

Wonderful Angling in Scenic Country

June Lake Loop



Originating in the snow covered backcountry, Rush Creek flows through Silver and Grant Lakes. This section yielded a small brown.

By Don Vachini

The early morning chill found most of the campground's occupants still snuggled in their sleeping bags as my two sons and I proceeded toward one of the lake's inlet streams. Dawn's first light caught the mirror-like reflections of the nearby snow-covered peaks. We were the first anglers on the shoreline, shattering the lake's calm surface with our lures.

Unsuccessfully trying to suppress our shouts of joy, we enjoyed a triple hook-up! Soon three small, silvery rainbow trout flopped on the gravel beach and

within the span of five more minutes or so, three more joined them. Not many things could have pried me away from this bounty, but the anticipation of fresh trout for breakfast was one.

Matt, Jason and I were just beginning a three-day stay at the eastern High Sierra's famous June Lake Loop. The Loop, located due east of Yosemite National Park, consists of a chain of four lakes plus two interconnecting streams. June, Gull, Silver, and Grant are fed primarily by seepage emanating from Mt. Davis (elev. 12,311 feet); Mt. Lyell

(elev. 13,114 feet); Donohue Peak (elev. 12,043 feet); Mt. Wood (elev. 12,637 feet), and June Mountain (elev. 10,135 feet) to name a few. Rush and Reversed creeks serve as the main feeder streams.

Situated five miles south of Lee Vining and 65 miles north of Bishop, the Loop is connected by Highway 158, a 17-mile-long, crescent-shaped road which provides access from Highway 395 in two places.

Facilities abound on the Loop. Campgrounds are located adjacent to all its waters and there are resort lodges, motels, stores and restaurants.

All of the lakes offer boat rentals and launch facilities for a reasonable fee.

A major trailhead to the backcountry originates at Silver Lake. A pack station provides horses for either a leisurely afternoon ride or a several-day trek into the vast Minarets Wilderness.

While this country offers much variety in the way of outdoor activities, it is fishing that draws the majority of the people here, including our party. These waters are very popular, especially with the Southern California crowd, and are under extremely heavy angling pressure.

Largely dependent on stocks from the Department of Fish and Game (DFG), three separate state hatcheries share planting duties on the Loop. According to Bob Iselin, Hot Creek Hatchery manager, "Hot Creek (hatchery) is primarily responsible for planting Loop streams, Fish Creek (hatchery) for lakes and Mt. Whitney (hatchery) for occasional plants of brook and brown trout."

June Lake, which gave its name to the town overlooking it, is the highest of the lakes at the 7,600-foot elevation mark. The town caters to fishermen in the summer and skiers during the winter.

To catch the abundant rainbow trout of this lake an angler stands a better chance when fishing from a boat. While several shoreline areas can be productive, a boat affords maneuverability to locate concentrations of fish.

Unless one prefers to anchor and still-fish while taking in the rich alpine setting, trolling is the consistent way to take trout from the lake. Lead-core line is the choice of most of the trollers at June Lake. This allows anglers to adjust to depths easily, depending on the time of the season. Triple Teasers, Needlefish and small Herring Dodgers have proven very, very successful here for trollers.

Two good areas to troll for starters would be the flat rock formation at the northeast end of the lake and the shoreline immediately across the lake from the marina.

Trolling depths will vary depending on time of year. Early in the season, after ice-out, near surface is the place to be while later in the year depths to 60 feet are necessary.

If one is shore fishing, a light-action spinning rod and reel with four- to six-pound monofilament is more than adequate for the lake. We used four-pound line with our ultralight tackle and found this very capable of handling lures, bait and fly/bubble setups. It also enhances the battle, especially for smaller trout.

The DFG is especially generous with plants to this lake. Since June Lake is one of the heaviest fished waters in the county, it is heavily planted, more so than others. Plants currently average 5,000 to 6,000 rainbow per week in the lake. These are big fish, too, averaging one pound or better in some cases.

Though a friend once took a nine-pounder from the dock and there are occasional rumors of fish to 20 pounds, the average rainbow caught here is ten to 12 inches and just under a pound.

June Lake overflow spills downhill by way of Reversed Creek to the smallest of the Loop lakes, Gull. Probably named after an abundance of seagulls in the area, Gull Lake is only 60 feet deep and covers about 40 acres. This is the only lake that absolutely must be fished with a boat. Tules and poor shore access are the reason.

Trolling or stillfishing are the two popular methods for the lake. Stillfishing with salmon eggs and marshmallows or trolling Triple Teasers and Needlefish with lead-core line is highly effective.

While Gull is planted weekly with between 2,000 to 3,000 rainbow, the lake offers another species of trout — brook trout are occasionally planted here, too, primarily to offer some diversity in the fishery. Years ago, this water was noted for being a fine brookie fishery and the intent was to maintain it solely as such. However, this didn't prove economically feasible and now the brookie is only an incidental catch. According to the DFG, small amounts of fingerlings and catchables are stocked in alternate years with brood fish from the Mt. Whitney Hatchery released about every third season.

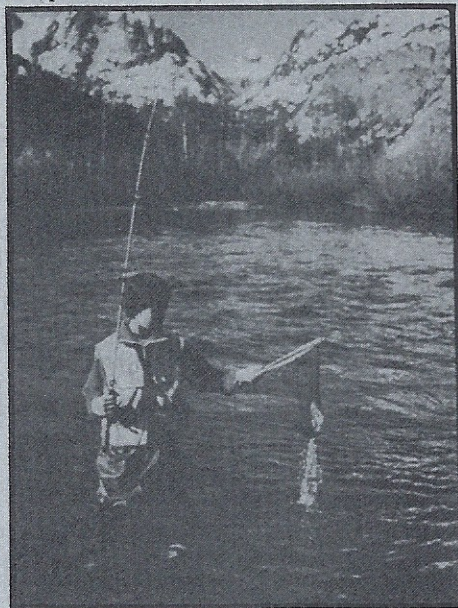
Late one evening, I participated in one of the "incidental" brookie encounters. Operating out of an inflatable raft, I noticed a small trout consistently dimpling the surface near a stand of tules. On my second try, it inhaled the No. 14 Mosquito and fought gamely. Barely filling my hand, it resembled a high country jewel, with its red dots, blue halos and white-edged fins. I released it,

of course. Too small to be a catchable, it was more than likely a surviving fingerling plant from the previous season.

Gull Lake trickles into Reversed Creek, which flows over a hill and empties into Silver Lake almost three miles away. Two other streams, Rush and Alger, add their flow to this lake with Rush continuing on through the lake.

Our campsite was nestled in a small meadow next to the clear but swollen stream, just below where it exits the lake. Over our breakfast trout from Silver Lake, I admired the awesome scenery of this Mono County area. Listening to rushing water, squealing gulls and droning mosquitoes, I stared upward at the snow-covered peaks. This kind of setting is common around all of the lakes but this one seemed especially commanding, with the peaks distinctly framing the blue skyline.

The three tributaries offer very productive fishing, with Rush and Reversed inlets best worked from a boat due to marshy access. The Alger Creek entrance (where we caught our breakfast) is a prime shore area.



Author's son, Jason nets a typical Rush Creek rainbow.

Boat anglers usually troll with the same lead-core line and lure setup as on the other lakes. Anglers can also use Ford Fenders or Dave Davis Flashers with a night crawler. Four- to six-pound line is acceptable for these setups if you prefer not to use lead line.

Shore fishing is more popular here due to plentiful open shoreline areas and good structure. The shoreline near the road is a good hot spot. Bait fishermen using salmon eggs, marshmallows and night crawlers score well here as do lure pitchers. Mepps, Rooster Tails, Panther

Martins, Super Dupers and Kastmasters are all effective, especially after recent plants.

At certain times during the season, usually after spring runoff, hatches occur which can provide exciting fly fishing action. When these emerge, a fly/bubble rigged with either a Black Gnat or Black Ant is the ticket. Hornbrook and Black Ghost patterns are good fished deep, too.

Planted abundantly by the DFG on a weekly basis, the most commonly caught trout are rainbow, although a few browns and brookies are present, too. The state record brook trout was caught from this lake in 1932.

Rush Creek flows out of Silver Lake and traverses a three-mile-long canyon before entering Grant Lake. This is the biggest of the four lakes and provides a unique fishery for two kinds of trout.

Lead-core line and the same types of deep running setups as mentioned previously are all used here but anglers trying for browns rig up with three- to five-inch Rebels and Rapalas. Deep is the word, especially early in the season.

This water, susceptible to heavy winds, is devoid of shoreline cover and has a rather stark appearance. However, there are some large rainbow and browns in it and if any of the four lakes could be counted on to belt out a large trout, Grant would be my bet.

In the early season, 90% of the catch is made up of planted or holdover rainbow. However, as the season draws near September and October, some large browns enter the catch regularly, mainly near the inlet end of the lake. Many of the brown trout present in here are descendents of plants made in the late 1800s according to the DFG. Brown trout ascend Rush Creek to spawn in late fall, accounting for the fact that many are caught near the inlet stream later in the season.

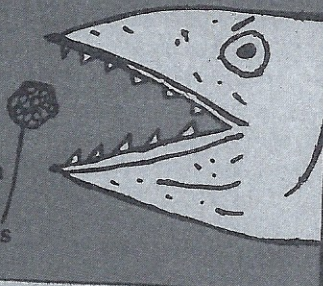
The stream is planted weekly with catchable rainbow; and the DFG supplements the brown population several times a season, mostly with larger size fish. Fingerlings would most likely end up in the stomachs of larger trout.

Fishy locations are hard to pinpoint on such a large body of water. However, for trollers, the long east shoreline near the highway offers consistent results as does the "narrows," located south of the marina.

For shore anglers, bait is the most common method, sitting and waiting for the fish to cruise by. Salmon eggs, marshmallows and night crawlers work their magic here, too, as do spoons and spin-

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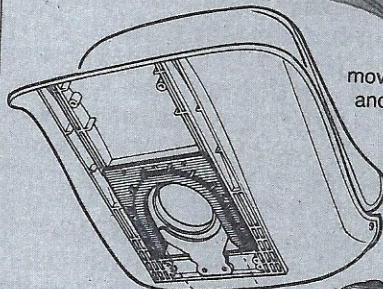
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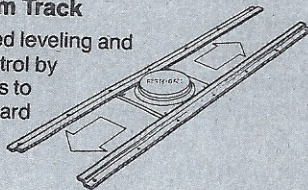
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ners cast at random. The east shore is productive for landlocked anglers, too.

Another productive locale on Grant is where the stream enters near the lake's outlet. The flow is from water diverted from Lee Vining Creek and it provides excellent structure for both planted and native trout.

I have had good luck in the area near the lake's marina, where newly planted trout tend to congregate, gaining some protection from the cove before they spread out.

Rush Creek begins high in the backcountry, the product of perpetual glacial melt from Mt. Davis and the Davis Lake chain, and drops rapidly to enter Silver Lake. As previously mentioned, it continues almost three miles into Grant Lake. Many years ago it flowed from Grant in steady torrents into Mono Lake. Today, below the lake, it virtually dries up by late summer, its flows diverted southward to serve as part of the domestic water supply for Los Angeles.

In the backcountry it is high and cold early in the season and a mere trickle later. However, during the early summer the stretch between the two lakes flows well and offers a good fishery, mostly for planted rainbow. Highway 158 parallels the creek, closely in some stretches. Heavy willow brush and dense cottonwoods restrict access in many spots and limit it primarily to bait fishing.

One morning Jason and I left the campground and walked downstream a few hundred yards to a huge swirling hole. I watched as he flipped a small Kastmaster toward the opposite shore and dredged it deep back across the runoff swollen current. After several similar casts, he set the hook into a typical Rush Creek rainbow and the fight began.

Watching him battle and net the small trout in the fast flows while his body was bracketed against a mountain snow field, I felt a great sense of fatherly pride. While the trout wasn't memorable, the moment surely will stand out in my mind for a long time.

The section immediately above Grant enters a deeper canyon as it moves away from the road. Some nice browns sometimes enter the catch here but anglers earn their catch. The spawning habitat on this creek is ideal with an abundance of fine gravel and dense cover. In fact, very few really big browns are caught in Rush Creek because their spawning rituals take place in late fall after the season has closed.

Reversed Creek begins as the outlet to June Lake, flows into Gull Lake and terminates at Silver Lake. The ribbon-

thin section between June and Gull is virtually unfishable and provides no real habitat anyway. Below Gull, the creek provides a fair early season fishery for planted rainbow but becomes an insignificant trickle late in the season. Earning its name via an optical illusion, it flows toward the mountain, making it appear as if it were going in reverse.

The Loop's popularity is directly related to its outstanding fishing. However, how can a fishery that is so heavily dependent on hatchery plants be so consistently good? The simple answer lies in the fact that the June Lakes are subject to a general trout season. Whereas many other waters in the state have year-long seasons, the lakes and streams of Mono and Inyo counties are closed approximately half the year. From October 31 to the last weekend in April, the trout season is closed, primarily due to winter weather which settles in swiftly in these mountainous counties.

This respite has twofold benefits. It allows native fish (mostly browns) a chance to spawn successfully as well as allowing surviving planters a chance to grow larger. Obviously any of these planted trout that survive and become holdovers are going to be quality fish by the following season.

Secondly, with this seasonal control, the DFG can plant after closure in the fall and right before the opener. Many times surplus brood stock is planted after the season closes, adding to the following season's appeal.

It is no wonder that the opening of trout season is held in such high regard in these counties. While the lakes and streams are under pressure, it is not year-long. The waters are given a chance to recover and build up stocks and this pays dividends the following season.

As one zips along Highway 395 from Southern California, the treeless, sagebrush, high desert scenario provides a land of contrast and beauty. Sheer granite faces of the eastern Sierra conceal many cirque-bound lakes and verdant, cottonwood-lined canyon streams that go unnoticed by casual observers. But only a few miles off 395 there is usually exceptional season-long trouting to be found, as these side roads straddle prime waters.

The June Lake Loop is one of these, for the surrounding land and water offer something for everyone. One can visit a day, a week or a season and not tire of the adventures available. Based on my past experiences, I have found it to be a rewarding location. For my part, I am going to loop the Loop again soon. □

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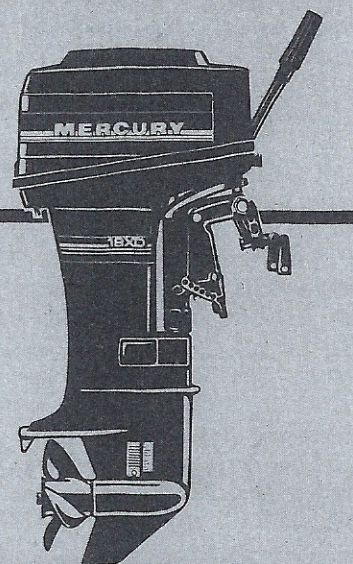
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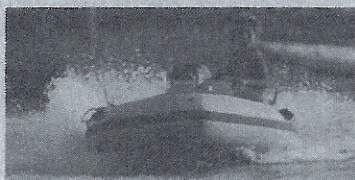
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