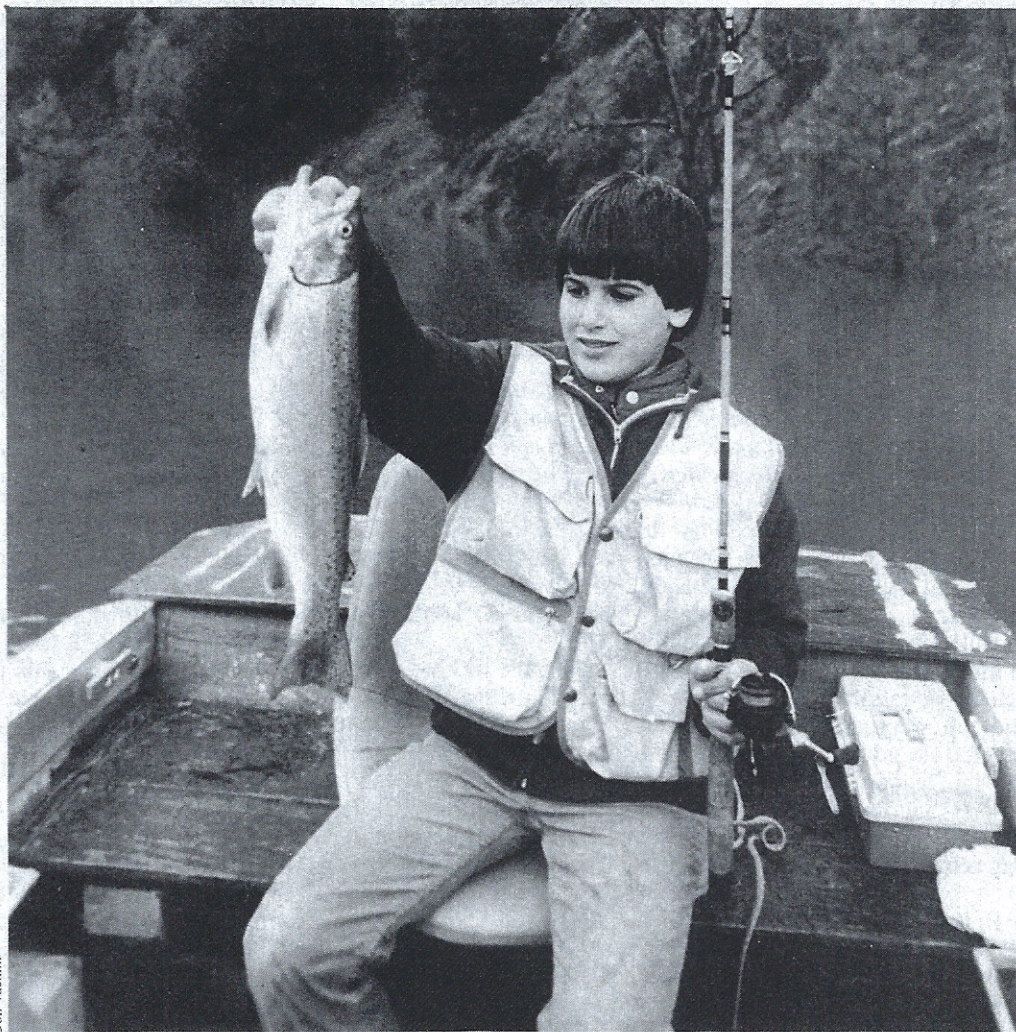


Berryessa's Bounty

by Don Vachini



Don Vachini

With a revised management program, this wine-country lake is producing vintage trout

The December day dawned to a gray overcast, and the chill nipped at down jackets, wool socks and thermal underwear. Outside of a few raucous acorn woodpeckers, the early morning silence was broken only by the sloshes and splashes of large trout porpoising all around our boat as we drifted about 50 feet offshore. We shivered more from excitement than cold.

Our guide Claude Davis, my son,

A mix of Kamloops and steelhead, the Coleman rainbow was selected solely for Berryessa. This 3½-pounder shows the fish's characteristic small head and large girth.

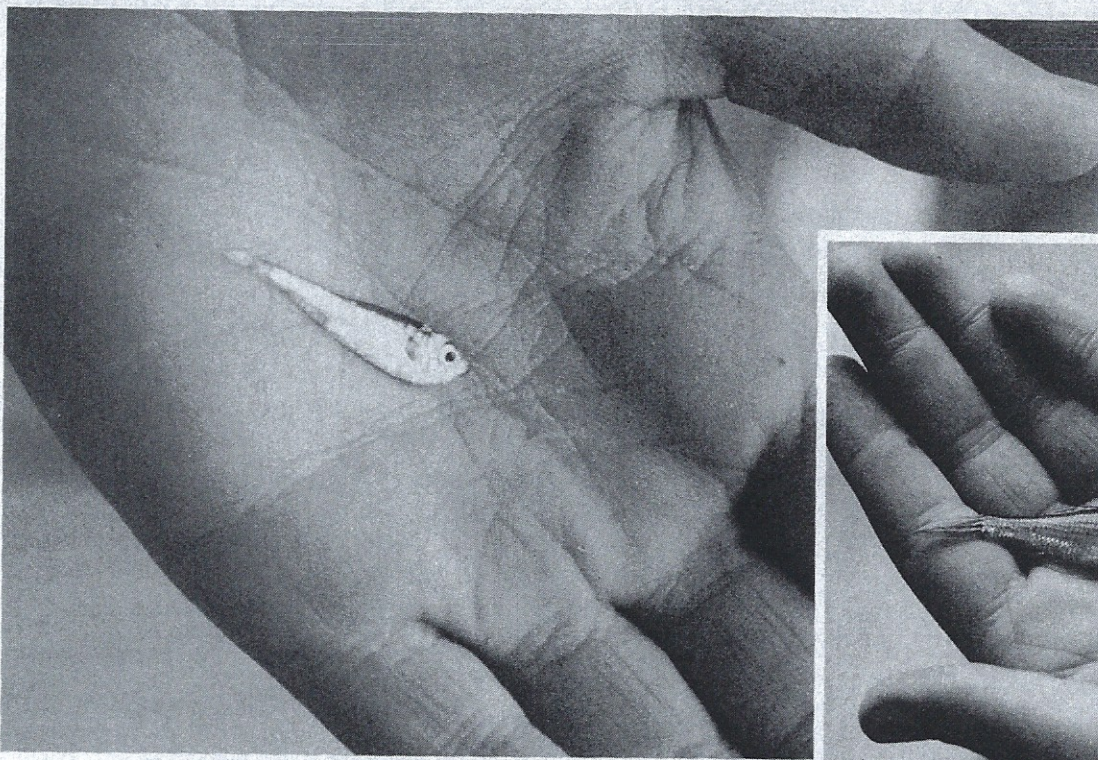
Jason, and I were braving the elements to sample Lake Berryessa's notorious fall-winter trout.

Overlooking such wine country settlements as Napa, Yountville, and

St. Helena, this low-elevation lake (440 feet) was originally conceived as a vast reservoir for irrigation and domestic water supply. It was created in 1956 at the completion of Monticello Dam on Putah Creek, and holds 22,000 surface acres in its 25- by 3-mile boundaries. All 168 miles of its shoreline is fishable by boat.

From the beginning Napa County officials sought to develop the lake's recreational potential. Consequently, it

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(Above) The tiny threadfin shad has become a staple in the diet of Berryessa trout, which now grow to trophy size.

(Right) A minnow hooked under the dorsal fin can move about, making it more attractive to the trout. The drifted-minnow technique is the most popular method of taking winter trout at Berryessa.

has evolved into one of the state's more popular dual-purpose waters, being visited by over a million outdoor enthusiasts each season.

Located 46 miles west of the state capital and 56 miles north of San Francisco, the lake offers quality trout fishing at a time when most higher-elevation waters are closed for the year. November, through January is a slack time for the resorts, and its during this peaceful season of light pressure that the trout fishing is by far the best it will be all season.

During its first decade, Berryessa offered a commendable warm-water fishery for black bass and catfish, with crappies and bluegills providing steady backup action. The California Department of Fish and Game (DFG) also maintained a put-and-take trout program during this time, but it proved to be sort of a mystery. Despite the great numbers of trout planted, very few wound up in anglers' creels; DFG studies showed that it took over 100 angler hours to land a trout on this expansive water! And the few that were finally caught were usually measured in inches, not pounds.

Following a pattern similar to all new reservoirs, the bass population began a rapid decline during the mid-1960s. According to John Emig, a fisheries biologist with the DFG, most bass lakes reach their peak in about 10 to 15 years.

"At this time the initially abundant nutrients from inundated soil and vegetation decomposition are lost and the water drops back to some level of stability."

At this point, the lake's angling future appeared uncertain. However, under the guidance of the DFG, one of the more startling success stories was initiated. Taking advantage of the lake's existing conditions, fisheries biologists selected Berryessa for trophy trout management. This pilot program not only set in motion a dramatic about-face for the trout fishery, but also brought the overall angling conditions out of the doldrums.

It is no secret that trout prefer water temperatures somewhere in the mid-50s. In Berryessa this ideal temperature exists year round. During the summer 50 degree water is found 40 to 60 feet down, but as autumn approaches, the lake undergoes a pleasant metamorphosis. During this phenomenon, known as turnover, warm surface water is replaced by the colder strata from the depths and surface temperatures linger in the 57- to 59-degree range for approximately four months.

Possibly the biggest event in establishing the trophy trout program took place in 1966 with the introduction of a tiny bait fish from the southern United States. It has long been common knowledge that as trout grow in size,

they prefer to feed on larger fish. The threadfin shad matures at 3 to 4 inches, reproduces prodigiously and does not compete with other species for food, making it an ideal forage fish. Taking hold in a big way, this plankton eater was the key to the successful development of the trophy program.

Threadfin spawn by the millions during the early summer, they move to the surface in huge schools later in the season, thereby making themselves available to the hungry trout.

Though bass, catfish and crappie all feed on the shad, it has become a staple in the diet of the trout. According to the DFG this fish is responsible for the substantial and rapid growth of the trout.

"The trout at Berryessa average well over a pound of growth per season because of this forage fish," informed Bob Rawstron, who was in charge of the initial trophy trout program. "The rainbows are from 1/4 to 1/3 pound when planted in the spring and most achieve good size by the fall of that year."

Holdover fish will approach 2 to 5 pounds and more in some cases. A 38-inch, 14 3/4-pounder was boated near the dam in 1982!

The initial trophy plant in 1968 consisted of 57,000 Coleman-strain rainbow trout, but that has escalated to between 150,000 and 200,000 annually. Selected specifically for Ber-

ryessa, this strain differs from catchables planted elsewhere. "The Coleman strain, chosen because it is most efficient in terms of angler returns, is a mixture of both Kamloops and steelhead," mentioned Rawstron.

Noted for their voracious appetite, Coleman rainbows have been known to gain up to six times their normal growth by gorging on the complying shad. In addition, their fighting characteristics frequently provide an extra jolt of adrenaline to the angler on the opposite end of the line.

A few thousand king salmon have also been released into the lake the past three seasons to add a little variety to the established rainbow fishery.

While a food-chain relationship exists between the trout and the shad, the catalyst that brings the action to the top is the fall turnover. Though Claude Davis, a semiretired guide out of Markley Cove, uses downriggers 30 to 50 feet deep to consistently take trout in the summer, he admits fall-winter trout are a different ball game. "From late-October through February surface conditions are near perfect and trout can be taken almost anywhere along shallow shorelines and coves," he said.

The late December morning we were on Markley Cove, we were taking up Davis on an offer we couldn't refuse. "Christmas season is probably the peak time for surface action," he confided. "Taking fish is as close to a sure thing as can be, and most people are off the lake due to the holidays."

Surrounded on three sides by typical Coastal Mountain oak, pine and bay woodlands, we were alone but for several grebes whose rapid surfacing and submerging reminded me of a child playing peek-a-boo. We opted for light-action spinning rods and reels loaded with 4-pound-test monofilament. To the size 6 hook we attached a live minnow with no additional weight and flipped it as far out as we could.

After an eternitylike 15 minutes, Jason's rod tip began a jiggling dance as he watched line roll off his spool. Patiently waiting a few moments, he closed the bail, took up the slack and raised his rod sharply. The sting of steel produced instant results. After a couple of surface splashes the brawler sounded, creating a whiplike vibration in my 12-year-old's rod. After its third drag-straining run, the silvery, deep-bodied 3½-pounder was brought to net.

Before the rains pelted us a short two hours later we had both boated our three-trout limits, taken on minnows.

All our fish were like peas in a pod. Between 12 and 15 inches, they sported small heads and a deep girth, which characterize the healthy, well-fed Berryessa salmonoids.

"The drifted-minnow technique is probably the most popular and effective method of taking fall-winter trout," advised Davis. "The minnow resembles a wounded bait fish so rigging is crucial. Hook it under the dorsal fin, not the lips. This way it can swim naturally, and its flashing action is more attractive."

Rigged in this manner the minnow usually tips off a trout's presence by swimming frantically to escape, causing a slight movement in the rod tip. An ultralight or light-action rod helps detect this sensation.

Davis suggests leaving the bail open and gently holding the line between two fingers in order to feel minnow movement. "This way the trout feels less resistance and will ingest the bait, making for a solid hook-up."

While winter trout can be taken at all hours, dawn seems to be the most feasible. "This is the best chance to take a big trout because this is when they seem to be in the shallows and less wary," professed Davis. In early morning hours the minnow should be fished in 3 to 5 feet of water, then deeper as the days grows older according to Davis. A clear plastic bobber is helpful in keeping the minnow at the desired depth.

If the action is not directly on the top, Davis foregoes the bobber and anchors off points of land and known drop-offs, keeping the bait a foot or so off the bottom. Most winter trout are taken in water 5 to 20 feet deep, no more than 50 to 100 feet from shore.

The key to fishing Berryessa is locating concentrations of shad, for the trout will not be far away. Large concentrations of big rainbows work together to chase the bait fish into coves and keep them cornered for considerable lengths of time while dining on them. One can zero in on these more productive spots and be reasonably certain of action. As Davis states, "Once you find the pantry, you'll find the fish!"

On some occasions, trout can be observed chasing bait fish right on the surface, creating a foaming mass. Repeatedly casting silvery lures or flies into this frenzy can produce some jolting results. I once hooked a trout in one of these top water boils, and to my astonishment, the fish continued to bore right after the school with my shad

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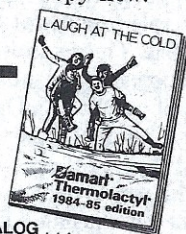
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fly still in its mouth! Obviously, the large rainbows lose much of their inherent caution when involved in these dining maneuvers.

Just coming into vogue at the lake, the shad fly is tied, epoxied and hand painted to imitate the real thing. They are most effective when fished on a sink-tip fly line with a rapid retrieve. To take advantage of this short-lived action, I try to have a separate rod and reel in the boat rigged and ready to go at a moment's notice.

Winter trout can frequently be taken right from the covered docks in the marinas. Shad seek the protection of the docks, and the trout come right in after them. These structures are ideal places to attempt night fishing, which is legal at Berryessa.

After winter rains have fallen and feeder creeks are swollen, there are concentrations of fish near the mouths, where they stack up before ascending to spawn. While both salmon and trout enter these tributaries, low summer flow and poor overall habitat make them insignificant as far as maintaining a self-sustaining fishery.

Some bank fishermen are successful in shoreline areas such as the Oak Shore Day Use Area, and Spanish Flat, Markley and Putah Creek coves, but a boat offers the flexibility to follow the trout.

Seven marinas provide launching, boat rentals and lodging, as well as fishing tackle. Contact any of these resorts for up-to-the-moment information (all have area code 707): Spanish Flat Resort, 966-2201; Markley Cove Resort, 966-2134; Steele Park Resort, 966-2123; Putah Creek Resort, 966-2116; South Shore Resort, 966-2172; Lake Berryessa Marina, 966-2161; and Rancho Monticello Resort, 966-2188.

For further information write the Lake Berryessa Chamber of Commerce, P.O. Box 9164, Spanish Flat, Napa, CA 94558.

The initial goal of the trophy trout program was to simply "establish fishing for good sized trout," according to Rawstron. Today Berryessa is synonymous with big trout, as the rainbows are currently measured in pounds in lieu of inches. Equally pleasing is the DFG statistic that reveals that it now takes only six angler hours to net a trout!

Certainly one of California's finest winter trout lakes, Berryessa appears to be comparable to the fine Napa Valley wines produced nearby — both getting better with age.