



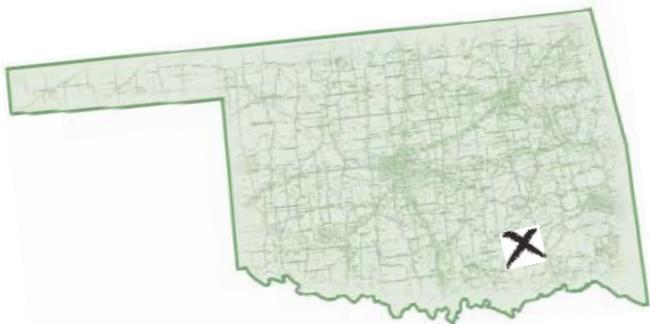
BY RICH FULLER

If you ever find yourself going southbound on the Indian Nation turnpike, you'll likely notice a fairly abrupt change in the scenery about 25 miles south of McAlester. The Jack Fork Mountains sprout out of the moderately flat landscape forming a new horizon seen near the top edge of your windshield. Other changes are more subtle.

As you continue south or eastward, autumn's colorful oaks, hickories and cottonwoods give way to

more and more ever-present green provided by groves of short-leaf pine growing up the hillsides. To me, this transition zone really stands out in my mind as "the gateway" to the southeast's piney woods, rugged mountains, crystal flowing streams and the bloom of springtime dogwoods.

Upon reaching the turnpike exit for state highway 43, you'll probably see a line of trailered bass boats exiting to make one last stop for gas or snacks at the wide spot in the road known as Daisy, Oklahoma. Even though the land is dotted with small farm ponds, there isn't a lake big enough for a bass boat in sight, just mountains. However, Daisy is the jump-off point between two of Oklahoma's premier trophy-bass lakes; Sardis a few miles to the east and McGee Creek to the west. Although it's an entirely different pursuit, this unique part of Oklahoma also offers hunters the chance at so-called trophies. Equal to the difficult, but still yet possible, task of catching an elusive wall-hang-



er bass from Sardis or McGee Creek, the potential exists for hunters in this area to bring home a trophy of their own.

Eastern wild turkey gobblers in excess of 22 pounds and sporting “whale-rope” beards have been harvested from the Jack Fork Mountains as well as numerous wide-racked older aged white-tail bucks. One such area open to public hunting access is the McGee Creek Wildlife Management Area located

adjacent to McGee Creek Reservoir. If heading west from Daisy on Hwy. 43, travel about six miles west of the turnpike and watch for the old Redden school house on the north side of the highway. At the same spot, you’ll need to turn back south for a five-mile trek to the management area. Numerous signs along the way will direct you to the WMA headquarters.

At 3,800 acres the V-shaped McGee Creek Lake is fed by two major creeks; Potapo Creek flows in

Easterns, a Tougher Challenge Than Their Rio Cousins

To explain the difference between hunting Eastern wild turkeys versus their Rio Grande cousins, here’s an analogy. An Eastern wild turkey is more like a seasoned veteran quarterback, while the Rio may be more like a rookie.

The rookie is much more likely to make mistakes like throwing the ball to a double-covered receiver. The Eastern gobbler, on the other hand, is more cautious and conservative, like the

veteran quarterback who just throws the ball away if his receivers are covered.

So what does that mean? Are Eastern wild turkeys actually “smarter” than Rios?

Until someone develops a special Turkey IQ test then I guess we won’t ever know. I tend to subscribe to the thought that a turkey, is a turkey, is a turkey, and the habitat dictates a turkey’s behavior. Although there are subtle morphological differences in the various sub-species of wild turkey, I’ve never heard of any differences in brain-size or cognitive ability.

Anyway, back to the analogy. In the Rio Grande turkey’s world of wide-open spaces, he can probably afford to make more “rookie-like” mistakes like running pellmell to a hen’s call. With the wide-open terrain he can usually see approaching danger in the form of a coyote or bobcat in time to still make an escape.

The Eastern bird, however, doesn’t have the luxury of seeing danger before it’s too late. The thicker vegetation and broken terrain makes for “close-quarter” ambush sites for predators. So rather than running to a hen’s call (or a hunter imitating a hen’s seductive yelps), the wily Eastern bird is much more likely to approach very, very cautiously, if at all. If it looks risky, then he’ll sure enough “throw the ball away” on you by either hanging up out of shotgun range, or moving away.

One point that needs mentioning is the gobbler’s purpose in gobbling. Among secondary reasons, a tom turkey gobbles in order to attract hens to him for mating. When a hunter imitates hen calls using a box, slate, wingbone or diaphragm turkey call to call in a gobbler, they’re actually trying to make a gobbler do the opposite of what generally happens in nature. In the majority of instances, it is the hen that comes to the sound of the gobbling tom, not the other way around. In order for a tom turkey to be seduced into coming to a hen’s call, then the gobbler must feel safe in doing so. Again, because of the thicker vegetation and rugged terrain, this threshold of “safety” is probably more acute with Easterns than with Rio Grandes.

A turkey’s most powerful defense mechanism are his eyeballs. Perhaps it’s projecting human traits on an animal that has a “bird brain” no bigger than an olive, but I think it’s the fact that due to their habitat Eastern birds are more cautious and tend to gobble significantly less than Rios. Besides calling any receptive hens in the area by gobbling, gobbling also alerts predators to the tom’s location. Perhaps this explains why Easterns tend not to gobble as much as Rios overall.

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The author knows a thing or two about spring turkey hunting at McGee Creek Wildlife Management Area. Each spring Rich Fuller, information supervisor for the Wildlife Department, makes a pilgrimage to the pine-covered hills to match wits with wily gobblers.

from the northwest and McGee Creek from the north. The large peninsula lying between the two creeks, or the “center of the V,” represents three fourths of the 10,000 acre WMA. The remaining 1/4 of the WMA lies west of the Potapo Creek arm of the lake.

The habitat on McGee Creek WMA offers hunters a mixture of oak and hickory forests with some shortleaf pine groves particularly on drier southern facing slopes. The area is rugged with

Hunting Tips for Bagging a Southeast Oklahoma Eastern Gobbler

- Don't overcall.

Particularly true in areas of high hunting pressure, many mature “whale-rope” bearded toms will simply quit coming after they've exchanged just a few gobbles to your two or three calling sequences.

Don't make the mistake in thinking that the gobbling turkey doesn't know where you are in a vast unbroken forest of pine trees. If the tom's gobble cuts off your initial yelps, then quit calling. Get your back to a large tree and be completely still. Don't worry, he knows where you're at.

If the tom continues to gobble and appears to be moving off in a separate direction, you can try giving him just a few different yelps, purrs or clucks with a different type of call (i.e. changing from a box call to a slate), but be very, very, conservative in your calling. Sometimes just the change in tone is enough to seduce him into coming into shotgun range.

- Be super-patient

If you get out in the pre-dawn darkness and get a roosting tom to cut off your calls with a throaty gobble-oble-oble, then shhhhh-hhh and stay put! He knows exactly where you are.

If he flies down from the roost and doesn't come to you, it could be that he is accompanied by one or more hens. If so, chances are he won't be coming to your calls anyway. It is possible sometimes to aggressively call in the hens to your location, which theoretically will also bring in the following gobbler, but this technique is usually tough to accomplish with high-pressured turkeys.

However, as the season goes on, many hens will often leave a tom by midmorning to seek out nesting sites. If this happens, he'll come back to the exact place that he last heard your hen calls from the roost. And, it's likely he won't be gobbling when he comes searching for you. Full camouflage, absolutely no movement, razor-sharp senses and pounds of patience are needed to wait out these type of “high-pressured, call-shy” gobblers.

- So what if he “hangs up”

It doesn't take much to over call, which results in the gobbler stopping in his tracks to make that hen (or you the hunter in this case) come to him. If the tom “hangs up” out of shotgun range, you can quit calling altogether and hope that he gets curious enough to come on in, or you can change your type of call to produce a more seductive tone, or lastly, you can try to move to a different setup location. Aggressive calling usually will not work with turkeys that've decided to hang up out of range.

Moving to a different setup is usually a risky proposition. Not



PAUL MOORE

Examining the tailfeathers is one of the easiest ways to differentiate between the Eastern and Rio Grande subspecies of wild turkeys. The Rio (right) will have much lighter coloration on tips of their primary and secondary tail feathers. The Eastern (left) will have an overall darker tail fan, you can think of an Eastern's tail tip as being more chocolate than tan.

only does the turkey hunter run the risk of being seen by the hung up gobbler, but it can also be potentially dangerous for the turkey hunter. A hunter sneaking through the forest to setup on a gobbling turkey runs the risk of being mistaken as game by another turkey hunter. Obviously, this is a prime reason to avoid wearing any clothing with red, white or blue which resembles the colors of a tom turkey's head.

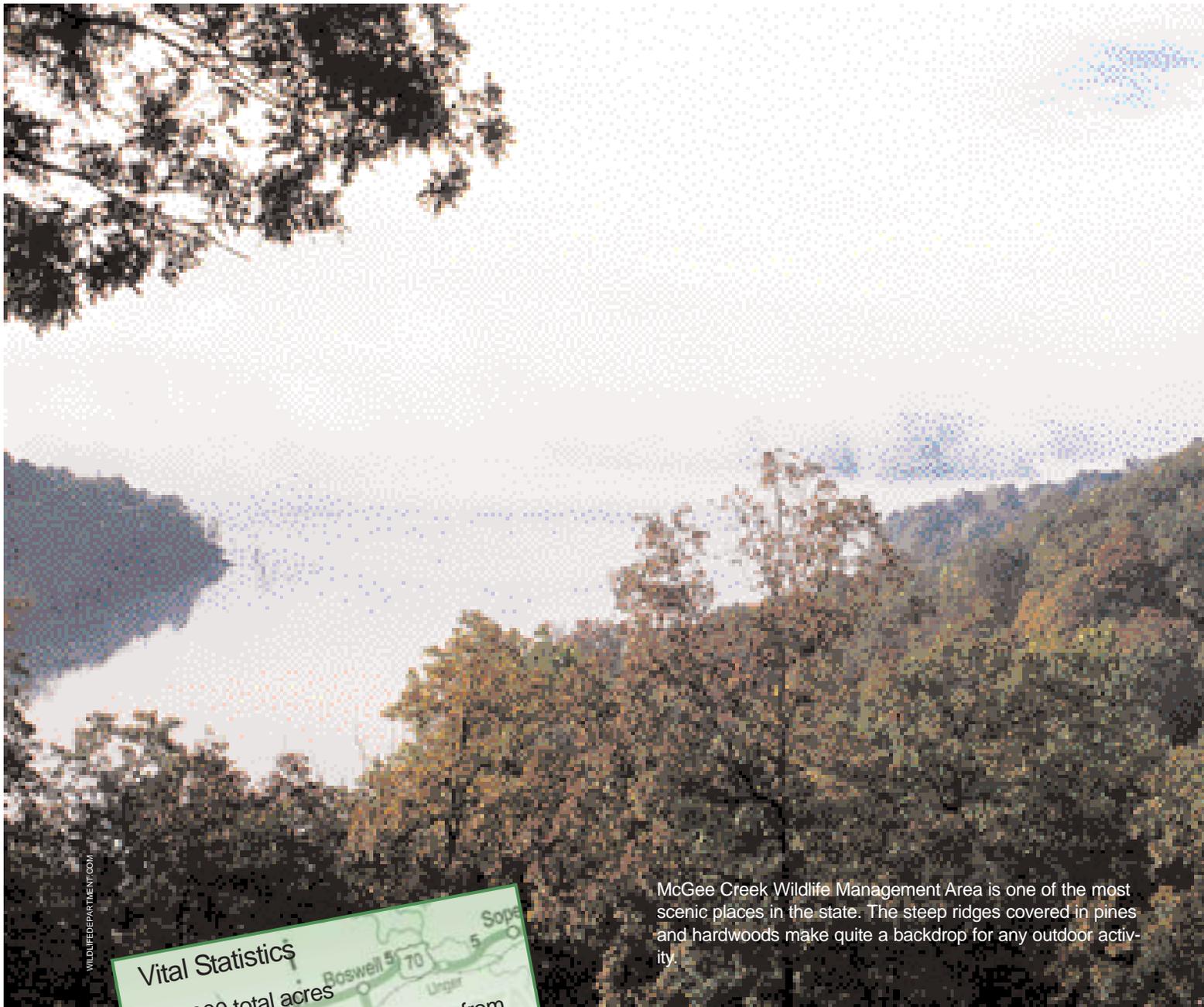
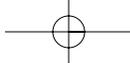
Two turkey hunters converging on the same gobbling turkey can end in disaster if neither makes absolutely sure of their target and what is beyond their target before pulling the trigger. If a hunter encounters another hunter converging on the same turkey, common sense says not to make turkey calls to alert the hunter to your presence, nor does the waving of your hand or any other body movements. The safest way to alert another hunter is with your voice. A “Hey! Don't shoot! I'm a hunter!” is the best. So what if it spooks the turkey away, at least both of you will be able to enjoy another turkey season.

Moving to a different calling setup on a hung up turkey can be productive, but again it should be done very, very cautiously. If two hunters are hunting together, then one designated caller can attempt to dislodge a hung up tom by moving further away to call. Sometimes this “leaving hen” trick can induce a tom into following. By adjusting his angle, the caller can try to lure the tom in a path that converges with the designated shooter's line of fire.

- Be persistent

The difference between collecting a “whale-rope” Eastern turkey beard and coming home empty handed is persistence. April weather in southeast Oklahoma means rain for what seems like every two out of three days. Wet weather usually means even less gobbling activity by the already tight-lipped Eastern birds. A hunter who can dedicate five or more days has the best opportunity for getting one good morning for collecting an Eastern gobbler.

Persistence also pays after an unsuccessful morning. Many turkey hunters give up to hunger pains and head back to camp or the truck by mid-morning. A hunter who can tough it out through 1 or 2 p.m. may have a shot at finding a lone gobbler who is receptive to a few, sparingly given, calls from your favorite box, slate or diaphragm.



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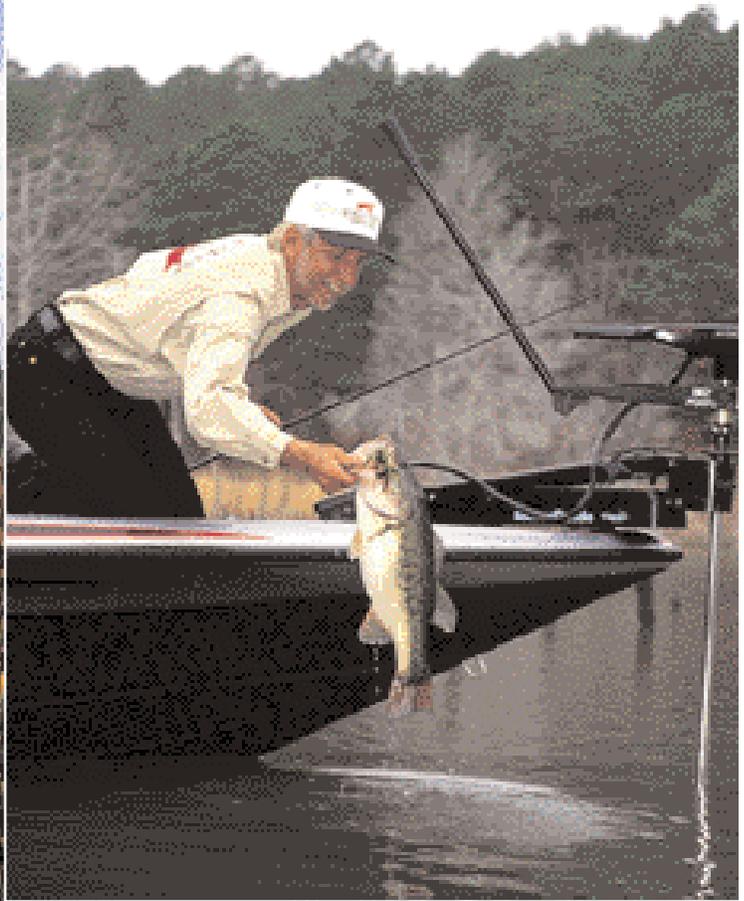
Vital Statistics

- 10,000 total acres
- Terrain within the WMA ranges from steep to moderately steep. Vegetation consists primarily of oak-pine forests. The average precipitation of the area is about 52 inches annually.
- McGee Creek WMA is situated in southcentral Atoka County. Located 11 miles east of Stringtown on Greasy Bend road.
- Area Biologist is Buddy Prather. He also manages Atoka and Stringtown WMAs. His phone number is (580) 346-7664 his e-mail address is atokawma@wilnet1.com.

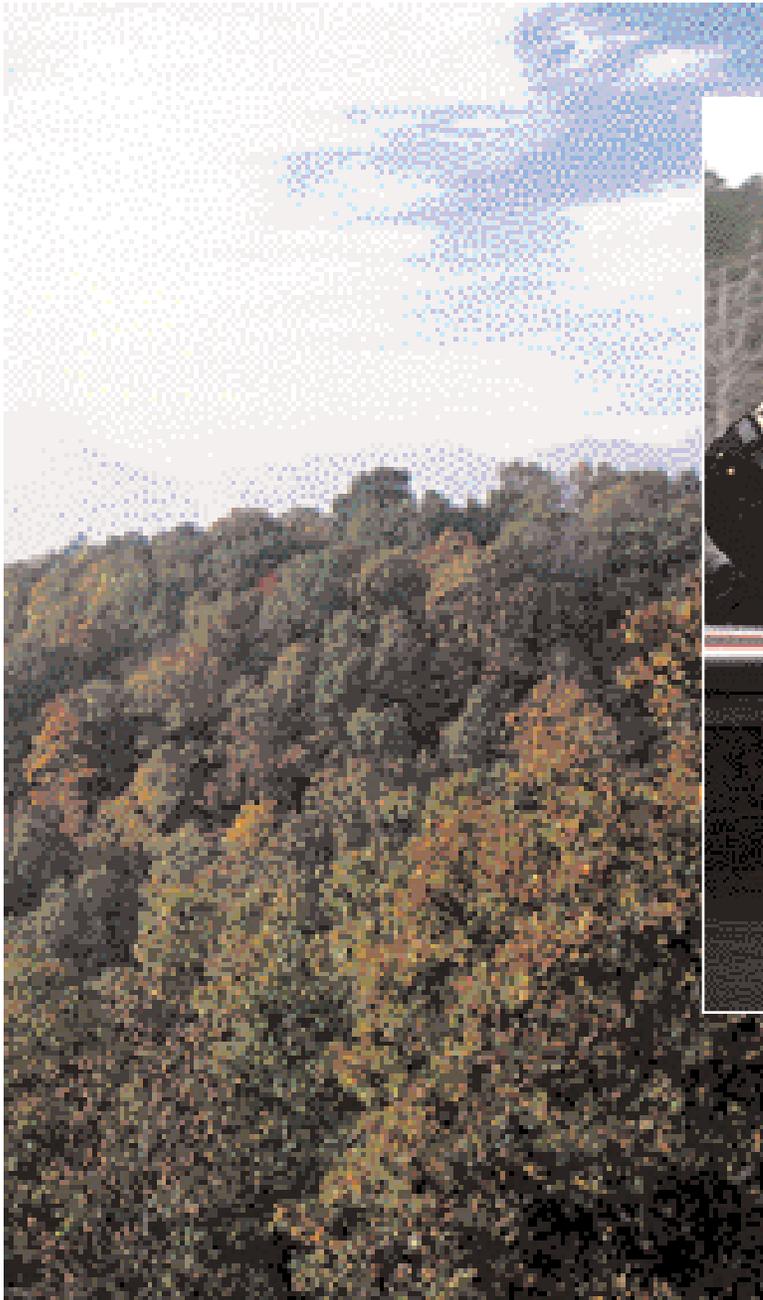
McGee Creek Wildlife Management Area is one of the most scenic places in the state. The steep ridges covered in pines and hardwoods make quite a backdrop for any outdoor activity.

ridges, rocky outcroppings and occasional small clearings or grassy meadows interspersed. To a white-tailed deer or Eastern turkey hunter, McGee Creek presents an inexhaustible supply of hunting locations and scenarios. Native foods such as acorns attract deer to ridgetops and other upland areas. Forbs and tubers such as wild onion grow in low-lying areas and is a staple of wild turkeys. Small game including both gray and fox squirrels are plentiful as well.

Although the WMA is extremely rocky and in places steep, the network of roads belies the rugged terrain. The roads on McGee Creek are smooth and wide with numerous parking areas located throughout the area. Of particular note are two scenic pull-offs, which overlook McGee Creek Lake. The stunning images captured at these strategic vantage



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points have been featured numerous times within "Outdoor Oklahoma" magazine and TV show.

DESCRIPTION OF WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT PRACTICES:

Like many other management areas around the state, McGee Creek WMA has benefited by long term studies conducted on nearby Pushmataha WMA. For more than 15 years, several experimental "study" plots have been manipulated by prescribed burning on various time-span rotations. Through the research at Pushmataha WMA, it's been found that a burning rotation of once every three years provides not only game species such as deer and turkey with optimum food and cover, but also benefits many non-game species as well. This management strategy has been applied very effectively at McGee Creek WMA. The goal of biologists is to burn approximately 1/3 of the

The WMA borders one of the best bass fishing lakes in the state, McGee Creek Lake. The area is a perfect destination for a combination fishing and hunting trip.

entire area annually, which results in the optimum three-year burn cycle.

In addition, approximately 50 acres of wildlife habitat plots are maintained and planted annually. While these plots don't provide a significant food source to the overall health of game populations, these plots do at times concentrate available game species.

CAMPING AND FACILITIES:

One designated primitive camping area is offered on the area. Additional camping and cabin rental can be obtained through the McGee Creek State Park (580) 889-5822 while both lodging and restaurants are available in Atoka and McAlester. The Atoka City Hall can be reached at (580) 889-3341.

FISHING OPPORTUNITIES:

One could easily write an entire separate article on the outstanding fishing at McGee Creek Lake. Through stockings of Florida largemouth bass, the lake has gained the reputation as one of Oklahoma's top lakes for springtime trophy bass. Catfish and crappie are also good bets on the scenic reservoir.