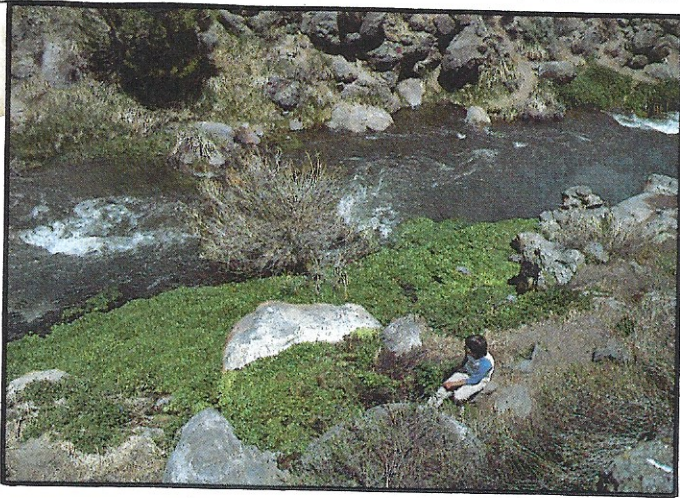
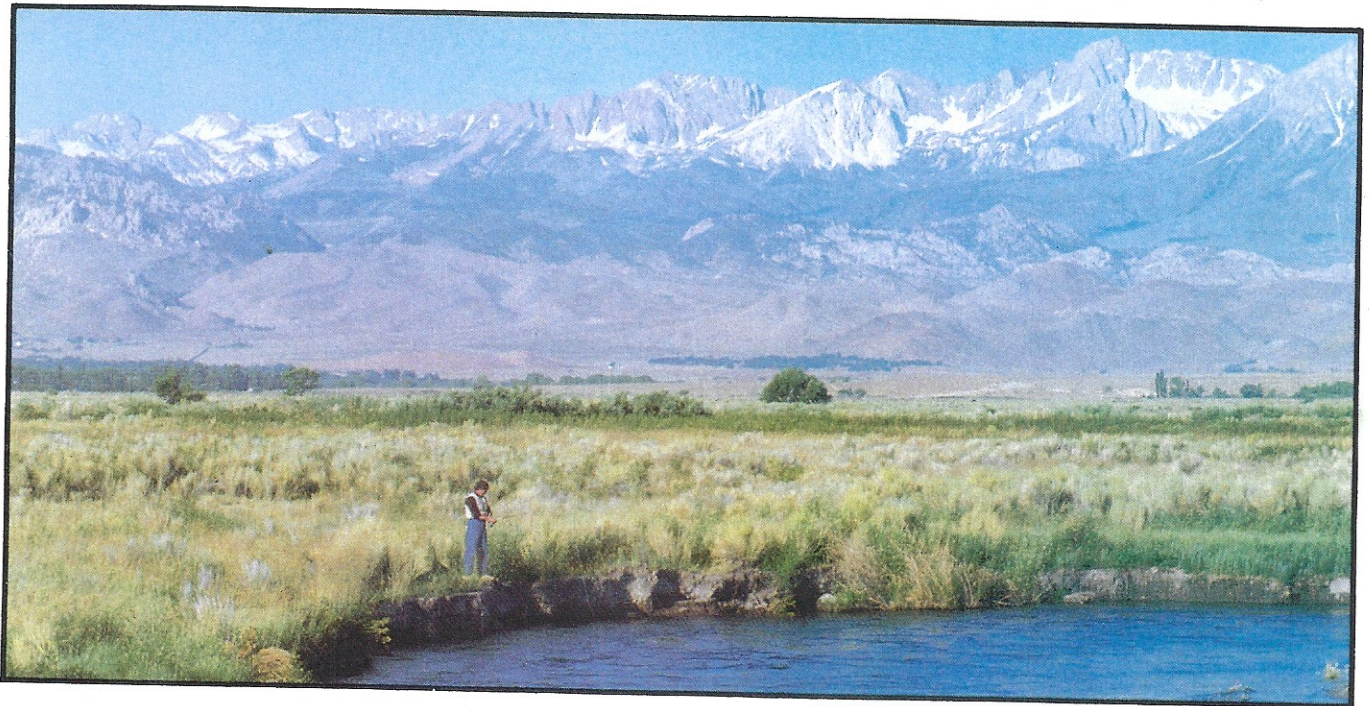


The Owens



A River of Two Faces



by Don Vachini

Stepping out of the icy water, I tucked my rod under an armpit and tried to push my hands deeper into the pockets of my down jacket. The late spring chill bit deep as the morning sun had yet to warm the surrounding countryside. From my vantage point on the grassy shore, I was watching my son, Matt, standing thigh-deep in the uncharacteristically high flow, battling an as yet unseen adversary. His reel screeching and rod bowing under a heavy force, he was framed by the heavily snow-clad Eastern Sierra peaks.

Heretofore, the trout had only been using the

strong current but when the lake-run rainbow began to use aerial tactics my boy really had his hands full. It was apparent he would need both skill and luck to land it.

On this occasion, Matt and I, along with our friend Steve Davis, were sampling a sector of the Owens River near Benton Crossing during late May, 1983.

Noted for its excellent rainbow and brown trout angling, the Owens has two main sources. The product of snowmelt and runoff from the eastern slope of Mt. San Joaquin (11,600 feet elevation) and other lofty Mono County peaks, Deadman and Glass creeks

drain in a southeasterly direction, crossing Highway 395 at Crestview, California. Four miles from here, Deadman Creek enters an area known as Big Springs. It is at this location that the Owens officially is born as huge quantities of water spew forth from the lava bedrock, doubling the flow of the "new" river.

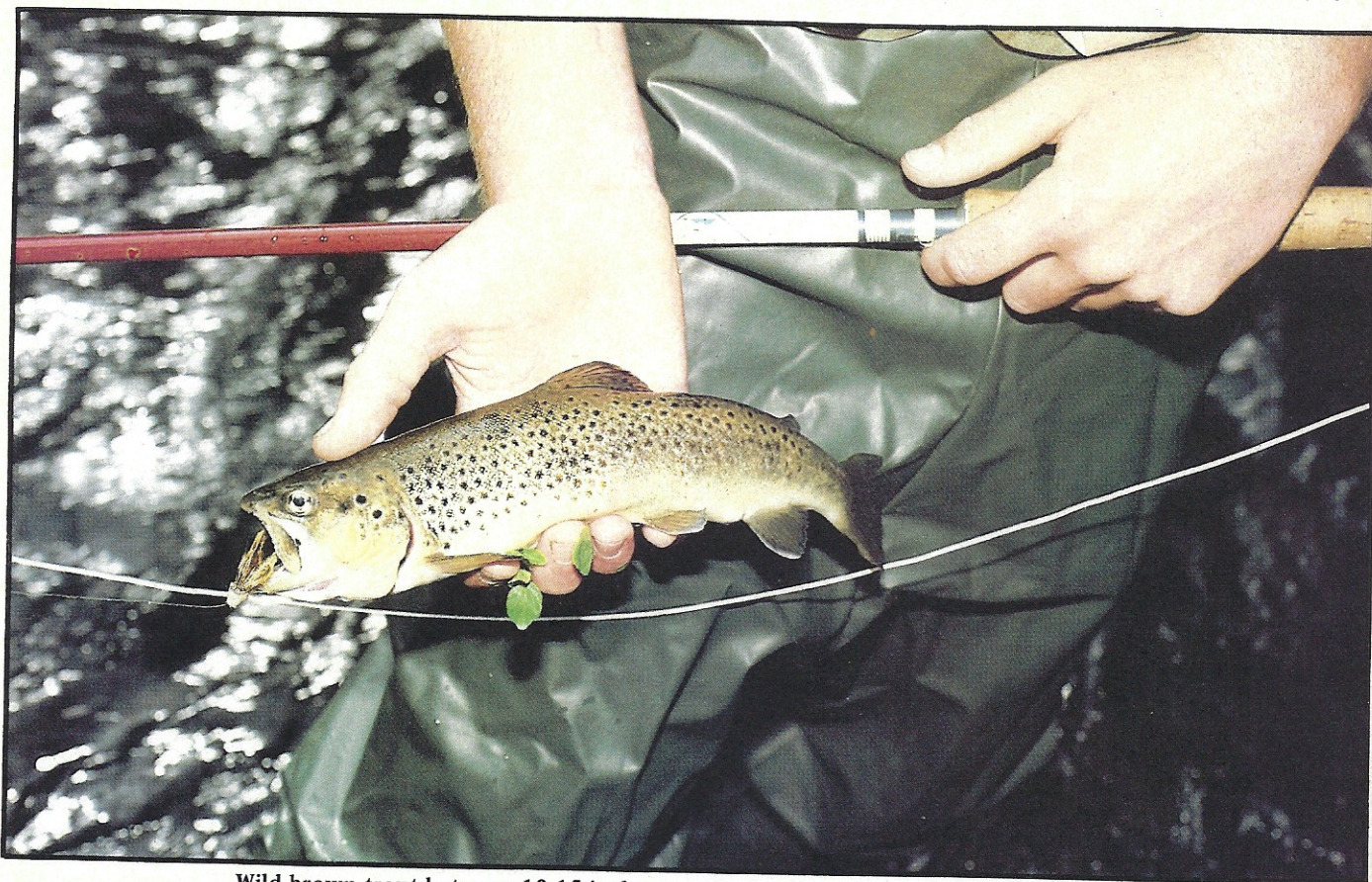
A major source of the domestic water supply for Los Angeles, the river runs well over 115 miles through two counties in a southerly course to

forest for approximately two miles below Big Springs.

Worms and salmon eggs are the rule of thumb on this section which is subject to heavy angling pressure and thus abundantly planted with catchable rainbow by the Department of Fish and Game (DFG). Heavy shoreline brush and willows make bait the most reliable and feasible method in this neighborhood, although flies and lures will produce in the less brushy spots.

gains flow from other sources. Most notable is the water tunneled in from the June Lake Loop, which provides a constant, regulated addition. Since much of the river's flow is spring-fed and controlled from the June lakes, it runs a fairly consistent 58 to 61 degrees.

Besides cold temperatures, stream conditions are well suited for natural production of trout. The Upper Owens has an abundance of insect life, such as caddisfly larvae and pupae, mayfly



Wild brown trout between 10-15 inches are the dominant trout on the Lower Owens.

its eventual termination at Owens Lake. In its early days it ran uninhibited through both Long and Owens valleys but currently its flows are interrupted four times by reservoirs. The construction of a dam across Long Valley in 1941 created Crowley Lake, the first and largest of the four impoundments on the river. Considered to be one of the best producers of trout in the Eastern Sierra, Crowley Lake divides the Owens into two separate rivers — the Upper and Lower.

The birthplace of the Upper Owens, like many other headwater streams, is a trouty looking locale. Vibrant and moving rapidly, it drops over a rocky, moderate gradient as it stepladders through a sparse cover of evergreen

Shortly after the river passes through some private ranch land, the forest cover noticeably thins and the surrounding terrain changes to sage-covered rolling foothills. Quickly, these knolls open into the huge, expansive Long Valley. Here, the gradient virtually disappears and the river now snakes its way through lush meadow country, framed on either side by desolate gray-green sage. Jagged Sierra peaks loom over the foothills to the west. Gravel, washed down over the seasons from higher elevations, has been graciously deposited over the winding river bottom, helping to form holes, riffles and bars, resulting in great spawning habitat.

As it traverses the twelve miles toward Crowley, the Upper Owens

nymphs, as well as shrimp, snails, and scuds. Due to favorable conditions, hatches take place virtually all year.

Many times in the early morning or evening I have walked these open banks casting flies to undercut banks. For rainbow fishing, the Hare's Ear, Prince Nymphs and caddis patterns in olive and brown shades are good local favorites, while streamers and muddler patterns are notorious for taking browns. A light action fly rod is very sporting and if flows are on the high side, a sink tip line is handy to get the fly down.

Hot Creek, rated as one of the best dry fly fishing streams in the West, pours its spring-fed waters into the Owens a few miles above Benton
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THE OWENS: A River of Two Faces (Continued from page 4)

Crossing. A major access point, the Crossing is reached by a six-mile drive east from Highway 395. Under heavy angling pressure, it too is heavily planted with rainbow catchables. However, I visit here for another reason. Crowley Lake is only a short distance from here. Besides being a great fishery in itself, the lake serves as a sanctuary for large rainbow and brown trout.

Depending on the season, many of these large specimens enter the river to spawn. Spring finds rainbow to three pounds moving upriver while fall is a good time to cross paths with sizeable brownies to 15 pounds! Though large Woolly Worms are my favorite, streamers, as well as salmon eggs, worms, spoons and spinners are productive on these leviathans.

One particular spring morning Matt, Steve and I hiked to within a half mile of the Crowley inlet. Using large Woolly Worms and nymphs, we were all trying for fresh-run rainbow. While Steve and I drew blanks for the first 15 minutes, Matt's fly was intercepted and the fight was on. Since the rainbow made a beeline toward the lake, Matt chose to leave the river and follow it downstream. Five minutes later he led it to a bend in the river and netted a nice female where the flow slackened. After a quick inspection she was gently released to carry out her spawning mission. In the fall, streamer flies are the ticket, especially in the late evening just before legal fishing ends.

Below Crowley, the face of the Owens has undergone some drastic changes over the years. The section of stream immediately below the dam passes through a deep, rocky canyon before trickling into Inyo County and Pleasant Valley Reservoir. This second interruption on the river is located just north of the town of Bishop.

Since the impoundment was completed, the 15-mile stretch is now a mere trickle, fed only by springs and dam seepage. Crowley has no minimum flow agreement so water which should be running through the canyon is now diverted by tunnel to Pleasant Valley. Halfway through the gorge, a powerhouse collects the remaining flows and pipes them to the lower reservoir. Below this pumping station the river is virtually bone dry.

Despite the marginal flow, the gorge, as it is known locally, is still a prime spot to catch small native brown trout. Inaccessible except by foot, the best access trail is right below Crowley Dam. However, ticks, mosquitoes and rattlesnakes coupled with scorching summer heat and a physically demanding climb make the real challenge one of getting there. Rewarding for the hardy souls who enter its domain, the hiker should allow a full day to enter, fish and exit the steep canyon. A full canteen is a must.



Releases from Pleasant Valley, which more than double the pre-dam flows, form the official beginning of the Lower Owens. Exiting the gorge, it serpentine ninety-five more miles through the huge Owens Valley before being sucked dry by thirsty Southern Californians near Lone Pine. Completed in 1953, Pleasant Valley Reservoir has meant more than just a water source for Los Angeles. Prior to 1940, the river was at the mercy of early season runoff and floods or late season low flows. However, regulated flow has given the Lower Owens a year-round dimension.

One of these dimensions is a very successful and popular management program encompassing the five-mile stretch from Pleasant Valley Dam downstream to Five Bridges. This part of the river is under the management of California's growing Wild Trout program, currently headed by John Deinstat. Open all year, it is operated with a reduced bag limit of two fish. Since its inception into the Wild Trout program during the mid-'70s, the project has revived the water's

potential. "Without steady flows the project wouldn't have been feasible," stated Deinstat.

Wary wild brown trout, the dominant species on the Lower Owens and sole trout inhabitant of the Wild Trout section, have also found conditions to their liking. Subjected to an almost constant barrage of angling techniques, the browns have adapted well and steadily increased in number. "In stream tagging surveys, many of the same tagged fish show up year after year," claimed Darrel Wong, a DFG fisheries biologist at the Bishop office. "They stand the pressure too well — no one catches them," he laughed.

Most browns in this locale range from ten to 15 inches. Though an occasional lunker is landed, many fish present in the river are between three and four pounds according to DFG sources.

With the completion of Pleasant Valley, all upstream access was cut off. As mitigation, the Los Angeles Water Department constructed a spawning channel. Almost one thousand feet long, it contains suitable spawning gravel and has a reduced flow. Weirs guide spawners into the channel where conditions are to their liking. "There is no artificial spawning, just conditions made better," confided Wong.

Approximately 500 browns per year use this side channel, which is obviously closed to fishing. CalTrout, Inc., is further improving access to the spawning redds by removing a culvert and installing a bridge. The project is due for completion sometime in 1984.

Despite the large number of trout, the Lower Owens remains tough to fish. "It is not your typical meandering meadow stream," cautioned Wong, who fishes the area frequently. According to him, "The flows are too fast, making it difficult, if not impossible, to get the fly, lure or bait down to the fish."

Habitat degradation has occurred due to these extreme releases. Channelization has removed much of the rocky bottom structure which would normally offer protection for trout and pockets for anglers to ply. Soil erosion has made the banks vertical and devoid of riparian vegetation, while silting clouds the water. When hooked, a trout is extremely difficult to land due to the steep banks. Shoreline brush is tough to get around and wading is impossible because of depth and unbroken current.

To fish this section, one needs to really be willing to accept a challenge and not be discouraged when unsuccessful. I have found a few things which help my success rate here. I search for areas

near bends in the river where swirls or eddies are created. There are enough slack sections available where trout will hold to get out of the raging current. By using a sink tip fly line and casting well upstream, I can properly present large nymphs or streamers at or near the bottom of these lies.

Morning and evening are the best times to fool wary brown trout. Early morning seems to offer cover of darkness while evening provides a small hatch, during which some browns will dine right on the surface. "About one hour before dark, some surface activity in the form of caddisfly hatches takes place," stated Wong. "Otherwise all action is below surface."

Late one August afternoon I found a deep hole that looked productive. For the umpteenth time I retrieved my Muddler Minnow without success. Though surface activity hadn't begun yet, a brown of fair size was consistently breaking the surface to my left. Changing to a light-winged Stonefly, I cast well above it and watched its surface drift. While about to lift the fly off the water for another cast, I noticed a large form boring straight for it. My heart pounded as yet another shape darted to the fly and my line tightened. A hookup, but as luck would have it, a husky ten-incher had intercepted my fly just as it was about to be engulfed by a much larger specimen. Laughing at my "luck," I released the small brownie, watching him flash his bronze sides in the dark blue swirl.

While conditions are difficult here, enough fish are caught to keep fishermen coming back. I personally saw six taken over a two-day period. All but one was hooked using nightcrawlers and a bundle of weight and they all approached two pounds!

Access along the Wild Trout section is very good. Dirt roads parallel both sides and well-worn paths follow each bank closely.

The Owens below Five Bridges is governed by general trout season guidelines and is heavily planted, usually at the bridges which cross it. Somewhat lazier and slower due to irrigation diversions and choked with shoreline brush, it is a popular drift fishing section. All or part day floats are common with several put-in and take-out points available. Fishermen can better sample structure while drifting than trying to operate from the tule-infested shore.

As an integral part of Southern California's water system, the Owens has actually benefitted from recent coopera-

tive efforts between the Los Angeles Water Department and the DFG to insure proper trout habitat. Assured of consistent flows throughout most of its course, the trout fishery not only flourishes now but should continue to do so in the future.

Whether exploring the Upper or Lower river, fishermen are confronted with a variety of choices. Whether poking bait into bubbling Big Springs, attempting to match the hatch on the meadows near Benton Crossing or plying the fast waters of the Wild Trout sector, one is in for some challenging rainbow and brown fishing.

Though planted trout are common in some well-traveled access points, native trout, plentiful throughout, are the main fare. Offering anglers a quality experience, the wild trout have proven difficult to fool, demanding the utmost of skills. Those seeking challenging angling situations should plan to spend a few days on the river. There, framed against the spired backdrop of the majestic Eastern Sierra, they can see for themselves why the Owens has earned the title of one of California's best trout streams.

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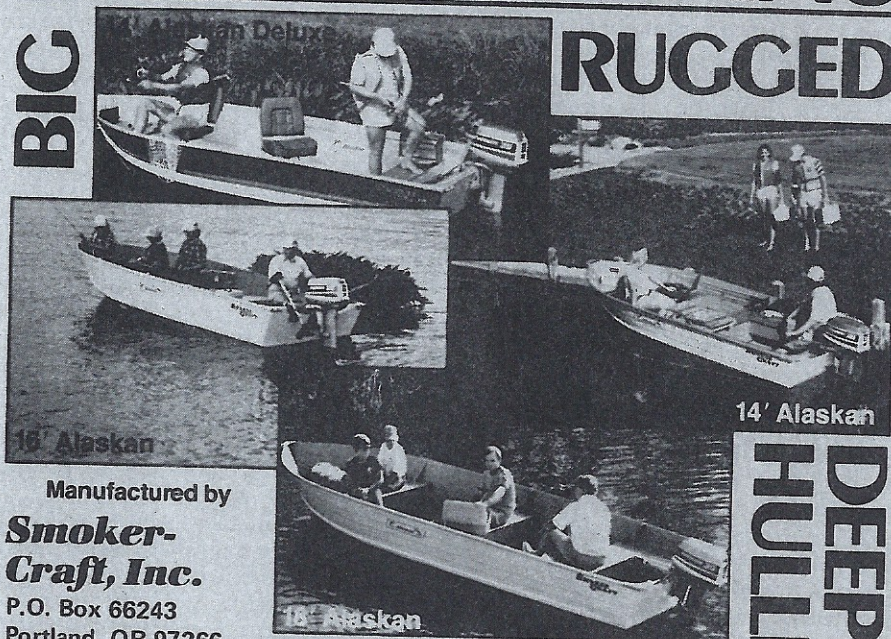
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