

Davis Lake Produces Very Large Trout

Don Vachini

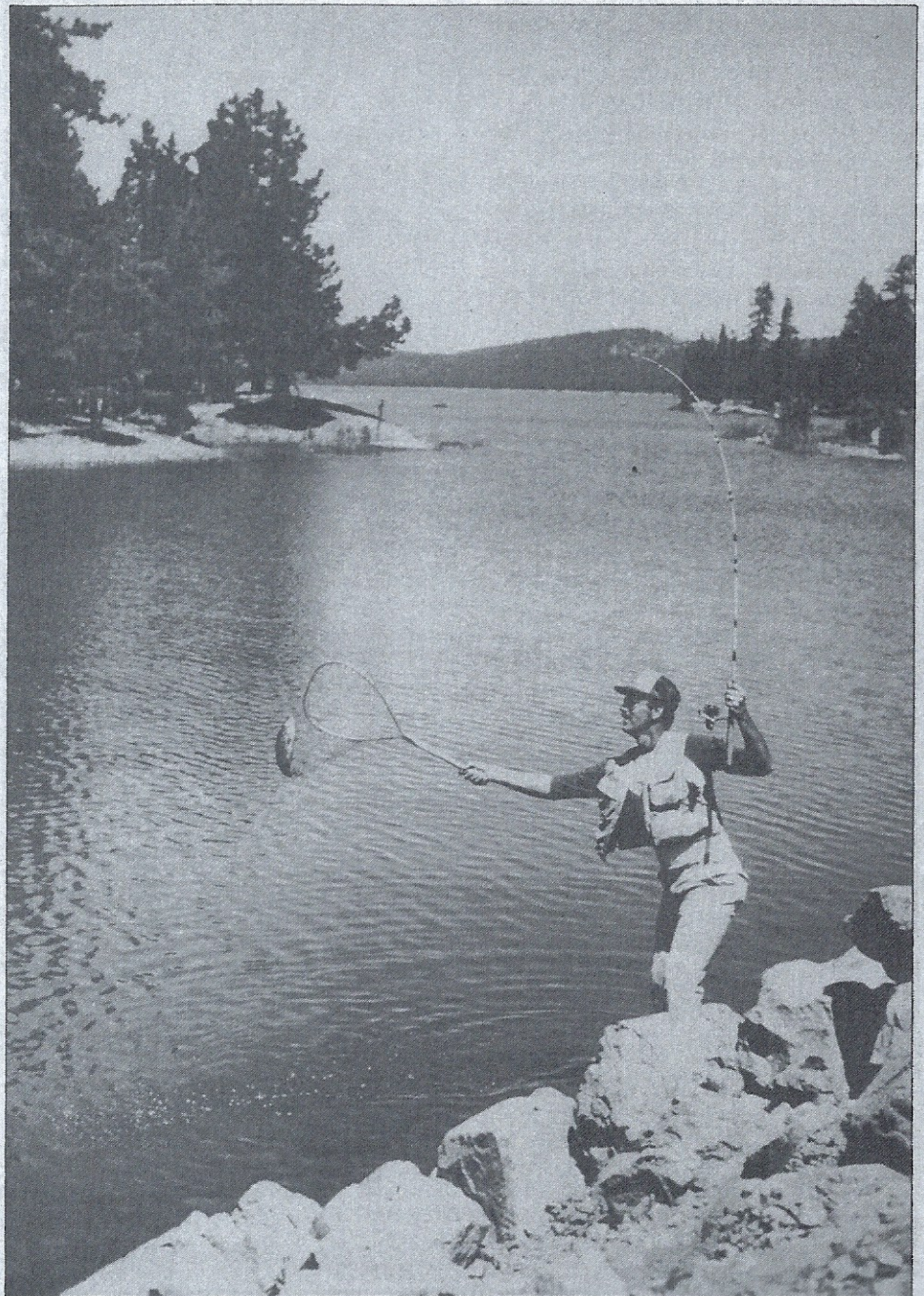
Driven by a piercing wind, black clouds first swirled around and then began to envelope nearby Smith Peak. As lapping waves turned to whitecaps, my retrieve was rudely interrupted and something heavy instantly took line toward deep water. With snowflakes pelting my face and reel screeching above the hissing wind, I managed to turn the brute after each dogged run.

Gasping on the bank, the hefty 16-inch rainbow exhibited a silvery sheen bisected by a pinkish-red lateral band. However, its disproportional features are what caught my eye: a thick, heavy stomach region with a small head and thin tail section. Obviously a well-fed trout!

Despite the inclement weather, I was enjoying northern California's famous Davis Lake on an early spring afternoon in 1970. Located seven miles north of Portola and reached via paved road off of Highway 70, the lake sits at an elevation of 5,775 feet in Plumas National Forest. Created by a dam on Big Grizzly Creek in 1966, the reservoir is fed by snowmelt and springs draining from the higher peaks of the remote northern Sierra Nevada range. When full, it holds 4,000 surface acres and covers 32 miles of open shoreline.

First opened to angling in 1968, it swiftly earned the reputation as one of the state's finest producers of quality trout. Still considered highly productive, it is blessed with near ideal conditions. At this elevation the growing seasons are long enough to allow for lengthy food production and yet not warm the water too quickly.

With the exception of the old creek channel, which approaches 100 feet in depth, much of the lake is between 15 and 35 feet deep. Since it is a comparatively shallow body of water, sunlight penetrates to a good depth throughout wide expanses of water. The result is abundant vegetation



and nutrients which in turn promote prolific aquatic life.

According to Department of Fish and Game fisheries biologists, these rich waters are conducive to unusually rapid growth of both planted and native fish. Approximately 250,000 catchable-size rainbow trout between 7-12 inches are planted annually and by the following season most are between 10-18 inches and a robust 1-3 pounds. Averaging 14 inches, most fall into the 1- to 2-pound range while holdovers tip the scales between 2 and 4 pounds.

Besides the planted rainbows, the dam trapped a healthy population of resident 'bows and browns from the old creek systems. With ample spawning tributaries, habitat and food, self-sustaining populations of both roam the lake. The carnivorous browns commonly approach 5 pounds

with a few 7- to 8-pounders checked in annually. The lake limit is five trout.

One of the best times to be on the lake is April-May, right after ice out. During this period, trout are not only scattered all over the impoundment at depths of 10 to 20 feet but are extremely active. Bank anglers using Kastmasters, Needlefish and Mepps spinners really reap benefits in the early spring as they can operate without being hindered by weeds on the schools of trout which commonly cruise along the shoreline.

According to Steve Harding of the Graeagle General Store, who frequents the lake, there are a lot of small baitfish in the lake and trout tend to school up in the areas where they are located. "Once you pinpoint a school of hungry trout, the action can be fairly fast," he informed.

As water warms in late June and weeds become restrictive, most anglers choose to

troll near the dropoffs to the deep channel where optimum conditions exist. The trout move in and out of the shallows daily via these shelves. While not needed early in the season, a boat is obviously a necessity from early summer through fall. According to Harding, a boat affords one the chance to work the ledges. "Trolling flatfish or yellow or brown Rooster Tails at the 20- to 30-foot depth is just the ticket," he winked.

When the heat of summer intensifies, deep trolling the channel with downriggers or lead core line is common practice. Best areas include the south end of the lake northwest of the dam and the dropoff along the northeast shore.

Fall angling is best near the feeder streams and along the Lightning Tree boat launch where a large dropoff exists. Some nice late season browns are taken here.

Ice fishing, which usually takes place between mid-January to March, adds another dimension to the lake.

While Barren Point, Center Island and the old channel are popular structure points, the mouths of feeders like Big Grizzly, Cow and Freeman are always a good bet. Though spinners, spoons and wet flies are effective here, salmon eggs or worms bounced on the bottom probably work best.

Abundant mayfly hatches occur consistently all summer all over the lake. I have observed them from 8:00 a.m. until dark. By using a pram or belly boat, fly casters can effectively work the edge of the weedbeds, many times casting to individual fish from deeper water.

Top dry fly choices here include such standby patterns as the Gordon, Cahill, Adams, Black Gnat and Hendrickson. Woolly Worm, nymph and streamer patterns which imitate baitfish are excellent wet choices. A size 8 Marabou Muddler, twitched from deep to shallow water, is my favorite here.

A light action fly rod with floating line for surface feeders is fine. A high density sink tip is perfect for fishing the edges where depth is more appropriate.

For hardware tossers, a light to medium action spinning rod and reel matched with 4- to 6-lb. line is more than adequate to subdue the chunky Davis battlers.

Besides domestic water supply and recreation use, the lake is also a part of a downstream fisheries enhancement program. Controlled releases have stabilized the rainbow and brown populations in the five-mile section of Big Grizzly Creek below the dam, as well as the Middle Fork of the Feather River.

Forest Service camping facilities, boat rentals and a store are available at the lake. Lodging can be found in Portola. For up-to-the-minute information, contact the Graeagle General Store, telephone (916) 836-2519. □

