

California's Outstanding Hat Creek



Lower Hat is perfect for fly fishing.

Nice country and very nice fishing go together

Don Vachini

In dawn's first light I rekindled the small campfire which brought circulation back to my hands. Even though it was mid-July, the nipping cold reminded me that I was in the high country.

Skipping breakfast, I collected my tackle and walked toward the babbling stream. Following a small game trail, I hiked about a mile upstream to a likely looking bend in the creek. It was here the previous evening that I'd received a couple of hard hits along the undercut bank, but had missed on both strikes.

Even though pine-covered hills hid Mt. Lassen's rocky prominence from

view, I could feel its presence while being serenaded by this effervescent section of Upper Hat Creek. One of Northern California's more famous creeks, it comes to life on the northeast escarpment of this modern volcano and flows close to 40 miles through eastern Shasta County to its confluence with the Pit River at Lake Britton.

The east fork of Hat Creek begins as a tiny mountain brook at Cascade Springs (7,200 feet elev.), collects drainage from two small lakes on the west side of Hat Mountain, and bypasses Dersch Meadows, Hat Lake, and the Devastated Area before merging with

the west fork near Emigrant Pass. The majority of these upper courses cannot be reached by road but hikers and backpackers can easily explore and fish their vibrant waters.

Collecting snowmelt and spring seepages, Hat Creek, now flowing vigorously, cascades past the northern boundary of Lassen Volcanic National Park where it is accessible by logging road near Emigrant Ford. This trail, blazed in the early 1850s by William Nobles and Peter Lassen, was one of the area's main pioneer access routes to the gold fields west of Redding.

According to old-timers, these early trailblazers were responsible for the creek's name. As the legend goes, a member of Nobles' 1852 survey party had his hat swept away while attempting to scoop out a brimful of ice-cold drinking water. To this day, the name has stuck.

Half a dozen miles downstream, it picks up significant volume from Big Springs before approaching the hamlet of Old Station. For the next 20 miles or so, the creek parallels Highway 89 while snaking in and out of Lassen National Forest land. Along this stretch, known as the Upper Hat, are six forest service campgrounds, plus several privately-owned motels, cabins and trailer parks.

The Old Station area has three major campgrounds — Big Pine, Hat Creek and Cave Camps — all heavily used facilities. Each can handle a larger number of campers; a few miles downstream are smaller Rocky and Bridge camps. Ten miles below Bridge is tiny Henn Camp, the last of the forest service camps along the highway. Despite showing signs of past volcanic action, all of the camps, as well as the creek itself, are shaded by stately conifers and brushy streamside alders and willows.

From the creek's origin on through the Old Station area, the gradient is fairly moderate as the stream stepladders briskly over an igneous base, then slows its tempo considerably as it meanders the flat, semi-open Hat Creek Valley. Here a good portion of its water is diverted to maintain permanent pasture for large herds of Hereford and Angus cattle.

Between the National Forest boundary and Cassel, the creek, which is now entirely on private land, regains its heavy flows. Numerous huge artesian infuse their water into Hat via Rising River, a famous (although private) fly fishing water in its own right. Past Cassel, the creek flows through Hat 1 Powerhouse and into Baum Lake.

All of the Upper Hat campgrounds are very popular with anglers since their waters are heavily planted with rainbow catchables by the Department of Fish and Game (DFG). Stocked before, during, and after the season, midsummer plants are by far the heaviest. "Between July and August, the Hat is planted twice and sometimes three times a week," informed Gary Arnold, manager of the Crystal Lake State Fish Hatchery, which serves the entire Burney Basin. DFG employees jokingly refer to these multiple deliveries as the "milk run."

According to the DFG, Pit River strain rainbows are used due to their resistance to bacteria indigenous to area waters. "Anywhere between 60,000 to 80,000 of these rainbows are released annually in the creek," added Arnold.

The fuel crisis of the past decade has also benefitted the Upper Hat's planting fortunes. "As an economic measure, the DFG has omitted some distant waters and instead opted to put the surplus trout into the nearby Hat," mentioned Arnold.

It is no secret that hatchery trout are fairly gullible. However, fishing the Upper Hat can be tricky despite the abundance of trout. Early season flows are usually high due to heavy runoff from snowmelt, making it difficult to get offerings deep. Besides keeping the bait deep, presentation is crucial since the creek normally runs clear. I have found it best to pinch on just enough weight to get the offering near the bottom and yet allow it free movement in the current. Too much weight results in frequent hangups. One or two small BB split shot are just the ticket for heavy flows and one for reduced trickles. July to September usually offers fairly stable flows.

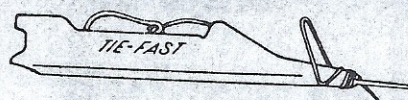
Due to its lava base, the water often stays fairly clear, even after heavy rains. The best structure to fish includes deep pools and pockets, especially those with sandy bottoms.

Proper presentation is of the utmost importance. Casting above pools and letting the bait or fly drift naturally into the hole is a proven method. Try to keep the bait moving at the same speed as the current and drift it all the way through the channel. Many times a take will occur at the fringe of fast water. I find it best to keep the offering moving.

Because of the creek's brushy nature, bait is probably the most sensible method in most areas with red salmon eggs being very effective. Fly anglers shouldn't despair, however. "The upper courses can be fished effectively both wet and dry," stated Steve Vaughn of Vaughn's Sporting Goods in Burney. "Some proven Upper Hat patterns include the Adams, Light Cahill, Renegade, Irresistible and Rio Grande King in sizes 12-16."

Since there are very few really open areas, I have found a fly/bubble setup used with spinning gear to be very practical for placing short, accurate casts. Royal Coachmen and Woolly Worms, fished wet, are my two favorites here.

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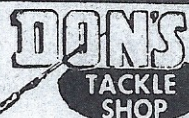
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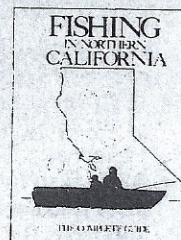
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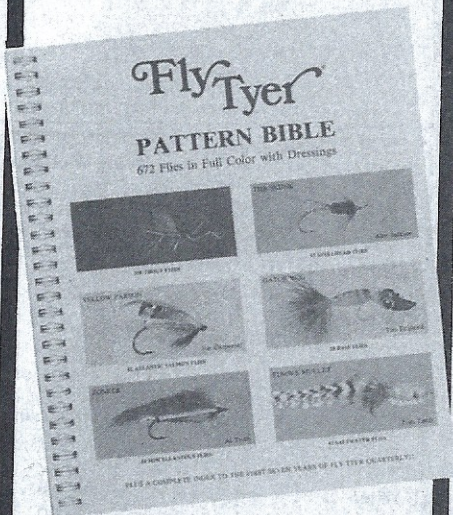
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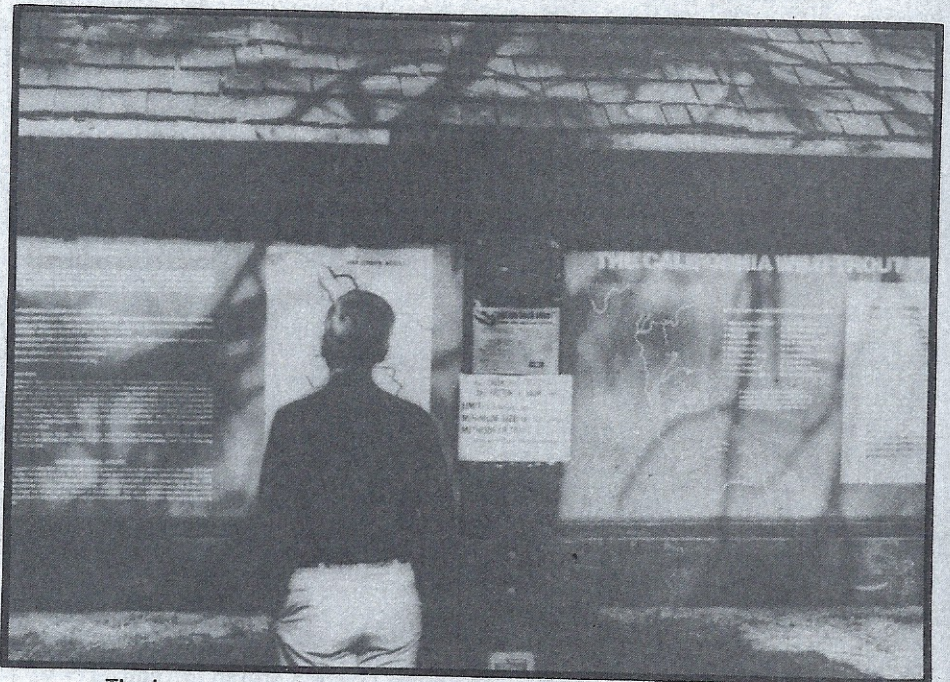


Heading upstream from Big Pine on this particular morning, I was not after a meal but simply sought an encounter with wild trout. After studying my course of action, I flipped the bubble with the accompanying size 14 Woolly Worm well upstream of the undercut bank. Having the benefit of the previous evening's skirmishes, I was ready this time and as the bubble twitched lightly, I reared back on my rod. The pulsating bow in my rod told it all. After an all-too-brief scuffle, I gingerly admired a bronze-hued brown with healthy red spots gleaming in the early light. Too valuable a prize to keep, I let the 11-incher dart back to its undercut sanctuary.

access is available at two locations (Hat 2 Powerhouse and Hat Creek Park), well-maintained bankside trails offer the most consistent routes to this special fishery.

Twenty years ago this stream appeared hopelessly overrun with huge populations of rough fish. One estimation had squawfish and suckers outnumbering trout 100 to 1! However, several organizations noticed the potential for developing a great fishery. Representatives of P.G. and E., the California Wildlife Conservation Board, the DFG and Trout Unlimited (later to become Cal Trout, Inc.) worked cooperatively to carry out their dreams.

A barrier was constructed at the



Thanks to a group of organizations working together, a dream was completed.

Though savvy browns and an occasional brookie can be taken, fiesty rainbows are the most commonly caught natives in the upper reaches. Most natives are in the 6- to 10-inch category but every season lunkers measured in pounds are landed. Obviously, the locales well away from the campgrounds or hard to get at spots such as the Gorge, offer the most productive (and esthetic) native angling. Care should be taken, however, as the less travelled areas contain prime rattlesnake habitat.

In marked contrast to the briskly tumbling Upper Hat, its lower courses are reminiscent of eastern limestone streams, consisting of deep, slow-moving, flat water. From Baum Lake to its termination 3½ miles downstream, this designated wild trout stream, known as the Lower Hat, winds its way through fairly open countryside. Though paved

creek's mouth to prevent non-gamefish from entering and chemical eradication of all garbage fish was soon accomplished. Over 6½ tons of these fish were removed from this short section of stream.

In 1968 over 47,600 trout were stocked in the Lower Hat. Pit and Shasta strain rainbows and Trinity and Mt. Whitney strain browns were used with 2,600 weighing over one pound. With the exception of a few thousand trout in 1969, no further plants have been made since.

Special regulations have helped the trout populations to become entirely self-sustaining. At first, a two-fish limit was put into effect with no gear or size restrictions but when the quality of angling seemed to be on the downhill slide several years later, new regulations were adopted. Since 1979, artificial lures or flies with single, barbless hooks

and a two-fish limit, each of which must be 18 inches or over, are the regs now. These new laws allow many of the trout a chance to grow in size as well as sophistication.

This pilot project far exceeded expectations for today the creek is recognized as one of the state's blue ribbon wild trout waters. Besides being bountifully endowed with large numbers of rainbows and browns, the creek's successful reclamation left a valuable impact on future California trout management. In 1971, the states's Wild Trout Project was funded, paving the way for such other Golden State waters as Fall River, the Lower McCloud, and the East Walker River, to name a few.

Fly fishing is about the only technique that is successful on the Lower Hat, and even then a powerful challenge exists. While the creek's bottom is moss-covered, offering ideal habitat for insect larvae, there are multiple, overlapping hatches. At least seven separate species can be emerging at the same time so matching the hatch can be a trying event. I have observed afternoon hatches so thick they resemble a thin fog from a distance!

Though creating headaches for entomologists, these abundant insects nevertheless provide prime banquets for the creek's trout population. "The average trout in Lower Hat Creek measures between 10 and 16 inches, with nice ones ranging up to 22 inches," beamed Vaughn. According to him, this section yields a mixed catch of approximately 80 percent rainbows and 20 percent browns. "A few seasons ago, a 32-inch, 17-pound hen brown was netted in a DFG electro survey. As far as I know, it is still lurking there," he exclaimed.

While matching the hatch is difficult, there are other factors which can cause anglers to mutter obscenities under their breath. The creek is normally too deep to wade safely so most fishermen

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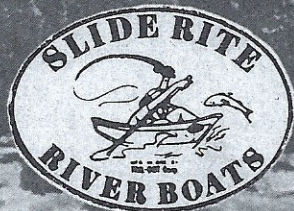
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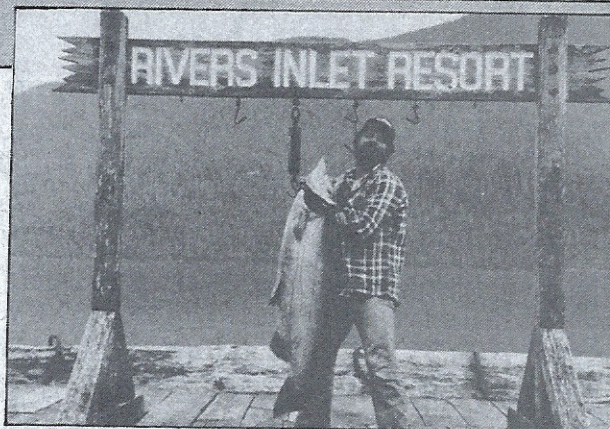
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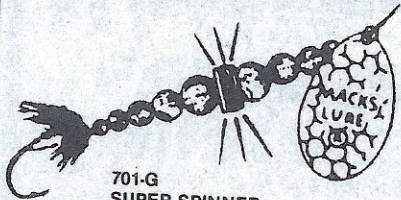
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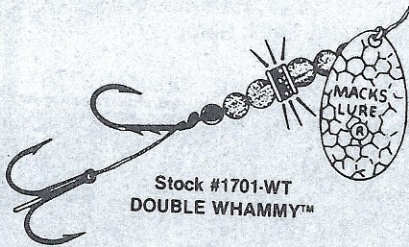
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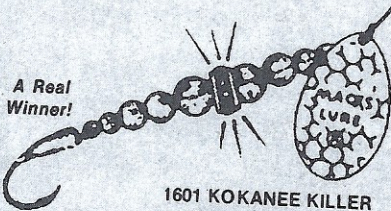


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are restricted to shoreline boats which cut down on the amount of water that can be covered. While a small boat can remedy this problem, float tubes are becoming increasingly popular here.

Many of these trout, by now the progeny of the original plants, have been caught several times and have become very sophisticated. In the gin-clear water, flawless casts with long leaders are necessary to prevent them from being put down. Vaughn sometimes uses leaders to 20 feet.

Care must also be taken when approaching feeding fish. It is not uncommon to see anglers crawling catlike on all fours to keep their shadows from breaking the bank's horizon.

According to Vaughn, who fishes the creek daily during the season, line drag is also a problem. To combat this, he casts downstream and then feeds line from the reel to allow line free drifts over feeding stations. "This technique is very effective for short distances," he states.

When an angler is proficient enough to match the hatch, present feather soft casts and overcome drag, dozens of quality fish can be caught and released in an evening.

While many fish take up feeding positions near the middle, I have found a good share hold right up against the banks. On several occasions I have noticed dark forms darting away from shore as my shadow betrayed me.

Though this appears to be a stream for accomplished fly anglers, it is not so much so that beginners can't score. Late one August morning my son, Jason, tied on a size 10 Grasshopper to his 10-foot tippet. Instead of casting, he set the hopper in the slow current and swiftly fed out line from his reel. It traveled maybe 15 feet when water near the bank erupted and the fly disappeared. Telegraphing a connection, his rod bowed

and line screeched off his reel as the trout fought well. After a ten-minute battle, he managed to net a nice 18-inch 'bow. As many people do, even with keepers here, he let it swim free.



A size 10 Grasshopper fly took this 18-inch beauty.

Early in the season Vaughn recommends dry Salmon patterns (sizes 6-10), dry Cahills, Blue Duns and Adamses (sizes 10-18), wet Sawyer's PT's, Hare's Ears and Zug Bugs (sizes 10-16), and Muddler streamers, Sculpins and Leeches (sizes 4-10).

Midsummer patterns include dry Paraduns and yellow Stones (sizes 16-18), dry Humpies, Cahills and Sulphur Duns (sizes 10-18).

"Late season dry patterns include Grasshoppers (sizes 8-12), dry Caddises, Adamses, and Paraduns (sizes 10-12)," advised Vaughn.

According to Vaughn, the best time to fish is late afternoon to evening, when some really fine hatches occur. "When the temperature reaches 60 degrees, watch out," he winked. "Some excellent surface activity takes place then."

The nearby Pit and Fall rivers, spring-fed Burney Creek and Baum and Crystal lakes give the Burney Basin much variety in the way of angling. Likewise popular with campers, hunters and skiers it is probably "... one of the best outdoor recreation areas in the world," according to Vaughn. However, one remarkable water flows in a class by itself, offering a smorgasbord of trout activity throughout. Here one can sample a wide selection of water types in search of three separate species, match wits with either hatchery or wild trout and opt for pansizers or trophies. When I'm in the Basin, this is one "Hat" I don't want to pass.

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