

on the bank, boaters drag their \$100,000 boat across the state to put it in and hunt the waters.

Many go to the guide services and leave the tracking to the pros.

Lake Buchanan, as the largest of the Highland Lakes, is the natural favorite fishing spot for many sportsmen.

Groves of trees stand at the bottom of the lake along the old riverbed, providing ideal cover for striped bass.

Rick Szukalla has been guiding clients on striper fishing trips on the lake for years.

He forecasts good fishing "until the water goes away."

Lake Buchanan is a variable-level lake, which affects the striper fishing. When the water gets shallow, it warms up faster, driving the fish to deeper water.

"The water needs to be below 70 degrees, otherwise they get lethargic and don't feed as aggressively," he said.

Szukalla said that stripers love live shad as food—and the weight of some of them shows the abundance of food in Lake Buchanan.

"The stripers in this lake get up to 20 pounds," he said. "The average is four pounds."

Since the massive flooding in June, the fishing has been spotty because the schools have been broken up by the storms.



PHOTO COURTESY EMPTY POCKETS FISHING SERVICE
Jackie Headrick of Empty Pockets Fishing Service helps a young fisherman show off the day's catch.

said. "Catfish are plentiful any time of the year," he said. "Put stink bait on your line and wait for them to take it."

He also said that white bass and carp are plentiful, as well as perch.

"There are a lot of perch. It's a good recreational fish for the youngsters to catch," Szukalla said.

Just below Lake Buchanan, **Inks Lake** offers good conditions for stripers for much of the year.

"It's small and cold, fed by water from the bottom of Lake Buchanan when its generating," said fishing guide Fermin Fernandez. "It's a fantastic fishery."

He said that the striper fishing is good in Inks Lake, even when it's too hot in Lake Buchanan.

"When Buchanan slows down, Inks doesn't have that problem," he said. "They'll feed during the summer."

Fernandez said that Inks Lake isn't heavily fished, which allows the stripers there to grow huge.

"I've caught 77 stripers that were over 30 pounds," he said.

Fernandez may have caught some of those monsters twice; he has a strict personal policy of catching and releasing.

"The locals need to think about releasing" what they catch, he said.

"It wouldn't take much to fish the lake out."

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Fernandez has seen the day, back in the mid 1990's, in which the combination of oxygen depletion in the water and an influx of fishermen depleted the fishing severely.

"It took years to recover," he said. "(The fishing) isn't as endless as we used to think."

Stripers are especially sensitive to over fishing, since they cannot reproduce in the Highland Lakes.

Every striper alive in the Highland Lakes was born in a fishery and stocked in the lake.

"If you release the 10-15 pound stripers, they'll be the future 30-pound fish," Fernandez said. "They get big quick if left alone."

Fernandez said that preserving the good fishing on all of the Highland Lakes takes cooperation from everybody.

"To keep an incredible fishery from going bust, it takes people thinking ahead," he said.

Inks Lake isn't just a striper lake; it's also excellent for catching catfish.

"These catfish run me off of a spot where I'm trying to catch stripers," he said. "I read in an article once that there are more catfish per acre than any other lake in the state."

For fishermen who eat what they catch, Fernandez suggests fishing for white bass.

They are warm water fish, and they reproduce in the Highland Lakes.

"White bass have made a huge comeback," regularly reaching lengths of 18 inches, he said.

Downriver from Inks Lake, the confluence of the Llano and Colorado Rivers make for good striper fishing in **Lake LBJ**.

"Lake LBJ is another fabulous fishery," Fernandez said.

He said that the fishing hasn't been quite as good in Lake LBJ since the flooding.

"In years past, it seems I couldn't fish without catching 10-15 pound stripers," he said.

Now, "Inks and LBJ might have lost a lot of the big fish. I've not caught large fish since the flooding—they're small transplant fish from Lake Buchanan."

Since Inks Lake and Lake LBJ aren't normally stocked with stripers, all of the fish they get are refugees from Lake Buchanan. The flooding has pushed them down the river into Lake Travis and beyond.

Fernandez guesses that those small refugees will grow up in a couple of years.