

Lake Keepit Dam, NSW

As inland or impoundment fishing continues to boom in popularity, more anglers are discovering the joys of flat water fishing with the Mum and the kids - in sight of the camp. Mike O'Neil was in the 'Territory chasing barra last month - so we figured it was time he headed south to cool off !

*Part 8 in our series on freshwater impoundments & rivers, this month
written and photographed by Mike O'Neil.*

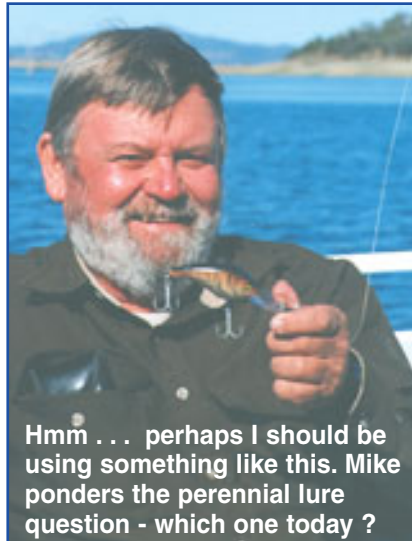
When F&B editor Peter Webster rang and asked me to suss out Lake Keepit State Park, located 38 km east of Gunnedah and 56km west of Tamworth off the Oxley Highway, New South Wales, as a boating, fishing, holiday destination I jumped at the chance of exploring different water and making new friends.

A quick phone call to park manager Ian Thompson soon had a foreshore cabin with ensuite and reverse-cycle air-conditioner organised for a weekend in July.

Although I usually camp out when on such excursions, organising the cabin was probably the most sensible thing I have done all year – Lake Keepit in July is cold . . . *we're talking seriously bloody cold here . . . brass monkey country!* But like any inland trip during winter, go prepared and enjoy the season.

It was a five-and-a-half hour run out from our home town Macksville. We arrived at 12.40am to find friends Russ and Carol Roberts with the cabin warmed and a glass of port waiting.

Up at 5.30 am for a walk down to the lake's edge for some dawn shots, the ice crackling beneath my feet. A mental picture of Peter (Ed) snug in bed awaiting a Queensland sunrise overrides my thought processes: what can I say, it's minus 4 degrees. A thick layer of ice covers boat and vehicle . . . *Brrr . . .* this doesn't feel like good native fish weather.



Hmm . . . perhaps I should be using something like this. Mike ponders the perennial lure question - which one today ?

But the day dawned crisp and clear with cobalt blue sky. Myriad bird species led by those western NSW larrikins pink galahs and noisy minors invade the park. Parrots of all sizes and colours flutter and screech overhead in the eucalypt-studded State Park public area.

After a quick yarn to Lake Keepit kiosk proprietor and local fisho John Harris, we headed off to explore some of the lake's more renowned cod runs.

Good stands of dead timber and some steep drop offs make interesting viewing on the fish finder. Out on the lake proper there are several islands visible and the appearance of small ridge lines and large rocks are testimony to the lake's (at the time of writing) 42 per cent capacity.

About the Lake *Keepit in mind ...* that's the catch phrase for Lake Keepit State Park

At first glance it appears to be a relatively small body of water but research show it covers 4,370ha (two thirds the capacity of Sydney Harbour with 34kms of waterway and 104kms of shoreline.

While the lake could be described as a fishing paradise with stocked populations of golden perch, Murray cod and silver perch as well as resident catfish, this area has a lot more on offer as a holiday destination.

There's something for everyone with activities such as sailing, power boating, water skiing and swimming. And to add a little more excitement to a Lake Keepit holiday, there's a gliding club on-site offering tuition and joy flights. Looking for more action? No problem. You can take a shot at the on-site paintball course.

Other facilities include extensive picnic areas with barbecues, BMX track, tennis courts, skating area, wading pool, walking tracks and a five-hole practice golf course. The extensive swimming area in the lake, complete with a pontoon and slide, is outlined by buoys to keep it (sorry) free of boats.

Complementing these established facilities are the park's natural attractions: there is a diverse range of flora and fauna which can be accessed via a number of walking trails and the lake and its surrounds are home to



some 148 known bird species.

Accommodation Accommodation at Lake Keepit caters for all tastes. For campers and caravaners there are a variety of sites to choose from, with or without power, and all have ready access to the park's excellent amenities. For those who prefer a more rugged and private campsite, there are several large areas set aside specifically for bush camping, both on the lake's eastern foreshores and on the Namoi River.

Dogs are allowed in the bush camping areas as long as they are under owner control at all times but are excluded from the picnic and caravan parks areas.

For those that feel like a tad more comfort there's a range of cabins, some with ensuites. All cabins are equipped with television, dining table and chairs, fridge, microwave, toaster, kettle, crockery and cutlery. All you have to bring along are blankets and linen... but if that's too much problem (or you forget to pack them) these items can be hired from the office when you check in.

And for those who like to camp but can't be bothered packing all that gear and bringing along your own tent, the park has eight campotels (large permanent tents) for hire. They come with six beds, a microwave and small fridge, jug and toaster.

The campotels are situated near the Camp Kitchen, which has facilities for

Above: Tamworth's Brendan McGuire with a well-conditioned Lake Keepit cod. His fishing mate, Scott Cracknell couldn't resist getting in on the act. **Below:** There are no problems launching boats of any size. Lake Keepit has a very good concrete ramp (pictured in the background) just a short drive from the Kiosk. Smaller boats can also be launched with a four-wheel-drive from the lake's foreshore.



cooking and a hot water supply ,

Holidaymakers tenting or caravanning it can choose from a variety of sites with or without power all with ready access to the park's amenities.

A large covered barbecue-cum-entertainment area with a sunken fire pit and seating is just the spot on a cold winter's night. The barbecues are electric and for under a dollar you can cook a family feed. There's plenty of wood (thanks to the park ranger) for the sunken fire pit and if a cold wind blows, you can always pull down the roller doors.

And for those with a yen for something a little more upmarket, the park also has a chalet (six people) perched on top of the hill above the sailing club with panoramic views over the lake. It is a fully self-contained unit complete with laundry, private barbecue... the ideal spot for that special getaway.

What it costs Staying at the chalet (six persons) during peak rate season will set you back \$112 per night; ensuite cabin (2 persons) \$78, extra adult \$4 and child \$2; standard cabin w/t (2 pers) \$49 (\$4, \$2); standard

cabin (2 pers) \$45 (\$4, \$2); campotel (2 pers) \$39 (\$4, \$2); powered site (2 pers) \$16.50 (\$3.50, \$1.75) ; unpowered sites (2 pers) \$14 (\$3.50, \$1.75; and bush camping \$11 per vehicle (maximum of 6 persons). Off peak and weekly rates are also available.

Steeped in history Lake Keepit is an area steeped in history. Thomas Mitchell explored the Namoi Valley in 1831. He camped quite close to where the dam is now located. Encouraged by his description of the area as having an “important appearance”, settlers soon followed.

Departmental records show that it was in the early 1830s that a man named White secured a grazing right of some land on the Namoi River a few miles upstream of its junction with the Peel river.

He established a station called Keypet believed to be an Aboriginal name meaning ‘Many Bends in the River’. And there’s also a belief that the area derived its name from a convict of Dutch descent named Keypet who escaped from a Hunter River settlement and, while rustling cattle, found the protected basin known today as Keepit.

Keepet Station was established by William Simms Bell in 1837. During its regime the Bell family extended the holding to 70,000 acres.

The Bell family sold Keepit station in 1872 to the Blaxland family. About three miles from the station was a wine shop owned by Mrs Corrigan whose name lives on in a camping area bearing her name ‘Corrigan’s Camp’.

Following the drought of 1902 when water stopped flowing in both the Namoi and Peel rivers, a number of enterprising landowners invested in irrigation plants and due to their success the department of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Conservation in October 1906 issued a report confirming that damming Namoi River floodwaters was being considered.

Lake Keepit construction started on April 30, 1938 but was halted by the outbreak of World War II. Work recommenced in 1946 but the dam was not completed until 1960.

Lake Keepit now provides a regular water flow in the river downstream, providing irrigation for landholders in the Gunnedah, Narrabri and Wee Waa areas.



Top: Lake Keepit Family Fishing Club’s gun fisho Dave Stanton with a healthy young cod. **Above:** Doing it tough: Mike, family and friends had the whole entertainment area to themselves during their recent trip to Lake Keepit. **Below:** Mark Court, of Attunga just north of Tamworth, reckons a wink’s as good as a nudge when it comes to Lake Keepit’s yellowbelly! **Bottom:** Camping at Lake Keepit is all a matter of choice . . . we chose to stay in these well-appointed ensuite cabins with reverse-cycle air-conditioning and with the morning temperature at around four degrees C, we’re glad we did.



Fishing As well as providing water for irrigation purposes, Lake Keepit is also an ideal habitat for some of Australia's premium freshwater fish species such as Murray cod, golden perch (yellowbelly) and silver perch.

During a visit to the Lake in July this year I spoke with Lake Keepit Family Fishing Club secretary Elaine Harris, who, with husband John, runs the local kiosk.

The club, was formed in 1986 and holds two open fishing competitions each year... one in January and the other over the October long weekend.

The competitions are open to all comers. Funds raised through the club's competitions, usually upwards of \$1500 each year goes to the Narranderra State Fisheries Hatchery to assist in fingerling release into the lake.

Current release figures

March 12, 1995 - 60,000 yellowbelly.

March 21, 1995 - 105,000.

March 7, 1996 - 100,000.

December 18 1996 - 42,000 cod.

March 11, 1998 -110,000 yellowbelly.

March 17, 1998 - 50,000 silver perch and 47,000 yellowbelly.

December 17, 1999 - 37,000 cod.

January 11, 2000 - 22,000 yellowbelly and 22,000 cod.

February 1, 2000 - 61,000 yellowbelly.

February 23, 2000 - 70,000 yellowbelly.

Gun Fisho While exploring the Lake, I caught up with gun fisho Dave Stanton.

Dave, 25, was born and bred in Tamworth. He drives a 4.35 Hornet Wildfish powered by a 40hp Evinrude four stroke and, according to John Harris, knows Keepit waters as well as anybody.

"Cod are taken mainly on lures while yellowbelly, silver perch and catfish are chased with bait," says Dave

"When the lake gets a bit low, like it is now, there are little islands popping up everywhere. It gets a bit dodgy some times... you have to be a bit careful.

"I hit a rock I didn't know was there last weekend... Lucky I was only trolling and didn't do any damage. You couldn't see it until you were right on top of it."

And Dave's best fish to date: "I've

caught cod up to 15lb and yellowbelly up to 11lb. But there was a cod of 75lb caught around Christmas time.

"The best time to fish the lake is during the warmer months of summer when the fish respond better to lures. Sometimes when the water is rising in the dam and some is being let out for irrigation purposes, the fish head into the backwashes . . . That's a good time to chase them."

Licences A freshwater fishing licence is required for angling in all New South Wales non tidal rivers and in dams.

The licence, which can be obtained from NSW Waterways, most NSW National Parks and Wildlife offices, the Roads and Traffic Authority and some fishing tackle outlets, must be carried at all times.

A 28-day licence will set you back \$10, 12 months \$25; and three years, \$70. Under 18-year-olds, holders of Commonwealth Concession Cards, and Aborigines are exempt.

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