

WEST

California Trout

Bridgeport Bonanza

By Don Vachini

Anglers searching for a trout fisherman's paradise will find the waters of their dreams in California's Bridgeport district. Ribboned with numerous streams, possessing a myriad of alpine tarns, and garnished with three larger lakes, this northern Mono County locale offers rainbow, brook, brown, cutthroat, and golden trout, along with kokanee salmon. Indeed, this selection, ranging from pan-size to trophy dimensions, makes the Bridgeport district "one of the finest trout fishing areas in California," according to Rick Rockel, who is the neighborhood's much respected fishing guru. Rockel operates out of Ken's Sporting Goods in Bridgeport.

At the center of this area is the town of Bridgeport, located 350 miles north of Los Angeles and 200 miles south of Reno via Highway 395. Much of the public land within this 20-mile-plus radius sits in the Toiyabe National Forest alongside of the majestic rim of the Eastern Sierra Nevada.

There are hundreds of wilderness and semiwilderness lakes and streams along the Sierra backbone. Backpackers heading into the scenic Hoover Wilderness, a 42,800-acre swath adjoining Yosemite National Park, can find feisty rainbows, browns, and brookies without a problem or they can prospect for more unusual species, as I did one summer morning.

Setting the hook on a trout, I gingerly pulled the eight-incher out of 10,900-foot-high Moat Lake. A breathtaking array of orange and yellow identified it as a golden trout—a catch that was well worth the difficult hike up the talus switchback.

Backcountry permits, which are required for overnight hikers, can be obtained from the U.S. Forest Service office in Bridgeport (619-932-7070).

Adventuresome explorers can find many lesser known creeks that harbor crafty six to nine-inch rainbow, brown, and brook trout. According to fishing ace Rockel, creeks such as Koenig, Leavitt, Silver, Wolf, Molydenite, Eagle, Swauger, Dog, and Dunderberg are for the dedicated fisherman. On these waters, stealth is the key to successful angling. Eagle Creek also contains cutthroats.

Though worms and salmon eggs poked through the brush work best, I have found small Grasshopper, Humpy, Royal Wulff, Olive Nymph, Zub Bug, and Woolly Worm patterns to be very effective, too.

If there was such a thing as a trophy lake, Upper and Lower Twin lakes, located 11 miles southwest of Bridgeport, would fit

the bill. Framed by towering Matterhorn-type peaks, both lakes possess ideal conditions. While offering kokanee salmon and stocked rainbows, the lakes have recently been notorious for their huge browns. In fact, Lower Twin, which is more than 300 feet deep in spots, gave up the state record, a 26-pound 5-ounce fish in May 1983.

According to Rockel, who displays graph paper from fish finders in his store, "There are plenty more big ones present, with some estimated to be in the 40-pound class!"

From May to June, and again in the fall, these big bruisers can be found within 20 feet of the surface. During these times, Rockel suggests trolling three to seven-inch floating or Countdown Rapalas and using light saltwater rods that are matched with 10 to 12-pound-test line.

Some of the best early-season lake fishing takes place right outside of town in Bridgeport Reservoir. One absolutely frigid morning, my son and I were fishing in Buckeye Bay's inlet channel—an early-season hotspot. By casting Panther Martin and Rooster Tail spinners into the slow-moving water, we landed four husky rainbows in less time than it took us to rent our boat!

Rockel called Bridgeport Reservoir "the most fertile lake in the Eastern Sierra." Its trout put on weight rapidly, and range in weight between two and four pounds. In addition to catchables, the department of fish and game annually stocks the reservoir with approximately 5,000 rainbows in the two to five-pound category.

As is the case at Upper and Lower Twin lakes, anglers who want to catch big fish often troll. Rockel suggests using Rapalas, Rebels, or flasher/worm combinations for surface action, or Needlefish towed behind blades or keel sinkers to get your lure down deeper. And, near the dam, night crawlers have taken some nice brown trout.

There is also a place where wild trout are protected by low creel limits and tackle restrictions. The willow-infested, nine-mile-long section of the East Walker River below Bridgeport Reservoir is managed as a trophy brown trout fishery with special regulations (14 inch minimum, two fish limit, lures and flies only with single barbless hooks). Trout here usually weigh from two to five pounds but range up to nine pounds.

During autumn, the browns here feed voraciously. Once, just as I had noticed huge numbers of frightened baitfish crowding the shallows, something sizable grabbed my lure and headed north. With 10-pound-test line, however, I was able to turn and,

despite fast flows, eventually subdue the chunky 18-incher. By continually working among these minnows, I caught and released four more hungry trophies before the afternoon was over.

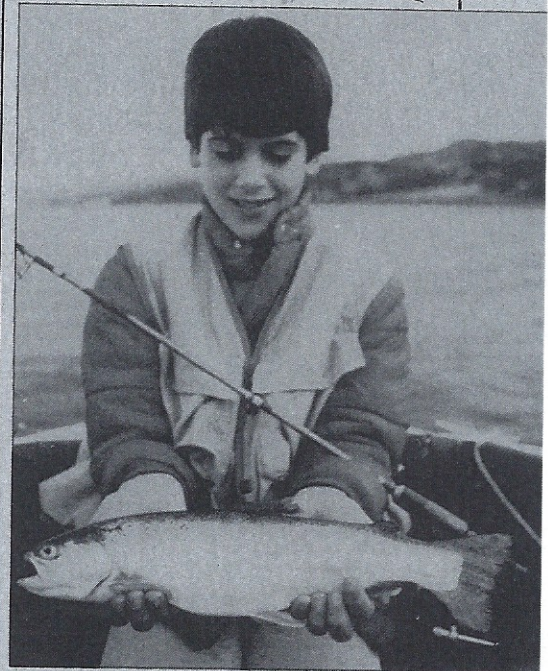
Either spin or fly equipment will suffice, but you should match your equipment with six to 12-pound line or leader.

Rainbow or gold-colored Countdown Rapalas in No. 7, No. 9, No. 11, or No. 13 are consistent lures. Baitfish-imitating Marabou, Sculpin, Matuka, and Baby Rainbow patterns are good choices, too.

Facilities throughout the area are numerous and varied. Campgrounds are adjacent to most roadside lakes and streams. In addition, there are resort lodges, motels, and restaurants within easy reach of practically any fishing spot.

Boat rental and launch facilities are on most lakes and are accessible by road. Four pack stations serve the backcountry.

Trout season in Mono County begins on the last Saturday in April and runs through October 31. For up-to-the-minute fishing information, licenses, and recreation maps of the area, contact Ken's Sporting Goods, 1 Main St., Bridgeport, CA 93517 (619-932-7007).



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