

California's Milton Reservoir

— A Future Quality Fishery?

A former trophy fishery is on its way back under experimental management.

By DON VACHINI

Parking my van on the dam at Jackson Meadows Reservoir, I was able to see several miles down the Middle Yuba canyon. At first glance, the tiny lake appeared quite similar to many other North Sierra impoundments — a dab of emerald surrounded by evergreen forest and lofty peaks. However, outward observation could neither reveal its underlying past or present angling conditions nor its impact upon the future of California's quality trout fishing.

From my vantage point on the Henness Pass Road, I was observing tiny Milton Reservoir prior to driving the remaining two miles down the bumpy, unpaved road to its shoreline. A dam on the Middle Yuba River in the early 1930s formed a 70-acre water storage facility at the 5,950-ft. elevation.

Dominated by a healthy population of brown trout, the Middle Yuba not only possessed excellent spawning habitat but provided natural stocks for the newly created reservoir. Thriving aquatic vegetation and ideal water temperatures created a marvelous habitat for insect life, upon which trout fed voraciously and grew to large proportions.

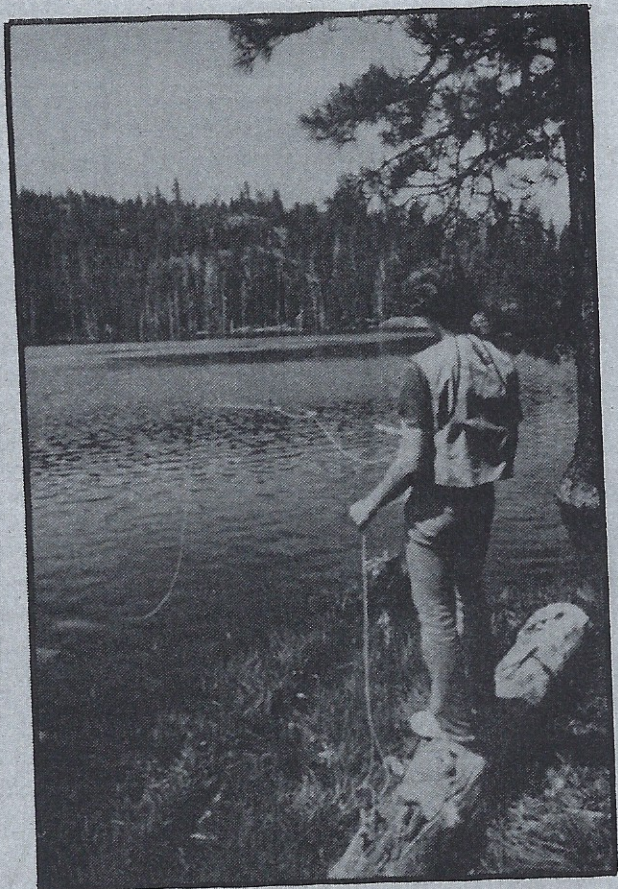
Meanwhile, poor road conditions kept fishing pressure extremely light and fish up to 20 inches and 10 pounds

were annually taken from its waters well into the 1960s. The real key, however, was that very few of these leviathans were caught each season, which was responsible for maintaining a healthy population for well over 30 years.

Regretably, several factors combined to alter Milton's fishery for the worst during the late '60s. One, road conditions in the rugged mountain area improved making the water more accessible and fishing pressure increased drastically.

Two, the construction of Jackson Meadows Dam two miles above Milton (also on the Middle Yuba) cut off a good percentage of its spawning territory as well as reducing flow into the lake.

A popular and effective method of taking big browns was drifting live shiners, brought in from other waters, as bait. Many of these were illegally released into the lake when anglers left for home. Gradually but steadily an ecological problem occurred at the Reservoir. Ten-lb. trout are not easily replaced and when excessive numbers were consistently removed it allowed



Casting flies or lures can be difficult due to shoreline trees and brush. Most browns we caught were natives between 8-10 inches, proof that natural stocking is already taking place.

the shiner and bullhead population to squeeze out the trout and dominate the lake.

For a period throughout the '70s no knowledgeable fisherman seriously bothered much with Milton because, as one local Truckee resident confessed, "Who wants to fish for shiners and bullheads?"

Though Milton was little known, word of its plight spread. California Trout, Inc., an organization dedicated to the protection and preservation of the State's wild trout, steelhead and the waters that nurture them, became aware and for some time expressed an interest in restoring it. A sample taken by the Department of Fish and Game (DFG), working in cooperation with CalTrout, officially disclosed an overwhelming population of brown bullhead and Lahontan redbreast shiners present in the lake.

In September of 1981 when the Sierra Power Company drained most of the Reservoir for repairs, the DFG moved to rid the lake of its non-game populations. Trout were stunned and

carefully removed and the lake was treated with rotenone to destroy remaining non-game species. Electro-shock samples of the river upstream revealed no shiners or bullhead and a healthy population of various-sized browns, so consequently it was not chemically treated.

DFG indications pointed toward initiating a catchable trout program for Milton. However, CalTrout's goal was to restore it to prior trophy status and maintain it as self-sustaining. "We feel the way to achieve this," stated Richard May, President of CalTrout, Inc., "is through special management."

Largely through CalTrout persuasion, the California Fish and Game Commission adopted special regulations for Milton beginning in 1982. Only artificial lures or flies with single, barbless hooks may be used and a bag limit of two fish per day is allowed, both of which must be 12 inches or *under*. All fish over 12 inches must be released.

"The regs will allow anglers a decent bag of moderate-sized fish while at the same time protecting larger specimens and allowing them to develop their full trophy potential," continued May.

While this experiment is California's first involving a maximum size limit, it has been used successfully in spots throughout the West. The most notable example is Yellowstone Lake.

Hopefully, these restrictions will result in two major outcomes at Milton: 1) Within four to five years it will offer accessible fishing for trophy brown trout, and 2) There will be enough large trout in the lake to maintain a natural balance between trout and non-salmonids. "We have found browns to be ideal for the biological control of lesser species," mentioned May.

In mid-June of 1982 my sons and I visited Milton, anxious to sample its cleansed waters. Though we found it

aesthetically pleasing, it proved tough to fish. In some areas, steep shorelines make access difficult if not impossible and in others lakeside trees and brush make casting difficult. Certainly a boat or float tube is almost a must, though not absolutely necessary.

While the area along the dam is open and allows undisturbed casting, the locale that appealed to all our eyes was the inlet area. Here the entering river spreads into a delta-like flat, infested with scrub willows, scattered cottonwoods and other assorted brush, yet offering enough places to effectively work a fly or lure.

Wading as far out as I dared where the river met lake, I cast my streamer into the moving channel and let the current bounce it along the bottom and into the lake. Whenever I try for big browns, my first choice is a sculpin imitation fished on a sink tip line. Imparting an erratic, herky-jerk action to simulate a live sculpin, I'd let it settle motionless on the sandy lake bottom for a minute or so after each drift.

The quiet gurgling of the river had lulled me to serene thoughts when something smashed my fly once . . . twice . . . and then took off in a reel-screaming run for mid-lake. Amid cheers from my boys (and laughs when I lost my balance and almost took a bath), I carefully played my unseen quarry. Soon I was able to lead a 15-in. bronze battler to net and quickly release it.

Though we caught and released six more browns, that was the biggest fish of the day for us. All others ranged from 8 to 10 inches and were caught in the inlet area (we had agreed to release all fish so as not to deplete any precious natural stock for the future).

As I found out later, all the *Salmo trutta* we caught were natives, obviously downstreamers. Though the DFG was scheduled to stock both catchable and

broodstock browns in the early summer and fall, none were planted because ". . . Disease caused the loss of all surplus fish from Mt. Whitney Hatchery the past season," bemoaned John Dienstadt, head of California's Wild Trout Program. Three-thousand browns were ticketed for stocking.

Thus, the presence of the specimens we caught indicates natural stocking is taking place — a very healthy sign at such an early stage. "The most effective method of rebuilding a trophy fishery," said Dienstadt, "is via stock from the same watershed." Thus the non-stocking "setback" is probably a blessing in disguise for Milton.

While not expected to peak for four to five years, the present fishery seems to be on solid footing regarding native fish. Only time is needed to allow them to grow in size and stature.

Milton is one of a fast growing list of CalTrout projects under special management. While CalTrout believes that size, not numbers, is the quintessence of fishermen's dreams, the DFG's main reason for focusing on the lake is to experiment for future projects. What research is gathered at Milton will quite possibly be worth applying to other waters.

According to Lew Palmer, Milton's project leader, the project could have widespread implications. He believes that California could be on the verge of better-than-ever trout fishing in the lakes now besieged with salmonid-nonsalmonid imbalances. His feeling is that once established, large piscivorous trout will eliminate the need to chemically treat and restock troubled waters.

If for no other reason, these special projects are an effort to bring back quality fishing to selected waters. Whatever the long-range results, anglers at Milton are currently finding out that a good trout is much too valuable to be caught only once! □

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