime, it would be a different story. We'd probably be having oxygen issues and fish health issues down there already," Havens said.

He said prior to the flood the coronavirus had impacted the number of anglers in the park.

"This is spring break. We should have about 600 or 700 fishermen a day, and we're at like 300. And it has nothing to do with the water or the rain because we've had good weather all week leading up to today. We should be a couple hundred more than that," Havens said.

However, Havens said various international groups from Scotland and Canada and states like Texas, Nevada, Kentucky, Iowa and Illinois are coming to the park.

"People are coming from all over. They're not stopping their travels. They're still here," Havens said.

The Missouri State Parks Facebook page recommends maintaining a dis-

tance of six feet between anglers and to consult the Missouri State Parks website for current advisories regarding park usage.

Havens said the water color caused by the flooding may affect fishing for those who like to sight fish for about two weeks.

"There's still fish in the river. You can still catch some fish, but it's going to be tougher on you for sure," Havens said.

Mike Angeli from St. Louis was having good luck.

In the two hours since he had arrived in the park, Angeli said he caught three trout. He was fishing at the upper end of the stream where the spring's clear water had forced the brown water from the valley to one side of the stream.

He was not worried about the flooding.

"I worry about flooded in, not flood-

ed out," Angeli said.

He had modified his usual angling techniques.

"You got to go a little big bigger, a little bit flashier. They're down on the bottom," Angeli said.

He carried a walking stick to steady him on one bad leg. He suggested another use for it with coronavirus being a concern.

"We have that six foot rule nowadays, so if anybody gets within that six feet, I've got something to pop them with," Mike Angeli from St. Louis joked.

His estimate was the stream was up a foot and a half. Neither the flood nor coronavirus cancelled his family get-together with his brothers and some of his sons.

"We all have to have concerns. I think Missouri is still, not in the safe zone, but two weeks from now, I might not have come down," Angeli said.

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