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Drought's over and Lake Lanier gets lively

People began arriving Thursday to celebrate Memorial Day weekend

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These mornings, when Jeff Powell unlocks The Dam Store, he greets a line of fishing experts waiting for him. They need blue-back herring, a a favorite lure for the striped bass that glide in Lake Lanier's dark currents.

That's all the proof Powell needs that the filling lake has brought people back to Lake Lanier — just in time for Memorial Day.

With the lake higher than it has been in two years, Atlanta's swimming pool is open for business.

It was a different story last year. Lanier resembled a colossal mud puddle, shrinking more each day. Boat ramps slanted down into mud. Coves looked like a desert floor, cracked and lifeless.

The disappearing lake revealed discarded appliances, tires, cans, bottles, you name it.

Government officials put watering bans in effect and urged us to think before we flushed.

This holiday weekend, however, the lake looks a lot like its old self. Campsites are sold out in some places.

A recent afternoon found Robbie Sowash and his son, Colton, at the Van Pugh south ramp, backing a Ranger bass boat into the lake. A half-mile out, a sailboat strained against a cross wind.

"I like it," said the Flowery Branch resident. "It looks a whole lot better than it has."

The lake is not sloshing over its banks, said Chris Arthur, chief ranger of park operations for the Army Corps of Engineers, which owns Lanier. It's still about 5 feet from full pool, meaning some swimming areas are dried expanses of sand. This time last year, the lake was 18 feet from full pool of 1,071 feet above sea level. That only exacerbated the squabble between Georgia, Florida and Alabama over the release of lake water into the Chattahoochee River, the lake's main water source.

'Onslaught' expected

This year, he anticipates about 300,000 visitors over the extended weekend. Imagine everyone from Columbus and Savannah showing up.

“There should be an onslaught,” said Arthur, who should know. He’s been at the lake 12 years.

It began Thursday evening. Visitors set lawn chairs on houseboat decks and toasted the new season with popped corks and pop-top cans. Traffic increased Friday as campers and others followed signs into the hilly tract where the lake touches Hall, Gwinnett, Dawson, Forsyth and Lumpkin counties.

There are dollars in those visitors, said Kit Dunlap, president of the Greater Hall Chamber of Commerce. Hall boasts the most shoreline of any county, more than 400 miles.

A 2001 study concluded that lake recreation was worth more than \$5 billion annually, said Dunlap. Last year, she and others founded the 1071 Coalition, a nonprofit agency whose name comes from the lake’s full-pool level.

The organization promotes the lake, and also is its watchdog. Buford Dam regularly releases water for downstream use, lowering the lake. The organization’s Web site says it wants to make sure all releases are “appropriate.” It recently funded a \$150,000 study to assess the lake’s economic impact on the region.

The rising lake, said Dunlap, has been a godsend. “It’s helped everyone’s attitude.” Dunlap crosses Lanier every day when she leaves her Gainesville offices. “It’s nice to have some good news from Lake Lanier.”

For Herb Bracken, sales manager for Anheuser-Busch distributor Leon Farmer & Co., good news means thirsty visitors. The distributorship’s trucks are a regular sight around Lake Lanier.

“I hope it’s good, real good,” Bracken said, wishing for blockbuster sales. “We’ll see.”

Michael Otting was just as hopeful. He owns 5 Star Detail Spa, whose specialty is boats. Earlier this week, he watched three lean guys swarm over a 24-foot cabin cruiser parked just off Holiday Road. They applied polish to chrome, wax to Fiberglass.

“Maybe everybody is sick of this depression,” said Otting, referring to the national recession. “Maybe they’ll say, ‘To hell with it’ and come to the lake.”

Years in the making

Lake Sidney Lanier, named after a renowned Georgia poet, was born in 1946 with an act of Congress. Lawmakers authorized Buford Dam, a concrete wall that would control floods, produce power and help boats navigate the lower reaches of the Chattahoochee. Officials noted that it would make a fine place to play, too.

Construction began in 1950. The government acquired 56,000 acres, plus relocated more than 700 families for its big new lake. In 1956, the dam’s intake gates shut, and the waters that flowed out of the hills began forming a pool. It took more than three years for the big hole to fill.

The lake now has public and private campgrounds. Homes, ranging from old single-wides to multi-million-dollar palaces, dot its 692-mile shoreline. Ten marinas reach into the lake, collecting boats of every size.

The state Department of Natural Resources expects a lot of those boats to be on the water this weekend. The agency, as well as the Corps of Engineers and local police forces, will be fully staffed for the inevitable: boats that break, drunks who drive, and people who need reminders that common sense shouldn’t take a holiday this weekend.

“I love having the people here,” said Arthur, of the Corps of Engineers. “I enjoy putting Band-Aids on fingers, if I have to.”

'We'll be here'

A wood chipper coughed and spat the remains of a downed pine. Not far away, Doug Brooks sat in a director's chair outside his silver Airstream parked at a Lanier campsite. Beyond the trees lay the lake, shiny as a pile of dimes.

A retired engineer, Brooks and his wife, Anne Walker, rented the campsite earlier this week, only to learn that someone rented the site months earlier for Memorial Day. So the Atlanta couple planned to move to another spot and spend the holiday there.

Walker, a native Australian, was a little apprehensive. Would the place be filled with yahoos howling all night? Would the snarl of boats ruin the serenity of that big body of water?

"We're thinking about not being here," she said.

"We'll be here," said Brooks, who shot his wife a sly smile. "I'll stay out of trouble."

Nasser Nasab had different plans. Late one recent afternoon, he sat in a beat-up folding chair at the lake's edge. He occasionally tossed a barbed lure into the water, trying to entice a striper. If he planned to bring dinner home, he was in trouble: The only thing biting, it appeared, was an occasional bug.

He has a small boat, but the Lawrenceville resident said he was going to keep it at home this weekend. He was staying there, too.

"This weekend, there will be so many boats out here, so many waves, that it will be like a small-craft advisory," he said. "It's going to be crowded."

Most likely. After all, Lake Lanier is Atlanta's swimming pool.

This year, the water's great.

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