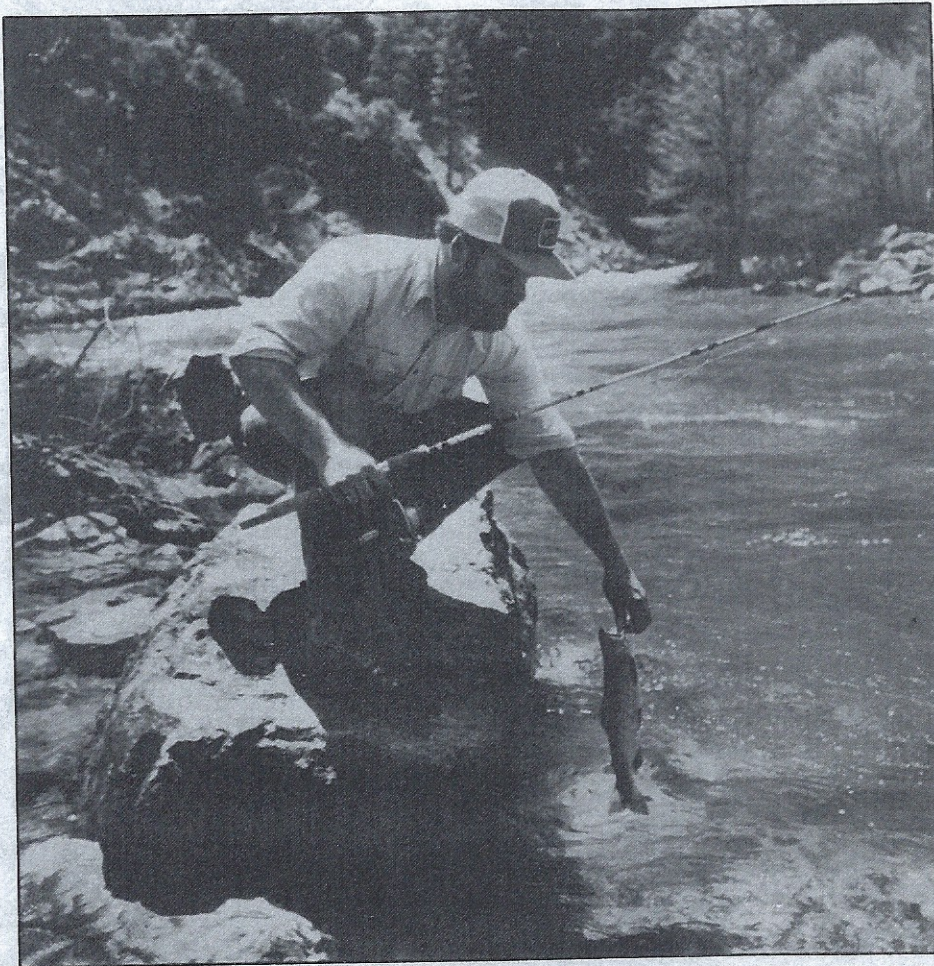


Lake Almanor Trout & Steelhead Bonanza

Anglers can just as easily find rainbows, browns or king salmon tugging on the end of their line while working this expansive Northern California river



The Locherman Canyon section of the North Fork Feather River will produce some hefty resident trout.

Don Vachini

The morning sky broke crisp and clear. Fresh snow, dumped by a freak midsummer storm the previous day, dusted the nearby peaks and accentuated the thick forest carpet surrounding the lake. Several boats dotted the near glass-like surface, catching the glint from a welcome sunrise. Our fishfinder indicated we were trolling in about 30 ft. of water and the six colors told us our lures were just off the bottom.

Suddenly one of the rods bowed violently and lead core line screeched from the level wind. Three other lines were retrieved, the motor was cut and all eyes prepared to watch the angler battle fish.

Our party consisted of host and former guide Frank Fonley, friends Dave Rogers, Dave Francis, Rich Holstein and myself. We were spending three days on California's vast Lake Almanor in mid-July

and, despite it being the "off" season, were hoping to tie into some sizeable trout or salmon.

Perpetually snowcapped Mt. Lassen, located 35 miles to the northwest, not only provides an aesthetic background but flow to the lake as the North Fork Feather River bubbles to life from beneath its lava base slopes. Created by a P.G. & E. dam on the North Fork in 1914, this Plumas County impoundment rests in a gigantic timbered

basin at an elevation of 4,490 ft. One of the state's oldest and largest man-made lakes, it provides over 52 miles of fishable shoreline and holds in excess of one million acre-feet of water.

Unseasonal inclement weather had kept us off the lake for the previous two days. On this bluebird day, however, we were trolling scientifically with radar on the deep channel when Rich's rod came to life. Though the fish fought admirably it was not large and was quickly worked to the side of the boat—probably too quickly. As Frank prepared to net it, the silvery king made a gallant, acrobatic twist, threw the Z-Ray and burst to freedom.

The remainder of the day proved fruitless. Though we noticed a few scattered comma-shaped blips on our sonar, it was evident the fish had scattered due to the untimely storm.

Even though we wore the skunk on this day, Fonley feels this water is one of the state's best kept secrets as it holds good populations of sizeable rainbow and brown trout plus king salmon. Up until a few years ago, coho salmon were also present but the Department of Fish & Game has stopped planting them.

The king salmon finning in the lake are DFG plants and will peak out at 4½ to 5 lbs. with a few 6 to 9 pounders while the rainbows and browns average one to three

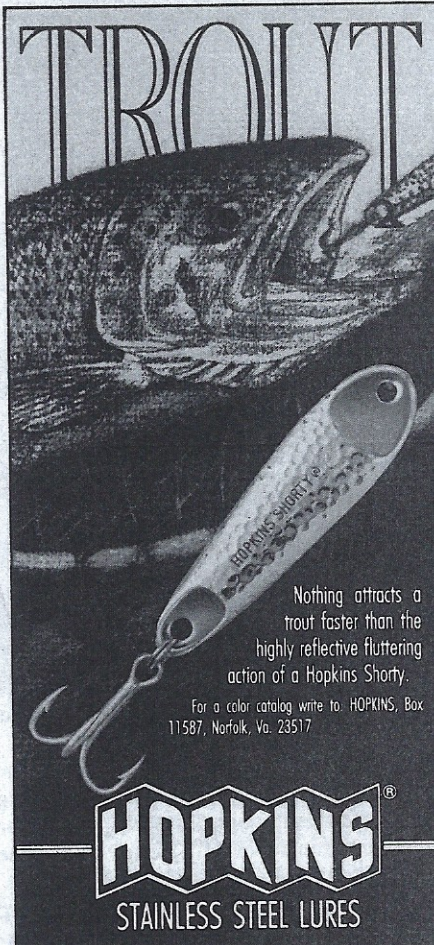
pounds but will reach 6 to 7 lbs. on occasion. "Throw in a thriving smallmouth bass population and you've got a quality year-round fishery," beamed Fonley.

According to the DFG, the salmonids at Almanor benefit from some favorable conditions. Good year-long flow enters from the Feather River and its Hamilton Branch, not only providing abundant food and oxygen but spawning habitat as well. Since the lake itself was formed by flooding a large meadow, much of its bottom is relatively flat. As a result, abundant plant and aquatic life exist here.

One of the biggest pluses, however, is the large population of Japanese smelt inhabiting the water, an obvious source of forage for the big fish. The tiny introduced fish, which mature at 3 to 4 in., feed on aquatic bloom and do not compete with the trout and salmon, are largely accountable for the large average size of these species in Almanor.

The rainbow trout planted here are a cross between Eagle Lake and wild rainbows—a highly spirited mixture. Both the king salmon and trout gorge heavily on the baitfish, with their small heads and thick torsos indicators of rapid growth.

The burly lake browns are deep dwellers and are usually caught incidentally by anglers after other quarry. Most are progeny of original stocks trapped behind the



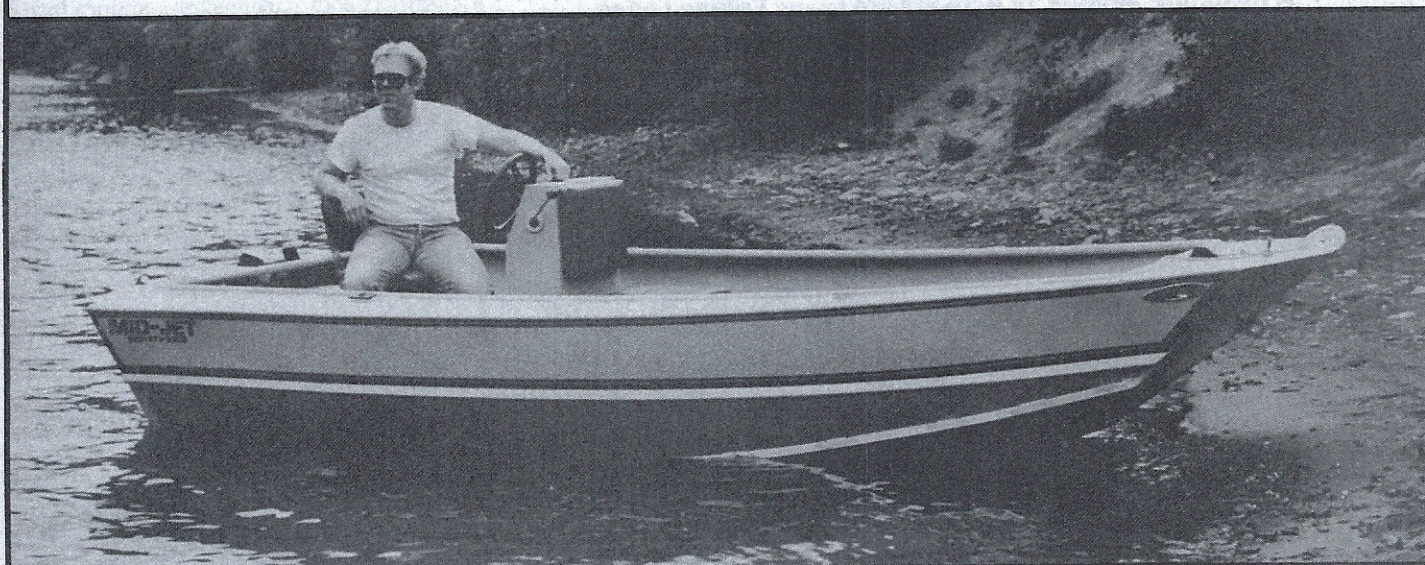
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Towering Mt. Lassen not only provides a scenic backdrop for the lake but snowmelt as well.

dam. While an early season closure on the feeder streams protects their fall spawning runs, a few are caught in early November right near the town of Chester where the North Fork enters the lake.

According to Fonley, the key to fishing this lake is locating the smelt concentrations. While he feels one would be lost on

the lake without a fish finder, large numbers of diving birds can also point out these large schools. "Once the food source is found, the big fish are not far away," he informs.

Consistent hot spots center around the Hamilton Branch channel from Big Springs to the confluence with the main North

Fork, though action slows considerably during midsummer. Early and late season usually booms with action. Where the Hamilton tumbles into the lake is also a very good bet.

Though a boat is virtually a necessity, some limited shore angling is also attempted. Best results occur near the dam and parts of the rocky, eastern shoreline although much access remains in private ownership. Salmon eggs, cured roe, night crawlers and marshmallows are productive in the waiting game.

First time anglers will find the lake imposing and should seek a guide or go with a person familiar with the water. Experienced guide Doug D'Angelo has over 20 years service on Almanor. He relies almost entirely on a set of home-made jigs labeled Fish Hawks. These creations closely resemble the smelt and are a good bet to take salmon, rainbows and browns. "I favor 4 lb. test line, a 4 oz. graphite rod and small reels with these rigs," he mentioned.

One of his recent favorites is an iridescent jig which reflects a lot of light. "The luminous jigs work real well in the early morning and late evening," he adds.

By no means does D'Angelo discount other methods on Almanor salmonids. Trollers working attractor blades on lead core line pull in good numbers of trout. Night crawlers, Z-Rays, Needlefish, Super Dupers, Rapalas and Water Demons all produce well for trollers. Filleted anchovies are real popular with the kings.

Many anglers here favor downriggers because they can fight the trout on light tackle.

Lots of trout are caught drift fishing night crawlers. D'Angelo suggests a whole 'crawler on a size 6-8 hook soaked in about

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40-45 ft. of water. "However, while drifting, don't set the hook at the first movement of the rod," he warns. "Let the fish run 10 to 15 ft. with the line before striking," he adds.

Almanor's trout can be found from the surface to the bottom depending on the time of year and water temperature. Early or late season finds the rainbows and kings within 10 ft. of the surface while browns are pretty much bottom dwellers no matter what the season. As soon as the warm weather hits (July-August), the fish predictably head for the cold water under the thermocline. Early a.m. is the best time to try for them during summer.

Open year-round, the limit is five trout or salmon in combination.

The two main tributary streams to the lake (the North Fork Feather and the Hamilton Branch) provide an excellent fishery in themselves. Flowing through stately stands of pine, fir and cedar, they possess ideal trout habitat with abundant food and plentiful spawning gravel. In fact, the DFG keeps the North Fork closed an extra month to protect lake run rainbows on their spawning mission. Good sized browns can also be taken, generally after mid October. While these feeders contain some big resident trout, the typical native fish found here is under 12 in.

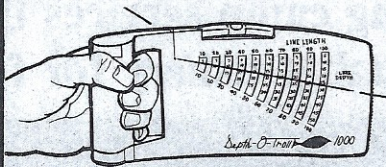
Though the DFG regularly plants catchable rainbows along most roadside access points on both creeks, my favorite tactic involves probing sections away from these heavily pressured spots. One morning several years ago, I followed a dusty logging road out of Chester for about five miles. Arriving in Locherman Canyon, I noticed that the secluded pools, pockets and riffles of the North Fork were still enshrouded in shadows. Before the morning sun caressed its waters, I had netted and released a trio of feisty, deep-spotted rainbows.

Over the years, I have caught some thick 'bows here, a few approaching a pound. Black Woolly Worms, Black Ants and dark Caddis nymphs worked through pocket water early and late in the day have proven their worth. Fairly predictable caddis and mayfly hatches occur all summer long.

Rice and Warner creeks, two North Fork tributaries, are of special note to anglers preferring a challenge. While Warner cascades over a steep, rocky gradient, the meadowy Rice branch resembles a tiny, hard-to-locate rivulet in places. Tiny dry flies or worms dabbed gently from behind brush will produce reverently small native trout.

To me, this large and scenic lake, once dubbed "Little Tahoe," remains a perfect spot to establish a base for a fishing vacation. Not only does the challenge of a trophy lake fishery beckon, but the sparkling feeders and their tributaries provide a serene alternative. □

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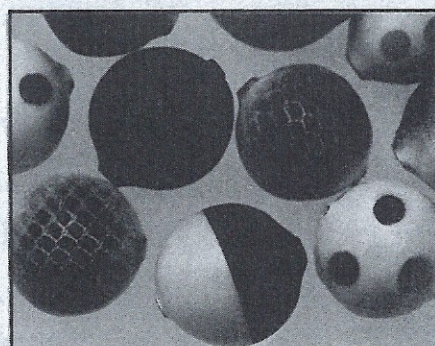
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