

Fishing The Virginia Lakes Chain

This small cluster of drive-in lakes offers four trout species and spectacular scenery



A highly colored prize, goldens are present in a few of the higher elevation lakes.

Don Vachini

Releasing a small brookie which had intercepted my fly, I gazed about at the awe-inspiring setting. The tiny lake appeared as a mirror, reflecting granite spires, now broken by spreading concentric circles from feeding trout. The sun's early light barely illuminated some of the higher peaks, many

of which were still snow-shrouded. Sprinkled with stands of pine and aspen, the landscape smacked of stark, virgin wilderness.

On this particular July morning I was plying Trumbull Lake, a small jewel in California's Virginia Lakes crown. Virginia Lakes is a broad name for a cluster

of ten small, gem-like lakes situated within a short distance of each other, about 20 miles south of the town of Bridgeport. Tucked around the 9,000- to 10,000-ft. elev. among the jagged Eastern Sierra crest, they are fed by perpetual glacial melt and seepage from towering Mt. Excelsior (elev. 12,446 ft.), Mt. Black



Early in the season, snow fields lace the surrounding peaks.

(elev. 11,794 ft.), and Dunderberg Peak (elev. 12,374 ft.). While four of the lower lakes rest in the Toiyabe National Forest, the rest are in the adjoining Hoover Wilderness along one of the northeastern entrances to Yosemite National Park.

Our friends from Riverside, Steve Davis and his daughter, Shari, were meeting my son, Matt, and me for a five-day foray into this spectacular vacationland. The Bridgeport area is probably one of the finest angling meccas in the West. Skyscraping peaks ribboned with trout-laden streams and emerald alpine lakes tower over the lush, meadowy Bridgeport Valley which houses several trophy trout fisheries. The Virginia Lakes, on the fringes of this 20-mile radius, are especially notorious for a variety of pansized trout. We chose this collection of waters not only for their scenic splendor but also because we could fish all of the lakes and creeks without the need to move our camp. Since this was Shari's initial trout outing, we also felt it was a good place for her to start.

This high altitude drainage was not always so bountifully endowed with trout. In fact, before the coming of the white man, most of its lakes were devoid of fish. Near the turn of the century a few adventuresome Bridgeport residents stocked trout in three of the lower lakes by means of mule train and the browns and brookies took hold in a big way. They even spread upstream via connecting streams to a few of the adjoining lakes within a couple of seasons. The remainder of the higher lakes remained fishless until "coffee can plants" brought trout to all by 1915. In general, mining prospectors were responsible for these stockings which included the gaudy golden to a trio of waters above 10,000 feet elev.

Prior to 1924, this Mono County locale was virtually unknown as a vacation spot. However, Walt and Anita Foster, a couple of "city folks" from Hollywood, slowly developed the area, building a road and adding a campground and cabins over the years. Virginia Lakes Resort really put the

area on the map. It became a very popular summer retreat, especially for the Southern California set, and remains so today (though under different ownership).

A lodge and 20 modern but rustic cabins line Little Virginia Lake and a portion of Virginia Creek today while a Forest Service campground overlooks Trumbull Lake. Big Virginia Lake serves as the trailhead to the Hoover Wilderness backcountry.

Nurturing the resort for over 30 years, the Fosters brought it through the Depression, World War II and various natural obstacles (a book entitled *I Caught A Fisherman* by Anita Foster tells their story). Obviously centered around fishing, the resort was highly successful. In its early years, trout were painstakingly stocked by private means to compensate for the heavy pressure and liberal limits. The angling was excellent as the mix of natives and planters always seemed willing to cooperate. Today, the Department of Fish and Game (DFG) plants the three accessible lakes to supplement a still thriving native fishery.

Of the ten lakes in the chain, Trumbull, Big and Little Virginia Lakes are the most accessible and thus the most popular. Because a paved road leads right to their doorsteps, almost everyone who visits the area wets a line in them. Despite heavy angling pressure, these lakes meet the *(Continued on page 11)*

A Lot Of Fish Are Hooked On The Sound It Makes.

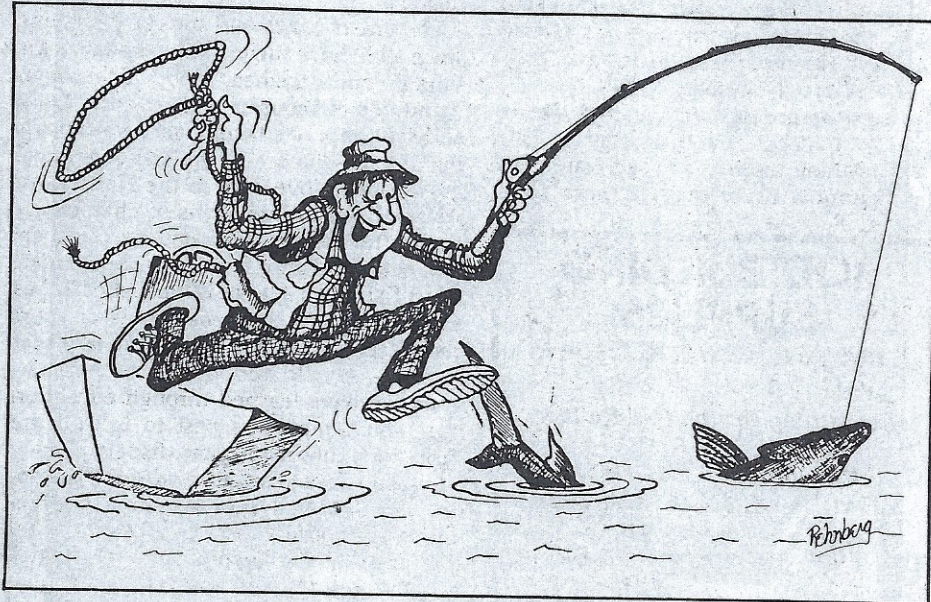


©1987 Blue Fox Tackle Co., 645 N. Emerson, Cambridge, MN 55008.

MY \$1,000 STURGEON

(Continued from page 4)

landing this sturgeon. I walked around the console to the bow and opened the front hatch. Taking some rope out, I fashioned a noose in an awkward manner while I played the fish. I was getting into shallow water and the sturgeon was partially out of the water. I made several at-



PETE REINBERG

Returning to the docks, I weighed the fish in at 68 lbs. 4 oz. and felt proud indeed. Then it hit me. Trilene had its line class world record contest open at the time. I'd changed to Trilene for the 1985 season after talking to someone who had broken a record (Buzz Ramsey). Now it just might be to my good fortune. After completing all the forms and having them notarized, waiting for acceptance, and now finally being awarded the World Record for Sturgeon on the 8-kg (16-lb.) line class, my

tempts to lasso the tail until in frustration I jumped into the shallow water and put the rope over, cinched it tight and pulled my catch to the beach.

I still had not thought of records. I had simply met a challenge and wanted to accomplish the feat of landing that sturgeon.

FISHING THE VIRGINIA LAKES

(Continued from page 7)

challenge and are always productive. These three lakes possess abundant food forms and the native brookies and browns find ideal water conditions year-round. The DFG stocks them weekly during the season with catchable rainbows, which make up the bulk of the yearly catch.

Since Mono County operates under a general trout season (from April 30 through October) these waters are closed for the winter, giving holdover trout a chance to put on heft. "Many rainbows are planted after the season closes and again just before it opens," informed Bob Iselin, manager of the nearby Hot Creek Fish Hatchery. "This makes for some fine angling in the spring," he added.

Trumbull Lake (elev. 9,300 ft.), the lowest of the lakes, sits in the shadow of Dunderberg Peak which dominates the

name will be there until someone comes along and breaks it. But best of all, Trilene makes it a \$1,000.00 fish!

It's over. I have put my name in the record book. There in the book with Ed Park, Jim Teeny, Buzz Ramsey and the many others who were for at least one fish, one moment, one day, a hero. □

mountainscape. Fed by underground seepage and springs, it has a slightly cloudy nature making many wary of its potential. For this reason most people opt for baits fished on the bottom. Red salmon eggs and worms work very well here. I also find "noisy" spinners like Rooster Tails and Panther Martins very effective in the murky water. Marshy on one side and rock-bound on the other, it is visited by many campground users.

Over the ridge from Trumbull sits Big and Little Virginia, the glamor lakes of the chain. Little Virginia (elev. 9,450 ft.), which sits alongside the lodge and a few cabins, is a shallow lake—only ten to 15 feet at its deepest. Clear and cold, it is an excellent bet for fly fishing, especially early and late in the day. When the glass-off takes place, trout feed so heavily on the surface it appears to be raining. Productive flies include Royal Coachman, Mosquito and Black Gnat in sizes 12-14.

While brown and brook trout are commonly enticed on wet flies in the shal-

Z-RAY®

"The Original Z-Shaped Lure!"

STEELHEAD SALMON TROUT



Featured in Aug.-Sept. '84 issue of STS magazine

Spoon type lure with swimming action. Good for all gamefish! Trolling or casting. Available in five (5) sizes and eight (8) color options. Ask your local dealer or write for our FREE CATALOG SHEET!

WITTMANN LURES

P.O. Box 12701, Tucson, AZ 85732

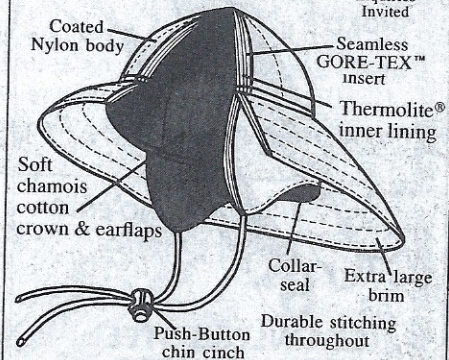
(602) 628-7027

OREGON HEADROOF®



ONLY \$28.00

Postpaid Dealer Inquiries Invited



This is the warmest, most waterproof, light-weight rain hat available for fishing, hunting, hiking, sailing or outdoor activities... ANYWHERE YOU NEED TO DEAL WITH RAIN & COLD. Sizes: S-M-L-XL. Colors: Bright Red, Navy Blue, Forest Green, Camo, Black, Grey, Sky Blue, Teal, Mulberry, Tan, Signal Yellow.

OREGON HEADROOF®
pats. pend. ©

2335 N.W. Flanders, Dept. S
Portland, Oregon 97210
(503) 222-3322

NAME _____			
ADDRESS _____			
CITY _____		STATE _____ ZIP _____	
<input type="checkbox"/> VISA or <input type="checkbox"/> Mastercard # _____ Exp. Date _____ Phone _____			
Qty.	SIZE	COLOR	PRICE
			\$ _____
			\$ _____
TOTAL			\$ _____

lows, rainbows are frequently taken on the side opposite the lodge where the lake is deepest. Steve and Shari had great success from this spot, with the novice taking her first trout early one morning, a plump 10-incher.

A spring flows in among the submerged rocks making both bait and lures effective in this trout haven. Salmon eggs, worms and Velveeta cheese are mainstays here.

No motorized boats are allowed on any of the lakes but a light pram or canoe is ideal. Some of the best action occurs right in the middle of this water. Rowboats are available for rent at the lodge.

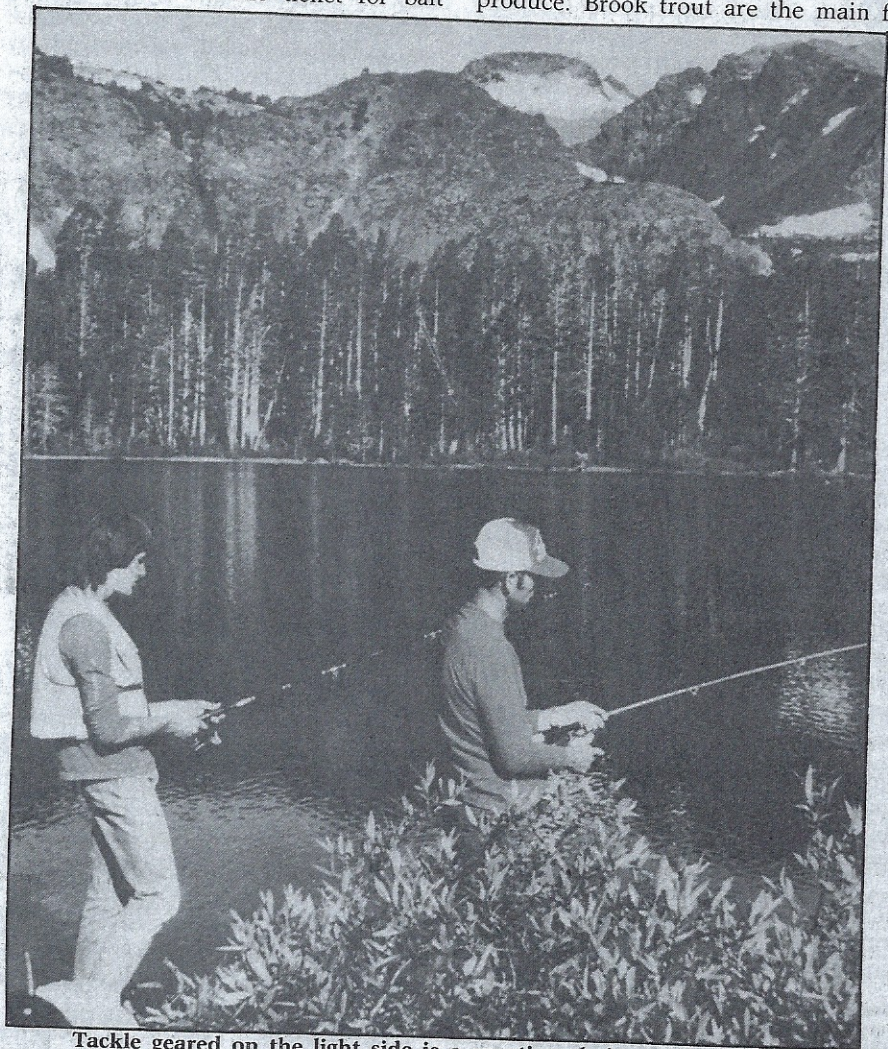
In addition to the rainbows, between 500 to 1,000 lbs. of catchable browns are usually released into Big and Virginia Lakes sometime in the fall. "Some of these are ripe and will spawn naturally in the creeks," said Iselin.

Besides the hatchery 'bows, which usually run 7 to 12 inches, some lunker browns are present and taken annually. "A few 2- to 5-pounders are caught each season, usually early or late in the season," beamed Carolyn Webb, manager of the Virginia Lakes Resort. "A couple of years back, a 12-pounder washed up on shore and died of old age," she winked.

Big Virginia (elev. 9,770 ft.), the largest lake in the group, sits a few hundred yards above the lodge. Since it's so large (by alpine standards), the trout tend to scatter over all parts of the water. Rain-

bows are the most common species taken here but browns and brookies thrive, too. A very deep lake, it is most conducive to soaking bait from shore, though rowboats are available for rent. Red salmon eggs work well when fished on the bottom with a light sinker. "Night crawlers and worms seem to be the ticket for bait

named pond sits Blue Lake (elev. 9,900 ft.). None of the wilderness lakes are planted so it is all natives from here on upstream. Since many people fish it because it is near the more accessible waters, it bears the mark of overfishing. While not abounding with trout, it will produce. Brook trout are the main fare



Tackle geared on the light side is a sporting choice at the lakes.

fishermen here," suggests Webb. "Inflated 'crawlers always seem to account for a nice brown or two," she continued.

The best spot for action, whether it be bait, lures or flies, is near the outlet where a small channel is etched and along the gently sloping north shoreline approaching the inlet.

An additional feeder is Red Lake (elev. 9,850 ft.) which lies in a small depression a hundred feet above Big Virginia. This lake is not planted but harbors a population of small brookies. Food is sparse here and the fish show it as 6- to 7-inchers are common. I find it a good lake for tiny flies dabbed over brush near the outlet. Size 12-14 Black Ant and Black Gnat patterns are good choices.

Following Virginia Creek upstream from Big Virginia Lake, one crosses the signed wilderness boundary and approaches the next tarn. Past a small un-

along with some small but feisty rainbows, obviously progeny of the ones stocked in the lower elevations. The shoreline is brushy and snag-filled and for this reason the inlet and outlets are the number one hot spots. Smallish Mosquito patterns used wet or dry, early or late in the day, have given me some fast action.

Three-quarters of a mile up the trail one encounters Cooney Lake (elev. 10,200 ft.), named for J.P. Cooney, an old prospector friend of the Fosters. It possesses an abundance of colorful *Salvelinus fontinalis*. Spawning habitat is adequate past the outlet and sheer granite walls on one side give the lake a rock-bound appearance.

Climbing up a steep switchback 200 feet or so brings glimpses of a tiny but verdant meadow basin near the pass. Resembling three small ponds, the Frog Lakes (elev. 10,400 ft.) mark the headwaters of Virginia Creek and contain active brookies and reportedly goldens, too. The brookies

HOPKINS®



**STAINLESS STEEL
TROUT LURES**

Freshwater fishermen recognize HOPKINS® as deadly jigs for Bass. They are excellent lures for Trout too. Cast the SHORTY® ½ S (1/8 oz.) or the SHORTY® S-1 (¼ oz.). Discover unsurpassed castability and great performance. The gold plated versions (½ SG & S-1 G) are especially effective for Trout.

Ask your Dealer

Free Color Catalog
1130 Boissevain Ave
Norfolk, Va. 23507



seemingly have crowded out much of the golden population, which are descendants of the original prospector plants. Not too much spawning gravel is present in these lakes' interconnected feeders. However, brook trout have the ability to spawn in waters without inlets or outlets so they are more numerous in the golden's terrain. Small, dark flies are killers here but the fish must be derricked over shoreline reeds.

Above these lakes the trail ascends Summit Pass on the way to Yosemite's backcountry.

A side trail branches off to the right a short distance above Blue Lake. Some years ago I took this side path, ascending the steep talus switchback for almost two miles. Sitting in a glacial cirque reflecting a panoramic view of jagged granitic crags was crystal-blue Moat Lake (elev. 10,900 ft.), the highest of the Virginia Lakes.

After 15 minutes of fruitless casting, my Mosquito fly disappeared in a brilliant swirl, partially tipping off my adversary. Following a brief skirmish, I admired the treasure which flashed hues of yellow, orange and cadmium in the early morning sun. As I gently released the golden in the azure water I savored my golden reward—California's state fish—for having hiked the demanding trail up to this lake.

A few of these wilderness lakes harbor dwindling populations of *Salmo aquabonita* and any caught should be carefully returned to their lofty domain, at least in this drainage.

Connecting most of these lakes is a small but prolific trout stream. Virginia Creek heads at the Frog Lakes, passes through seven of the lakes and then thrashes and gurgles its way 18 miles downstream to enter the East Walker River near Bridgeport. Along the way it picks up flow from Dog, Green and Dunderberg creeks.

Where a tiny creek emerges from each lake and spots in between, one is afforded some excellent choices for feisty but wary natives. In some cases one will have to approach on hands and knees to sneak up on the pools, especially in the meadows.

Browns, along with the ever-present brook trout, dominate the more inaccessible sections while planted rainbows make up the bulk of the catch near the highway. "Throughout its whole course, Virginia Creek is loaded with trout," informed Rick Rockel, who operates Ken's Sporting Goods in Bridgeport.

Some pleasant and memorable surprises have come from this brushy creek. A few seasons ago, I landed a foot-long brookie from a snag-filled pool between the two Virginia Lakes and later in that same year my son caught and released a nice brown over 2 lbs. about a mile below the lakes. This lends credence to the fact that many of the lakes' larger specimens use this stream to spawn. In fact, it is one of the main tributaries used by sizeable Bridge-

port Reservoir browns on their fall reproductive rituals.

Since trout in these high altitude lakes and streams are basically small, tackle geared accordingly provides a sporting match. A light or ultralight spinning rod and reel with 4-lb.-test line or a light 7½-to 8-ft. fly rod and floating line are good choices. My favorite is a combination spin/fly rod which breaks down for easy carrying into the backcountry. On many of the high lakes, a fly/bubble setup is more practical because it allows for longer casts than with a fly rod. In some cases stream or lakeside brush and trees render a fly rod useless.

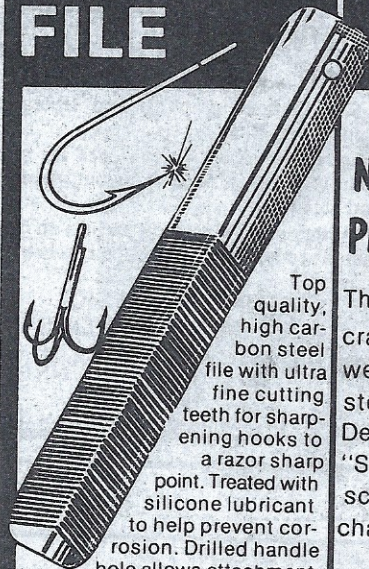
Whether a fly or spin outfit is used,

most dark patterns in the 10-16 size range will produce. According to Rockel, a much respected local, Mosquito, and Black Ant patterns prove most reliable on area waters. "However, Beetle, Jassid, small Grasshopper, Humpy (yellow or olive), Royal Wulff, Olive Nymph, Tan Caddis, Emerger, Zug Bug and small black or brown Woolly Worm patterns work extremely well, too," he added.

"For those anglers who just want to catch fish, worms are the ticket for natives followed closely by Velveeta cheese and red salmon eggs for the planters," mentioned Rockel.

Good lure choices include small Panther Martin and Rooster Tail spinners.

NEW! THUMB HANDLE FILE



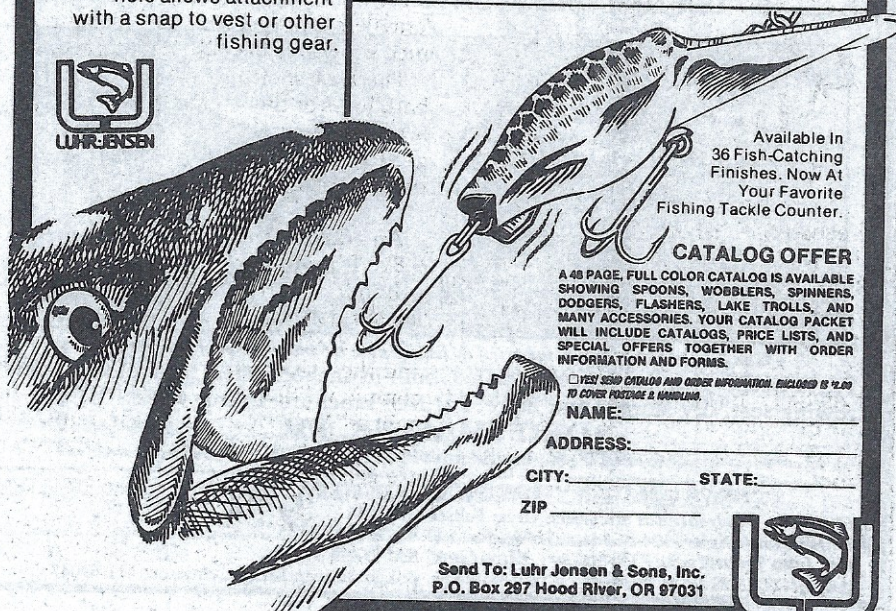
Top quality, high carbon steel file with ultra fine cutting teeth for sharpening hooks to a razor sharp point. Treated with silicone lubricant to help prevent corrosion. Drilled handle hole allows attachment with a snap to vest or other fishing gear.



NEW! HOTSHOT SE SPECIAL EDITION

NOW: A NEW "HOT SHOT" PLUG DESIGNED FOR CASTING!

This new extra-deep diving, high-action crankbait will reach a depth of 12 feet and weighs a full half-ounce. Perfect for steelhead, salmon or bass casting/trolling. Designed and tested by Buzz Ramsey, the "SE" features an instant conversion belly screw eye which allows you to easily change hooks to fit any fishing situation.



Available in
36 Fish-Catching
Finishes. Now At
Your Favorite
Fishing Tackle Counter.

CATALOG OFFER

A 48 PAGE, FULL COLOR CATALOG IS AVAILABLE SHOWING SPOONS, WOBBLERS, SPINNERS, DODGERS, FLASHERS, LAKE TROLLS, AND MANY ACCESSORIES. YOUR CATALOG PACKET WILL INCLUDE CATALOGS, PRICE LISTS, AND SPECIAL OFFERS TOGETHER WITH ORDER INFORMATION AND FORMS.

YES! SEND CATALOG AND ORDER INFORMATION. ENCLOSED IS \$2.00 TO COVER POSTAGE & HANDLING.

NAME: _____

ADDRESS: _____

CITY: _____ STATE: _____

ZIP: _____

Send To: Luhr Jensen & Sons, Inc.
P.O. Box 297 Hood River, OR 97031





*A cut Above
the rest...*



CUSTOM BUILT
Aluminum Drift Boats

16' MODELS

12' MODEL

Dealer Inquiries Invited

(503) 933-2807

For details,

call or write 40165 Mohawk River Road, Marcola, OR 97454

**Camp Kitchen
Dry Boxes**

STEELHEADER EGG LOOPS



TIE-FAST KNOT TYER

Ties egg loops, mooching rigs (sliding or stationary), fly fishing nail knots, end ties for lures or hooks. Comfortably fits in hand and has a ring for easy attachment to vest. Stainless steel. Made in U.S.A.

ORDER DIRECT FROM:

TIE-FAST MFG. INC.

P.O. Box 720158 • Redding, CA 96072
\$3.50 + .50 Handling & Shipping

**SAGE • G. LOOMIS
FENWICK • LAMIGLAS
POWELL**

- Custom-built graphite and fiberglass fishing rods.
- Specializing in fly rods, pack fly rods, spinning/casting rods, for trout, salmon, and steelhead.
- Write or call for free price lists on completed rods, kits and repair work on request.

**INTERIOR ALASKA
CUSTOM BUILT RODS**

Cedric A. Knuckey

2124 Bayard Ave., Dept. S • St. Paul, MN 55116

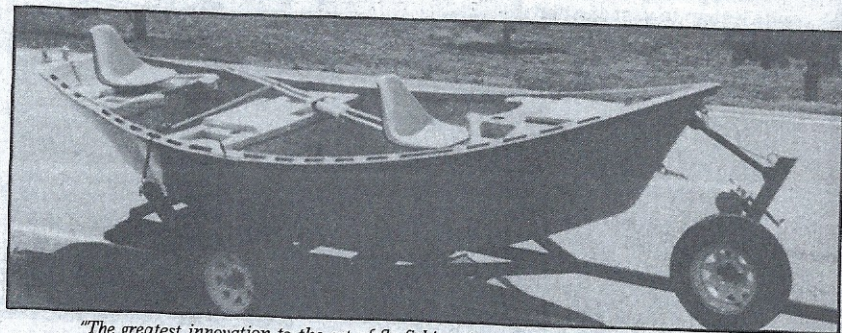
(612) 699-0455

Monthly Specials & Return Discounts Given



DRIFTMASTER, INC.

CUSTOM DRIFTBOATS



"The greatest innovation to the art of fly fishing since the introduction of graphite..."

FEATURES: Rear leg braces installed, built-in anchor system, swivel seats, oars, rowing seat, dry storage and more. For free brochure, call or write:

DRIFTMASTER, INC.

P.O. Box 7130, Sheridan, WY 82801 • (307) 672-8332

OR CONTACT A DEALER:

Fly Fisher's Retreat, 825 8th Street, Great Falls, MT 59405

Yellowstone Angler, 124 N. Main, Livingston, MT 59047

San Juan Troutfitters, P.O. Box 243, Farmington, NM 87499

ARGENTINA & NEW ZEALAND: Don Williams, Box 2, Billman Lane, Livingston, MT 59047

I have personally found the new spinner/fly series from Mepps to be very effective on these high mountain trout. Size 0-1 is about as large as one should go no matter which ones are selected.

Many backpackers use the trail to the lakes as a conduit to other drainages, both near and far. There are abundant wilderness campsites available along the trail. However, when camping anywhere in the area it is wise to hang your food from a high limb. Bears are common in this, and surrounding locales, and will readily take an easy "handout."

For an overnight stay in the wilderness, a permit is necessary. They are available free at the lodge or the ranger station in Bridgeport.

When here, I favor an exploratory venture with use of a day pack. With trail munch and simple tackle, I can easily sample all of the upper lakes in a day and still get out by nightfall. One should be in fairly good shape, however, and not try to overdo or push too much.

At high elevations, one should always be prepared for thunderstorms or freak weather, even in the summer. A lightweight poncho is worth its weight in gold.

A pack station is available, providing horses for day rides or extended trips.

Depending on the previous winter's snowpack, the best time of year to visit is usually from mid-June, when runoff and snowmelt have stabilized, or through September. The resort opens by June and, as per its lease with the Toiyabe National Forest, closes October 1st.

During spring and early summer, snow drifts lace the slopes while fall paints the aspen and cottonwood gorgeous yellow and gold—a contrast one has to see to appreciate. For the most part, pleasant days and cool nights prevail.

To reach the resort (and the lakes), take Highway 395 south of Bridgeport for 18 miles to Conway Summit and then six miles up the paved Virginia Lakes Road. If there is some doubt about early or late season road conditions, inquire at the Bridgeport Ranger Station, (619) 932-7070.

For well over sixty seasons the lakes and resort have been a haven for those seeking mountain solitude, a quiet campsite, a relaxing evening by a fireplace or a wilderness experience. In a range noted for its towering peaks, glacial lakes and alpine streams, brook, brown and rainbow trout are readily available for either beginning or seasoned anglers. For the more adventuresome, the rare golden trout beckons from a few lakes nestled near the clouds. Whether one tries for all four species or just opts for a leisurely day on one lake, there is no doubt the Virginia Lakes chain forms a link to outstanding angling. For my part, they will continue to hold me in "bondage" for a long time to come!