



In the midst  
of big-city activity,  
this chain offers all sorts  
of watery fun,  
including nice bass.

# The Bountiful Lakes of Winter Park

BY M. TIMOTHY O'KEEFE

**T**his is a scenario not many people are going to believe: all around me in the distance early-morning traffic rumbled as Orlando workers began their midweek trek to their jobs. Close by, a motorcycle's rattling exhaust split the air.

Not a hundred yards away, a sunrise wedding ceremony was starting on one shore of the lake. The bride and groom looked like fixtures atop a wedding cake as they stood framed in white Grecian columns.

On the distant shore, a ski boat pulled away from a big condo as some early morning jock began his laps. And straight overhead, the red-eye jet flight from Atlan-

ta was bringing the day's first batch of tourists to Orlando's world-famous mousetrap.



Columns background cruisers (above) on Lake Maitland. At right is a fishing-swimming dock near Dinky Dock, on opposite page a pretty bass is strung up beside a prettier lily pad.

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What was I doing in the midst of all this hubbub?

Pulling in a nice 3-pound bass, thank you, my second of the morning. And I had every prospect of snagging another, perhaps even larger, before the wedding party popped the cork on its last bottle of champagne.

As long as I've lived in the Orlando area—that's almost 14 years now—I've been amazed at how much good fishing there is right in the middle of the sprawling urban area, one of the fastest-growing in the country. What's more, virtually all of it has public access.

In all, there are said to be more than 2,000 lakes in the Greater Orlando region. However, none offers a greater variety of fun than the Winter Park Chain of Lakes, the place I was fishing. For all the activity, these lakes still manage to produce as many bass every year as many that are remote and hard to reach.

These seven lakes—surrounded, actually, by two cities, Maitland and Winter Park—are in use almost 24 hours every day. They serve as the practice area for the



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**The Cover:** Silhouette of a Central Florida hunter, young Jerry Brown. Page 8. Photo by Joan Ferran.

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Editor/Publisher: **Nancy N. Glick**  
Entertainment Editor: **Bill Frangus**

Contributing Editors:

**Don Ashley**  
**Boerner DeNike**  
**Joan Ferran**  
**Nancy Holland**  
**Timothy O'Keefe**  
**Valerie Patterson**  
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Staff Writer: **Elaine Lustig**

Staff Photographers:

**Phil Eschbach**  
**Lee Olsen**

Circulation/Office Manager:

**Judith R. Lee**

Account Executives:

**Jerry B. Ott**  
**John Glick**

Advertising Sales Representative:

**Special Editions, Inc.,**  
450 Wymore Rd., Winter Park, FL 32789  
305/644-0031

Subscription Sales Representatives:

**QSP, Ridgefield, CT**  
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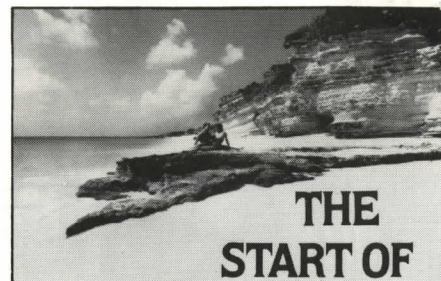
Editorial and Business Office:

720 W. Vassar St.,  
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*Bass romp at night when traffic calms down.*

Rollins College water ski team. They play host to boatloads of scenic tours that circumnavigate the lakes hourly.

College crew teams practice here, as do amateur but dedicated water skiers. In addition, canoes and power boats constantly prowling the shoreline to tour the stately mansions that line several of the lakes.

And there, in the middle of all this activity, are the fishermen, who probably seem daft to the water cowboys who pause in one place long enough only to change skiers.

Frankly, you do have to be a little crazy to fish the lakes in the middle of the day when everyone else is out. But that's generally the worst time to be on the water anyway.

Lake Virginia is the chain's southernmost body. It's also one of the most heavily used, since it's the site of Dinky Dock and adjacent to the Rollins College campus. Dinky Dock provides the main access to the chain; the other ramp is at Lake Maitland on Live Oak Street off Hwy. 17-92. Dinky Dock has the larger ramp and generally more parking spaces, so it's also the more crowded.

However, sand can sometimes build up over the concrete at Dinky, so check out the ramp before attempting to launch. Incidentally, the Dinky name is kind of misleading since it gives the impression the ramp area is a small one. But the Dinky name comes from the now-defunct Dinky Railroad which used to haul from the area to the nearby town of Oviedo.

Lake Virginia has 233 acres of fishing area, but most of the bass are pulled out of the same section, along with the eastern shoreline. In spring if you're quietly plugging the shoreline, you might hear some

strange, haunting calls issuing from the woodlands. Those are the peacocks which roam freely over the Genius Estate, perhaps the most elaborate of all the lake properties. The peacocks are noisiest in spring during the mating season. The first time you hear their squawks, it may sound like someone strangling chickens; but scientists say it sounds seductive to another peacock.

The Genius Estate is a prime example of how expensive all this shoreline property has become over the years. It was purchased for \$2.50 an acre in 1929. Lately, bids of more than \$60,000 an acre reportedly have been refused. No matter; we still can fish it for free.

All the lakes are connected in a straight line from Virginia, except for Lake Mizell which detours to the east. It is well worth the side trip to Mizell since there are more undeveloped shoreline edges there than in other lakes. If you happen to have the day off and are fishing this lake between 7:30 and 9 a.m., you'll get to witness one of the great traffic jams of the day, since fourlane Aloma/Fairbanks Ave. touches one denuded bank. I always manage to avoid any guilt feelings about my piscatorial pursuits at such times by staying at the opposite end and keeping my back to the traffic. There's something about watching bumper-to-bumper cars that knocks my concentration off the fishing.

Lake Osceola is the next step in the chain from Lake Virginia. It's reached through a beautiful link called the Fern Canal. Boat speeds must be kept to a minimum here, as in all the canals. Because of the canal's length, it should be traveled only by those under power. Anglers in canoes or those using trolling motors for propulsion could present a hazard to the other boat traffic passing through regularly.

Lake Osceola is much more placid than Virginia, normally not drawing nearly as much boating and water ski activity. This also is the only place on the chain where you can rent a fishing boat if you don't have one or want to avoid the hassles of launching your own. Fourteen and 16-foot rental boats are available from Scenic Boat Tours on Osceola's southwest bank. With 3½-hp engines, the boats rent for \$25 a full day or \$15 a half day. The only problem is that the day doesn't begin until 9 a.m.—past the prime early-morning fishing hours.

Lake Osceola covers 158 acres in a kind of melted-sunglasses shape. Fishing along here can be quite good with surface plugs, worms and shiners. If you're fishing late in the morning or early evening, expect to be gawked at when the tour boat passes. The tour is based on Lake Osceola (at the same place as the rental boats), and even during periods of low water when passage to other lakes is difficult, it always manages to circumnavigate its home lake.

The canal leading from Lake Osceola to Lake Maitland is a long one, extending

about seven-tenths of a mile. Known as the Venetian Canal, it can be quite unsettling your first time through because of its narrowness and the concrete siding at one end. On weekends, the odds of meeting another boat somewhere in the canal are almost certain, but this really doesn't present much of a problem if you remember where the canal bulges a bit so you can back up and pull off to the side. If you haven't passed such a spot recently, the other fellow probably has, and it will be up to him to retreat so you can pass. Everyone here is good natured about this whole procedure, since it does no one good to charge bullheadedly forward.

Lake Maitland, largest of the chain, contains 450 surface acres and loads of prime spots to cast a plug. Regrettably, the lake's size attracts plenty of non-angling boats, and the noon traffic can be stifling.

Further, in recent years the hydrilla problem here has on occasion been severe, with the noxious weed forming such a thick blanket in some areas that it's difficult to use anything but surface lures in such places. Still, there are plenty of weed-free sections along most of the shoreline that will accommodate any kind of lure.

Beyond Lake Maitland are Lakes Nini and Minnehaha. Both are less frequently visited by fishermen because navigating the canals sometimes can be a problem. But that may make them more attractive to serious anglers who are willing to take the time to test them out.

As mentioned previously, my favorite time for fishing is at night or early morning, when competition is generally confined to the angling community. Places regularly churned up by ski props during the day quiet down after dark and allow the fish to seriously consider feeding.

The lakes are an especially pretty sight then, with the illuminated estates and homes providing an unusual backdrop. It's a comforting sight; the distant homes look like the model town that came with a train set I had when I was a kid. The nearer buildings supply a more practical light—just bright enough so I can make out everything around me without having to use a flashlight too often.

And yet, for all the development, there are pockets of land where you can forget the city that surrounds you. Facing a dark shoreline with your back to the lights, it is easy to imagine the entire lake like this.

But wishful thinking is not needed when it comes to conjuring up the bass. There are plenty of them left in the Winter Park chain—right there within easy reach of every Orlando-area fisherman.

Sometimes progress isn't all bad. •

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