

Lake Berryessa's Bonanza Trout

Don Vachini

Eyeing the landmark once again, we again corrected our course. Finally, cutting the motor we eased the boat near a large, rocky outcropping. Not another craft was in sight and in the early morning light, trout were showing all around us, their large forms causing heavy "kerplunks" in their feeding forays. The anticipation of a great day helped remove some of the chill as we readied for action.

Our party consisted of Steve Belaus, his son Paul, Ron Sheaves, my sons, Jason and Matt, and me. We were fishing Lake Berryessa which sits at the 440-foot elevation in the Coastal Mountains overlooking the wine country towns of St. Helena, Yountville and Napa. Our reason for being here was to sample the lake's notorious fall/winter trophy trout fishery.

Berryessa had its beginning in 1956

when Monticello Dam was completed on Putah Creek. Mainly a water storing reservoir, it contains 20,000 surface acres when full and provides 168 miles of shoreline — all of which are fishable from a boat. Less than an hour's drive from Sacramento to the east and San Francisco to the south, the lake is over 25 miles long by three miles wide.

Situated in a locale with high summer temperatures, it is very popular with

speedboaters and waterskiers, who beat its waters to a froth from mid-May until late September. During this period, Berryessa's surface water temperature is warm but as fall rolls into winter, the colder water, which the trout prefer, turns over and moves to the surface.

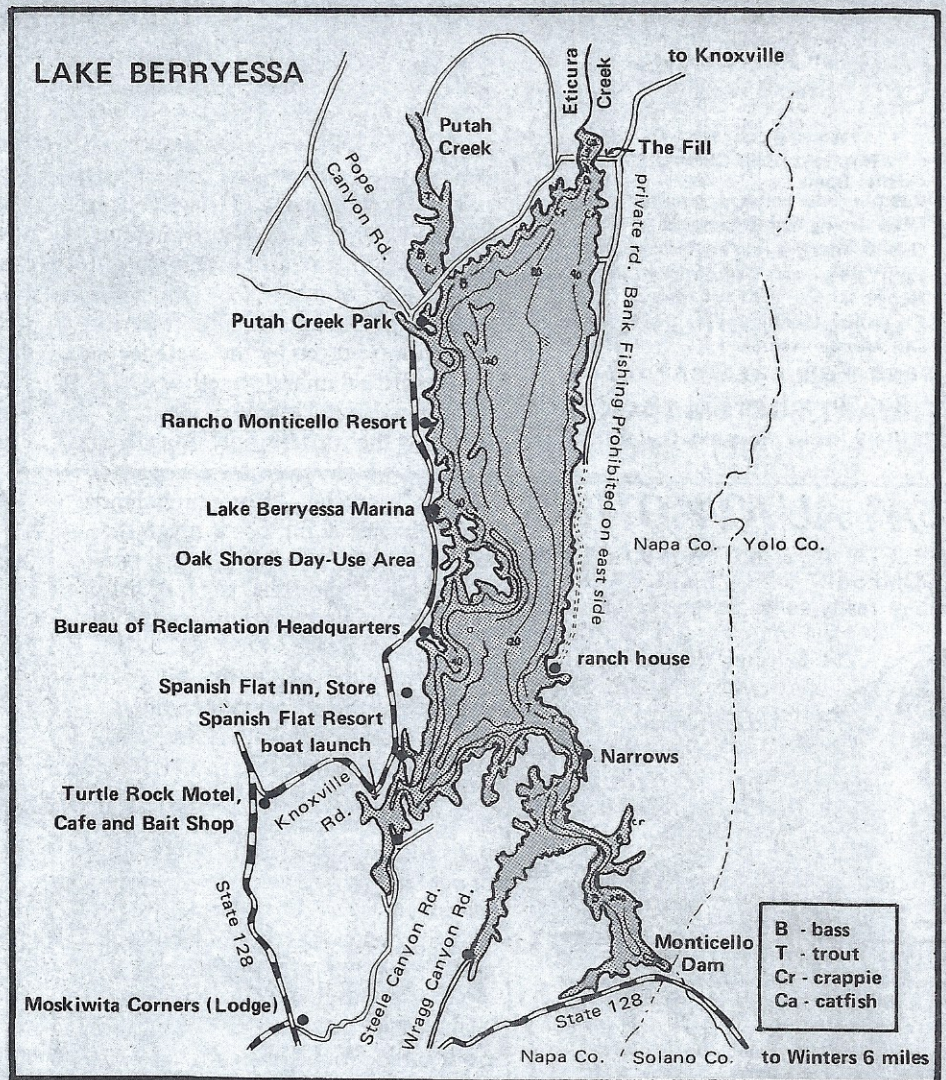
For its first decade, angling in the lake was principally for warmwater species with large and smallmouth bass, catfish and bluegill being the main attractions. Rainbow trout were planted annually by the California Department of Fish and Game (DFG) to supplement some native residents trapped behind the dam, but this provided an insignificant fishery as very few trout showed up in anglers' catches. Typical of planters, those caught were usually measured in inches rather than pounds.

Though somewhat productive for bass and catfish, the trout fishery remained questionable at best up through the mid-1960s. However, thanks to some good fortune and wise DFG planning, the lake was chosen for a Trophy Trout Program (TTP) in 1968, thereby beginning a turnaround for trout fishing. According to Jack White, DFG Information Officer at the Region 3 office, "The main goal of the TTP in Berryessa was to establish fishing for good-sized trout."

Actually the catalyst for this program goes back two years to the introduction of the threadfin shad from the southern United States. This small baitfish took hold in the lake in a big way. They mature at three to four inches and their feeding habits are such that they don't compete with other species for food, making them ideal forage for other species. "While Berryessa's unique quality of fall water turnover was ideal for the TTP," mentioned White, "the threadfin shad as a forage fish made the project possible and successful."

According to the DFG, this fish is the key to growing large trout over a short period of time. "The trout at Berryessa average well over a pound of growth per season because of the threadfin forage fish," said Bob Rawstron, currently with the Anadromous Fisheries Bureau, but formerly in charge of the original TTP at Berryessa. By gorging heavily on these abundant fish, trout can attain many times their normal yearly growth.

The rainbows range from one-third to one-quarter pound per fish when planted in the spring, so most are hefty by fall. Obviously, a holdover fish will approach three to five pounds and in some cases more. In the fall of 1982 Richard Moynihan of nearby Vacaville



boated a 38-inch, 14-¾ pound lunker near the dam. Though this was not a typical Berryessa trout, the program has developed so well that for the past eight years the lake's namesake has become synonymous with big trout.

Initially, 57,000 Coleman strain rainbow trout were planted, but over the past several years that figure has been expanded to 150,000 annually. Slightly different than the hatchery rainbows planted elsewhere, this strain seems well suited to the lake's conditions. "The Coleman strain, chosen because it is the most efficient in terms of angler return, is a mixture of both Kamloops and steelhead," stated Rawstron.

The Coleman strain are prolific feeders, making them well suited to the threadfin populations. Based on DFG studies, they feed actively when water temperatures are between 57 to 59 degrees — precisely the conditions present within the upper five feet of Berryessa's surface during the fall/winter months.

This particular November morning we were drifting near one of our favorite haunts. Known simply as the "farm-

house," it is characterized by a large outcropping of rocks which drop well into the lake forming an underwater ridge. In the dawn's first light, large patches of black rain clouds dotted an otherwise clear sky.

Our gear consisted of ultralight spinning rods and reels loaded with four-pound line and No. 6 hooks. To the hook we rigged a live minnow with no additional weight and flipped it 30 to 40 feet from the boat. We were free floating about 50 to 60 feet from shore.

Ten minutes seemed like an eternity as the trout suddenly stopped their surface action. "When are we going to get some action?" Matt asked. No sooner were the words out of his mouth when Jason's rod tip began jiggling. Opening his bail, he waited about a half a minute, took up slack and set the hook. His rod bowed and the drag protested as a silvery shape erupted where his minnow had been drifting. "Fish on!" he hollered, as the brawler made for the lake's bottom.

The trout made several scorching runs but Jason kept the pressure on and

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it was soon wriggling in the net. Probably only a yearling fish, it tipped the scales at just over two pounds and drew a shout of joy from Jason.

Action was sporadic but consistent as after two hours we had boated four fish all between two and three pounds. By now, several boats were around us and, though I wouldn't consider the action hot, I observed six more nice rainbows taken during a 45-minute period. All fish were taken by the same tactics.

The drifted minnow method is the most popular and effective means of tempting the winter trout. Rigging the minnow, which resembles a wounded baitfish, is crucial. "Hook the minnow under the dorsal fin, not through the mouth," advised Claude Davis, a semi-retired guide who fishes the lake daily, "because the flashing action of the fish is more attractive."

The minnow usually tips off a trout's presence by swimming frantically to escape, causing a slight dancing sensation in the rod tip. This feeling is the key to open the bail, "... so that the trout feels less resistance and will ingest the minnow," says Davis. An ultralight or light action rod helps detect this slight movement.

Berryessa trout tend to relentlessly cruise the ridges and dropoffs and by drifting minnows over these areas action is usually forthcoming. After turnover, trout can be found just about anywhere on the lake, though I have caught the majority of my trout in the shoreline areas as opposed to deep, open water.

Besides ridges and dropoffs, the mouths of certain feeder creeks have been very productive, especially after the heavy winter rains have it. Stacking up near the mouths of Pope, Eticura, Putah and Capell creeks, many trout attempt spawning runs.

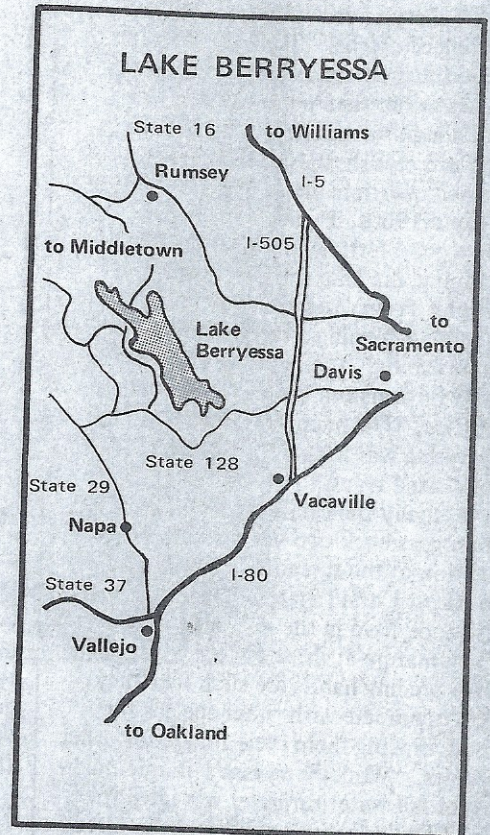
However, low seasonal flow and poor overall habitat make these streams insignificant as far as maintaining a self-sustaining fishery. For this reason the DFG relies on heavy seasonal plants instead of natural propagation to maintain the ongoing Trophy Trout Program. According to DFG statistics, the trout populations in Berryessa are healthy and numerous with a mixed variety of current and holdover fish of one to several years.

Since the project's inception, a three fish limit has been in effect — justifiable since trout are now measured in pounds, not inches!

By casting lures or streamers just past where the creeks enter the lake, I have enjoyed many hours of steady action. I always practice catch and release at these

hot spots to allow the spawners a chance to fulfill their destiny.

For the shore fisherman, conditions can be more restrictive as the whole east shore is private land. However, most of the west shore is open. Since trout cruise the shoreline points that jut into the water, there is no need to move around as they will usually come to the angler. Drifting a minnow under a bobber or dunking worms or salmon eggs on the bottom are proven methods for those bound to land. Of course, lures and streamers are occasionally intercepted in these spots too.



Trolling is productive but usually only over the dropoffs leading to the old creek channels. The "narrows" is a popular winter trolling area as is the dam area.

On some occasions, however, one is fortunate enough to be near a school of trout chasing threadfins right on the surface. At this time a lure or fly setup can provide some unique thrills. By repeatedly casting lures or streamers into the mass of boiling baitfish and retrieving quickly, a trout will sometimes be deceived. On the few occasions I have experienced this luck, the trout, once hooked, seemed more interested in returning to feed on the school of shad than making a run for it! Obviously, much of the trout's inherent caution is forgotten during these dining sprees.

It is wise to have a separate rod and reel of your choice rigged and ready to go so that when this opportunity presents itself it isn't wasted. These feeding frenzies may be within casting range only up to a few minutes at most. A silver Kastmaster or hammered spoon are very effective lures and white streamer flies (Marabou Muddler) on sink-tip lines are good fly rod bets.

Though action is fast throughout most of the winter, it is not always so at all locations. Some key tips can help one locate good choices for action. Large groups of diving ducks or sea gulls diving into the lake usually indicate concentrations of baitfish. When you spot the baitfish, trout are not far away. Also, large clusters of boats sometimes tip off a productive area. Whenever these are found, it pays to investigate. However, remember not to infringe upon the rights of other anglers — give them some room!

Though there are ample locations on shore which will provide fish, a boat is almost a must to consistently score. You must be able to travel to where the fish are concentrated, as they move all over. Boaters should dress warmly and always be prepared for rain.

There are several marinas on the west side, providing launches and boat rental facilities as well as limited lodging and camping spaces. Gear, including live minnows, is readily available.

What has the Trophy Trout Program meant to Berryessa? The DFG took a virtually troutless lake and turned it into one of the West's finest trout fisheries by using the lake's conditions to advantage. In a little over a decade of excellent management, the program is firmly established. "Pre-1968 it took over 100 angler hours to catch a trout at Berryessa," said Rawstron. "Now," he beamed, "it takes an average of six hours!"

A crisp fall morning is enhanced by the chance of landing a trio of fine trout. Even a bone-chilling winter drizzle is tolerated with the expectation of battling a feisty three- to five-pounder. Further bolstering this scenario is the fact that only a few miles away are numerous world renowned wineries.

What better way to cap off a successful day of trout on this amazing water than to toast the day's catch with some local vintage? With or without the toast, however, one thing is certain — Berryessa is well worth sampling for, like the Napa County wines produced nearby, it keeps getting better with age!



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