

California's trophy trout program is turning Lake Berryessa into a premium fishing location near Napa Valley vineyards.

Wine Country Trout

by Don Vachini

Father and son had just completed a productive winter's morning on the lake, which is notorious for its abundance of hefty trout. With guide Claude Davis as their mentor, each had filled his three-fish quota in just under two hours. The young lad struggled to lift the weighty stringer as he stepped up onto the dock, for the half-dozen trout were all between two and three pounds.

Though an impressive limit by any standard, it was not especially a head-turning event at California's trophy trout-managed Lake Berryessa. In fact, since the inauguration of the Trophy Trout Program (TTP) in 1968, the lake's fishery has borne a remarkable similarity to the world-renowned wines produced nearby as both seem to improve in quality with age.

Receiving a \$47 million appropriation in 1954, the Bureau of Reclamation began dam construction across Putah Creek and two years later Monticello Dam began holding water. Behind this thin wall of concrete stretches the expanse of a reservoir conceived for irrigation and domestic water supply. At 25 by three miles, it is the second largest man-made lake in the state and offers 168 miles of fishable shoreline.

Surrounded by oak, pine and bay woodlands, the lake sits at 440-foot elevation in the Coastal Mountains, minutes away from the vineyard-car-

peted Napa Valley. San Francisco to the south, and Sacramento to the east, are little more than an hour's drive away.

The recreational potential of this low elevation lake has been carefully developed by Napa County officials. In the warmer months, Berryessa swarms with water skiers, swimmers, sailors and pleasure boaters along with fishermen. Resorts and campgrounds are teeming, and the drone of speedboats seems incessant.

While a good percentage of the lake's annual million-plus visitors are found here during June, July and August, fall paints a different picture. With the approach of cooler weather, most of the crowd disappears and the lake virtually belongs to anglers just at a time when the trout really turns on.

Noted more for its warmwater species such as black bass, catfish, bluegill and crappie, the lake was also the recipient of a catchable trout program during its first decade. This program, however, perplexed the Department of Fish and Game and anglers alike, for despite huge numbers of trout deposited in the reservoir, very few found their way into creeks.

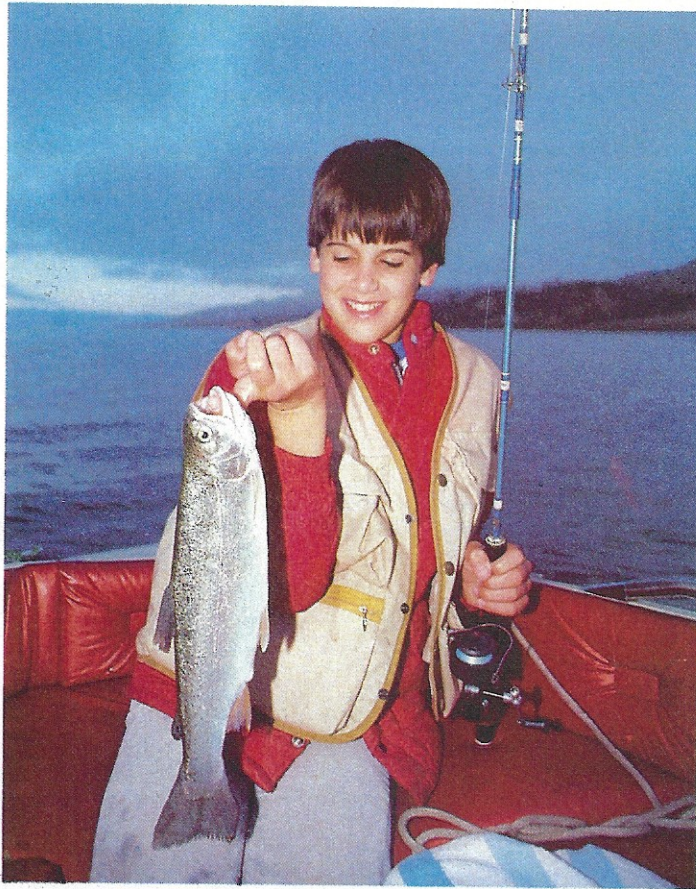
DFG officials at the Region 3 office huddled in earnest to try to solve the problem. Ideal trout habitat includes water temperatures which range in the mid-50s. Since its beginning, Berryessa has exhibited these conditions year-round. During the summer the lake

becomes stratified in temperature zones, with the colder water settling in the 40 to 60-foot level. In the fall, cold nights and the first sprinkles of the rainy season cool off the surface water. Eventually, the zones do a flip-flop, with the cold stratum rising to the top.

Since Berryessa is a classic example of this phenomenon, known as turnover, it was selected for trophy status in 1965. According to Bob Rawstron, currently with the Anadromous Fisheries Bureau but in charge of the initial TTP at Berryessa, the plan was a conscious effort on the part of the DFG to establish good fishing for sizeable trout within easy distance of large population centers.

While preliminary studies showed that the lake was rich in nutrients, it lacked a prime food source necessary for trout to achieve large growth. This problem was soon alleviated with importation of threadfin shad, a tiny baitfish native to the southern United States. With this 1966 act, the TTP took its first foothold on the ladder to future success. "No doubt the threadfin shad was the key to developing and maintaining a trophy trout fishery here," explains Rawstron.

A godsend from a management point of view, shad reproduce prodigiously, mature at three to four inches, and do not compete with other species for food. Not only have they taken hold in a big way but they have become a



Trout grow rapidly in Lake Berryessa, reaching good size by winter after being planted as quarter pounders in the spring.

staple in the diet of trout, making them an ideal forage fish in Rawstron's opinion. According to him, this fish is responsible for rapid growth over a short period of time.

"The trout at Berryessa average well over a pound of growth per season because of this forage fish. The rainbows are between one-third to a quarter-pound when planted in the spring, and most achieve good size by fall of that year," he says.

Though the unofficial lake record is a 14¾ pounder which was decked in 1982, most holdover fish will be in the two to five-pound category, with a few larger ones showing on occasion.

According to Rawstron, the catchable trout previously planted in the lake were not really suited to the lake's conditions. Under his guidance, the Coleman rainbow trout was deemed the most feasible for Berryessa. Chosen because it is most efficient in terms of angler return, this strain is a mixture of Kamloops and steelhead, he explains. It is noted for its voracious appetite, and on this body of water, thanks to the ever-present shad, has been known to gain up to six times its normal growth.

Yearly plants are the sole means of maintaining the ongoing TTP. While the initial plant consisted of 57,000 Coleman rainbows, that number has been escalated to around 200,000 annually. For the past three seasons a few

thousand king salmon yearlings have also been released to add a little variety to the established rainbow fishery.

While specialists like Claude Davis, who operates out of Markley Cove, use downriggers 30 to 50 feet deep to consistently take fish while braving the summer crowds, fall is a more pleasant and exciting situation. As surface water becomes more oxygenated, plankton begins blooming, the shad follow the bloom and hot on their tails are the trout, gorging on them with abandon. When turnover hits, the trout start going crazy. "At this time fish can be taken on the surface by all ages and skill levels," says Davis.

Though the actual start of turnover is weather-dependent, late autumn usually signifies the commencement of excellent topwater trouting. "From late October through February, surface conditions are near perfect and trout can be taken almost anywhere along shallow shorelines and coves," Davis says.

Large schools of rainbows work together to chase the shad into coves and keep them cornered for considerable lengths of time while dining on them. According to Davis, the key to taking Berryessa trout is to locate these baitfish concentrations. One can fish these productive spots and be reasonably sure of action. While marina employees can help pinpoint the latest hot spots, large numbers of diving grebes and sea-

gulls or a flotilla of boats usually tip off the location of current baitfish gatherings. "Once you find the pantry, you'll find the fish," says Davis.

While trout will be scattered all over the lake by December, the most productive winter areas are located on the lower third of the lake, near the dam. Spanish Flat, Skier's Cove, Wragg Canyon, Portuguese, Little Portuguese and Markley coves contain ideal inlets and points of land which harbor trout and offer protection from gusty winds.

Some hot shore locales include Oak Shores Day Use Area, Putah Creek Cove and the sector between Markley Cove and the dam. While bank fishing can be torrid, a boat offers the flexibility to pursue the fish wherever they move.

After the heavy rains have hit, many of the larger trout are in or near the feeder streams trying to spawn. Putah, Pope, Eticura and Cappel arms yield hefty limits when their tributaries are rain-swollen.

The covered docks not only provide shelter from the elements but are favorite haunts of cruising rainbows in search of a meal. Night angling, legal at Berryessa, is common under these structures.

Since the threadfin is the trout's prime food source at the lake, the majority of its anglers opt to try for them with live minnows. "The drifted minnow technique is probably the most

Trout

popular and effective method of taking fall/winter trout," advises Davis. "The minnow resembles a wounded baitfish ...so 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 ultra-light or light action rod helps detect this sensation as well as offer a sporting match. Four to six-pound line is more than adequate.

Davis suggests leaving the bail open while 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 hookup."

Though winter trout can be taken at all hours, dawn seems to be the most reliable. "This is the best chance to take a big fish because this is when they seem to be in the shallows and less wary," Davis says.

In the early morning hours, the minnow should be suspended in three to five feet of water, but deeper as the day progresses. A clear plastic bubble is instrumental in keeping the minnow at the desired level.

Occasionally trout create a frothing mass as they chase baitfish across the surface. Casting tiny, silvery lures or shad flies into this bubbling frenzy can produce some jolting action as the large rainbows seem to drop their

defenses as they bore undaunted after dinner. Used on a sink tip line, shad flies, epoxied and hand-painted to imitate the real thing, are in vogue among fly anglers at the lake.

When action is not directly on top, Davis forgoes the bobber and anchors off known dropoffs and points of land, keeping the minnow a foot or so from the bottom. Most successful fishing will be accomplished between 50 to 100 feet from shore and in water five to 20 feet deep.

Currently there are seven resorts offering launching, boat rentals, lodging, fishing supplies (including minnows) and current information. Several campgrounds are also available as are houseboat rentals.

Thanks to opportunistic DFG management, trout angling at this recreational mecca has been on the upswing for the past 16 seasons and should continue to be a success. Rawstron proudly points out that updated surveys reveal it now takes only six angler-hours to net a trout, with the fall/winter success ratio being much better than the yearly average.

Happily, with the establishment of a solid food base, the salmonoids are now robust and feisty. The fact that the trout are now measured in pounds instead of inches makes Berryessa one of the finest winter fisheries in California, and possibly the West.

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Outdoors writer Don Vachini waits patiently all summer for a chance at the winter trout of Lake Berryessa, near his home at Petaluma, California.

Berryessa Trip Facts

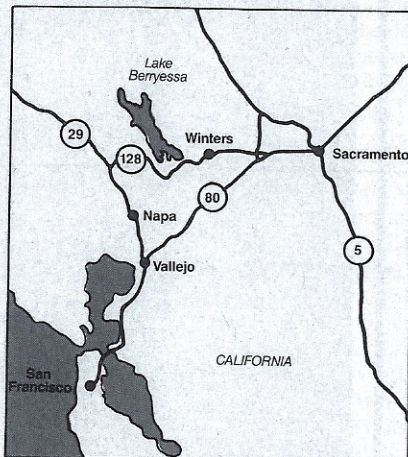
HOW TO GET THERE: From Sacramento, take Highway 80 west to Highway 113. Take the Winters exit and follow Highway 128 from Winters to the lake. From San Francisco drive on U.S. 80 east and exit at Highway 29 to Napa. Follow Trancas Boulevard about 15 miles to the lake.

WHERE TO STAY: The following resorts will provide current information (all are 707 area code): 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.

BEST SEASON: Heavy surface action usually begins in late October or early November, peaking sometime in late December.

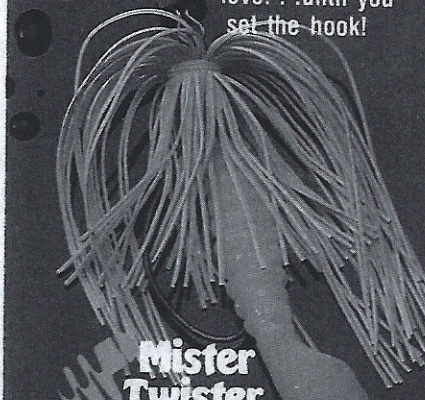
APPROXIMATE COST: A valid California fishing license runs \$13.50 for residents, \$35.50 for nonresidents. A special 10-day nonresident permit is

available for \$13. While free boat launching is available at Cappel Cove, most private marinas charge a \$5 fee. **WHOM TO CONTACT:** Claude Davis can be located at Markley Cove Resort or at (916) 787-3925. For further information, write Lake Berryessa Chamber of Commerce, P.O. Box 9164; Spanish Flat, Napa, CA 94558.



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