

California's Top Ten Trout Waters

An impressive variety of trouting action can be found within the spacious borders of the Golden State

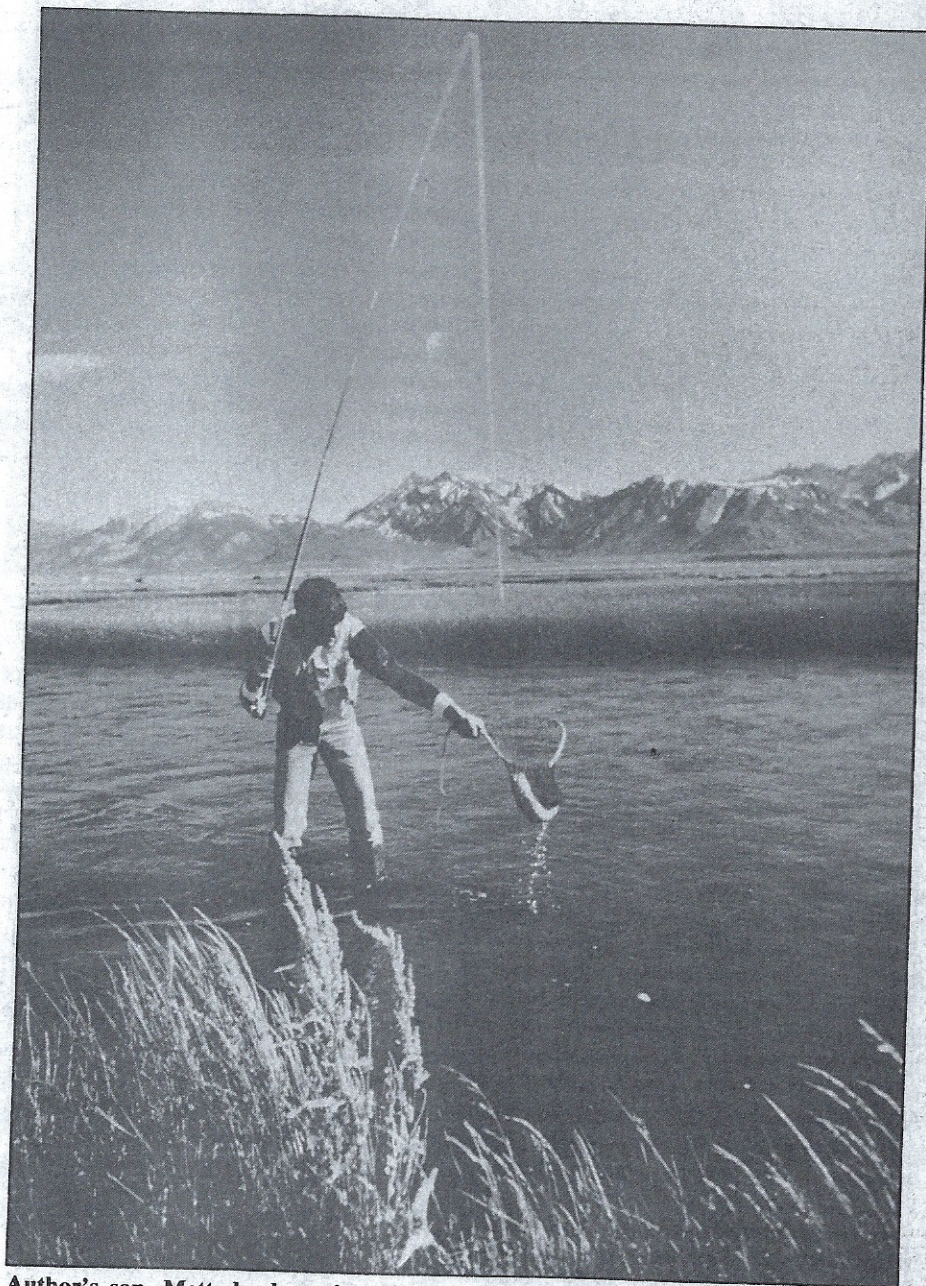
As a native Californian, I have spent a good portion of my 43 years enjoying the fabulous trout bounty this state offers. To my way of thinking, this land, with its seemingly endless array of water types, is a trout fisherman's paradise. The Golden State trouter can choose from among tiny, snow-fed rills and rivulets, cascading creeks, heartily flowing rivers or a myriad of natural and man-made lakes.

At the source of these verdant waters are many scenic mountain ranges with the mightiest being the majestic Sierra Nevada whose snowpack effects a four directional pathway between Mt. Lassen and Mt. Whitney.

California's trout, ranging from pan-size to trophy dimensions, can be found anywhere from sea level to over 12,000 feet. While rainbow and brown trout are the predominant species, healthy and abundant populations of brook, lake, cutthroat and golden can be found in specific locales or special fisheries.

Increased population, dwindling trout numbers and pollution have created some untimely problems for the state in recent years. However, organizations such as Cal Trout, United Anglers of California and Trout Unlimited continue to work tirelessly with the Department of Fish and Game to develop solid management procedures for a healthy future. The Trophy Trout Program and the Wild Trout Program are two such projects which create more emphasis on large fish, reduced bag limits and improved habitat.

Choosing ten waters from the state's vast potpourri is similar to asking a small child to select from among a wide assortment of candies — a difficult yet pleasant task! The blue ribbon waters chosen represent a kaleidoscopic statewide sample, offering something for almost every kind of trout angler. Some notable waters not mentioned on my list include the Fall and Feather Rivers; Shasta, Crowley, Almanor, Tahoe and Twin Lakes. Also omitted were numerous salmon and steelhead rivers such as the Klamath, Trinity and Smith in an effort to deal only with resident trout. While Eagle Lake, Hat Creek and the McCloud River all carry wide-spread reputations, my list also



Author's son, Matt, lands a nice rainbow at Benton Crossing on the upper Owens River.

Don Vachini

includes the isolated and little known Bear Creek drainage. This lofty backcountry basin, one of the best golden trout locales in

the world, is a must for the mobile backpacker intent on trying for the colorful state fish.

Following is my selection of California's

Top Ten:

- Eagle Lake
- Sacramento River
- McCloud River
- Hat Creek
- Lake Berryessa
- Truckee River
- Bridgeport Reservoir
- East Walker River
- Owens River
- Bear Creek

Eagle Lake

When ancient Lake Lahontan receded, one of the smaller bodies of water left behind was this Lassen County lake. Home to the fabled Eagle Lake trout, this highly alkaline water has the reputation as one of those special lakes where one can realistically expect to catch trout between 2-5 pounds as the norm.

Since no natural spawning takes place in this expansive, high desert water, an egg taking station maintains this rare strain. Eggs are hatched and reared in hatcheries but not stocked until close to half a pound so that they can compete with the tui chub population. The resultant growth rate of these rainbows is something to behold. One fish tagged as a 10 incher measured 24 inches and weighed 6½ pounds when caught 20 months later!

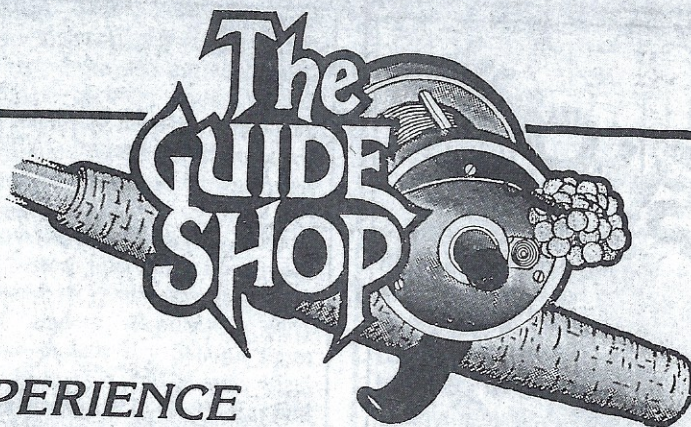
Top productive locales include Rocky Point, Pelican Point, Pikes Point, Wildcat Point and the Osprey Management Area. The northern part of the lake has a depth ranging 10-15 feet, the middle section, 15-40 feet and the southern sector over 100 feet.

Sacramento River

Even though this remarkable trout river flows right along the busy Interstate 5 freeway, it provides some of the finest stream fishing that can be found in the state. The 20 plus mile section between Lake Siskiyou and Lake Shasta is a rowdy flowing stretch. A moderate gradient has helped gouge out numerous pools, pockets and riffles while abundant food forms exist forming ideal habitat for both native and planted trout.

Though planted heavily in areas of great public access, it contains a fine population of native rainbows throughout that makes the fishery. While the bulk of the trout taken fall between 8-12 inches, 4-5 pounders are regularly landed.

This water proves just large enough to be suitably fished by all methods — bait, fly or lure. If one wants to consistently catch trout here, aggressive wading is the key. Another proven method includes using a short line and dabbing weighted flies or bait into pockets to prevent drag and get the offering deep. A fly with a dropper is very effective using the shortline method.



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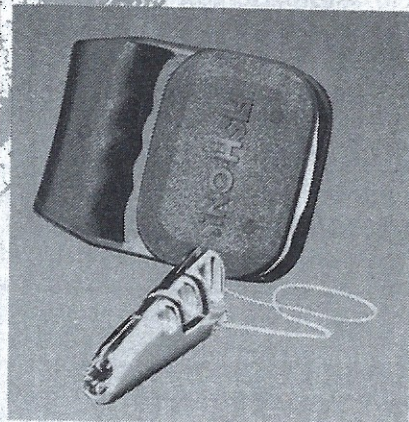
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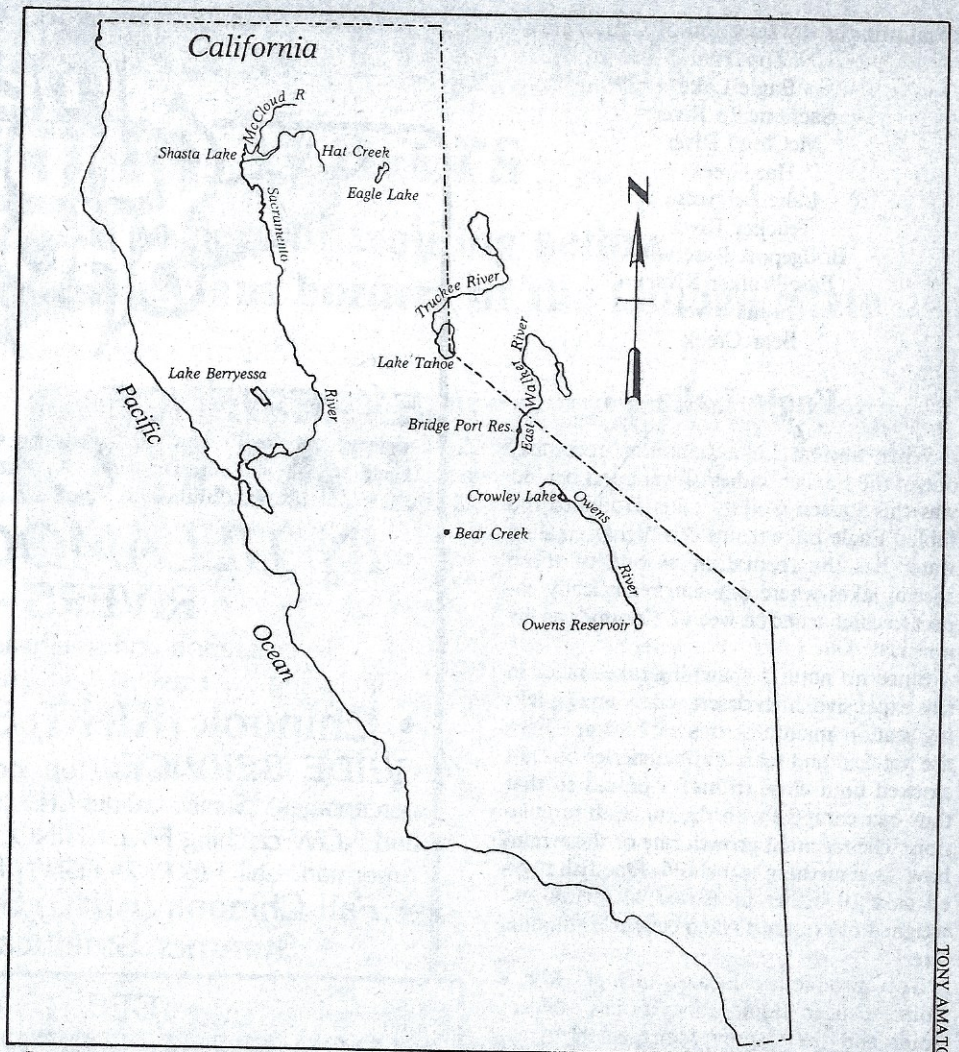


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TONY AMATO

Long casts, difficult due to shoreline brush, are not really necessary here. Short, well placed casts up to 25 feet serve the purpose. Black Gnat, Wooly Worm, Zug Bug, Caddis and Stonefly patterns (size 10-12) are most effective. A light action spin or fly rod is more than a sporting choice for this river.

Sometimes in the fall, lake run browns enhance the fishery, especially in the special Wild Trout section above the lake. Box Canyon, Dundmuir, Castella and the Sim's Flat areas contain good populations of willing natives. Early morning or late evening seem to be the most productive times.

McCloud River

Bubbling to life from underground volcanic springs on the eastern slope of Mt. Shasta, the McCloud is a classic and prolific trout stream which, even today, remains basically hidden and thus close to its native state in most parts. Healthy and colorful wild rainbow trout are its main fare.

Emanating as a tiny creek in its headwater sections, it gains flow as it tumbles over a fairly steep lava base gradient, virtually doubles in size at Big Springs, passes over the 3 Falls and into man-made McCloud Reservoir. Numerous D.F.G. plants occur in the Algoma and Fowlers Campgrounds but in the 15 miles in between it is only native trout. Due to its brawling nature in these locales it

is primarily a bait or fly type stream.

Below McCloud Reservoir, controlled flows are the order as well as special regulations. A popular section at Ah-Di-Na Camp is governed by the Nature Conservancy, a non-profit, non-political organization that preserves habitats in their natural state. On this 6 mile stretch only 10 anglers per day are allowed using flies or lures with single barbless hooks. Any fish caught must be released. Not surprisingly, trout commonly range between 17-22 inches here!

The McCloud River strain rainbow, known for their bright coloration as well as pugnacious tendencies, served as the original stocks for most hatchery trout including those sent to New Zealand.

Though this river runs heavy and wild, it is extremely clear with more trout taken in the fast riffles than in the deep pools. However, care must be taken by wading anglers as the centuries of river action has polished the rocks to a dangerous slick. A wading staff and a slow tempo is suggested.

Since the rainbows and smattering of browns are so wily, anglers must make careful presentations and be alert for their soft takes as they rarely smack the fly vigorously. Strike at any misdirection of your line.

Holding the rod tip high to get the offering deep and allow for a drag free drift is a

most productive tactic here. A floating line, 9-12 foot leaders, weighted flies and short casts help this endeavor. Recommended flies include Caddis, Black or Brown Spent Wing, Yellowjacket or Captain. A dropper loop using 6 pound test on the dropper and 3 pound test on the tippet is also productive.

Hat Creek

One of Northern California's more famous waters, this Shasta County creek had the distinction to serve as the state's pilot Wild Trout stream in 1969. Through its upper reaches, the gradient is fairly moderate as the stream steps over an igneous base before slowing its tempo as it meanders the flat and open Hat Creek Valley near the Wild Trout section.

Though savy browns and an occasional brookie can be taken, fiesty 6-10 rainbows are the most commonly caught natives in the less accessible and brushy sections of the upper Hat. Due to extreme water clarity, proper presentation is of the utmost importance on all sections. Some proven upper Hat fly patterns include Adams, Light Cahill, Renegade, Irresistible and Rio Grande King in sizes 12-16. Royal Coachman and Woolly Worm are my 2 favorites here.

In marked contrast to the briskly tumbling upper sections, its lower 3½ miles are reminiscent of Eastern limestone streams — deep, slow moving flat water. From Baum Lake to its termination at the Pit River is the

designated Wild Trout section. Special regulations here have helped the trout population to become entirely self-sustaining. Single barbless hooks, 2 fish limit, 18 inch minimum have combined with an outstanding food base to produce plenty of sophisticated rainbows and browns in the 16-24 inch range.

Multiple overlapping hatches, weedy, moss covered bottom fluctuating flows make this a challenging yet quality experience for accomplished anglers. Productive early season patterns include dry Salmon (sizes 6-10), Cahill, Blue Dun and Adams (sizes 10-18) and wet Sawyers PT, Hare's Ear and Zug Bug (sizes 10-16) plus Muddler, Sculpin and Leech in sizes 4-10. Dry Paradun, Yellow Stone, Humpy, Cahill, and Sulphur Dun are effective mid-summer patterns while late season Grasshopper and Caddis patterns are very effective.

Thick, fog-like hatches occur almost on schedule during late afternoon and evening for most of the season.

Anglers matching the hatch, presenting feather soft casts and overcoming drag can hope for some fine action. Though hearty rainbows are the main fare here, an occasional brown to 10 pounds should not be unexpected.

Lake Berryessa

Dubbed the Bay Areas "backyard fishing hole," this is one of those rare lakes where a

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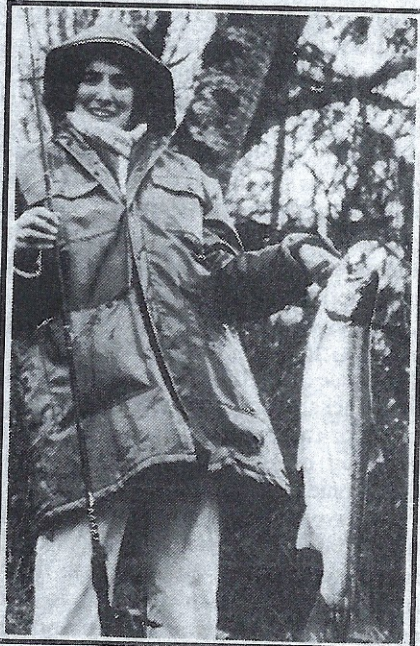
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Marilyn North of Seattle knows how effective **Little Lightnings** are. She caught this 12½ pound winter-run steelie on the Cowlitz with guide Chris Christensen. It was just one of six boated that day.

Most fishermen are using electronics nowadays to help them find fish, but Cowlitz

River guide Chris Christensen is using electronic lures to help fish find him! Often considered "gimmicks" by those who haven't tried them, the lures Chris is using contain electronic mechanisms within them that produce either light or sound.

The **Little Lightning** which contains an **LED** that flashes on and off as the lure is retrieved, and the **Fish Caller** which makes a fish-attracting sound are manufactured by **Vortex Lures** of Kalispell, Montana.

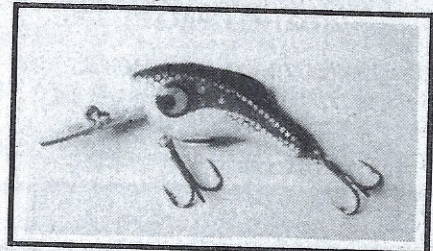
"These lighted lures are my bread and butter," claims Chris. "I use them with the lights on in the early morning and late evening and without the lights during the brightness of the day. Often when I'm fishing right next to other boats I catch fish when they don't, so I know they work."

Chris uses the **Fish Caller** without hooks on a jet planer while fishing for Salmon as well as for Steelhead. The sound attracts the fish which then strike the **Little Lightning** he rigs on his regular rods. This technique has proven so successful that many of Chris' guide friends are using it.

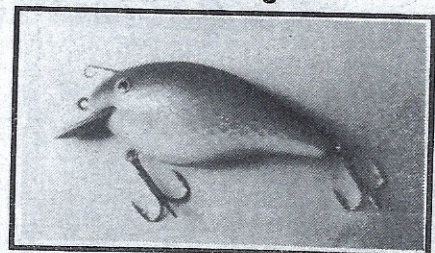
Not only are Cowlitz River fishermen using these electronic lures, but steelheaders are using them in Idaho and Eastern Washington with devastating results. This technique recently helped charter captain and Vortex Pro Staffer Jim Stayer win a salmon tournament on Lake Huron.

Chris Christensen may be contacted at (206) 582-3378.

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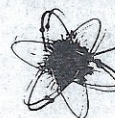


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3 fish limit of trout between 2-3 pounds each is not a head-turning event! In fact, since inauguration of the Trophy Trout Program in 1968, the lake's fall/winter fishery has borne a remarkable similarity to the world renowned wines produced nearby as both seem to improve with age.

Two key factors are responsible for this dynamic fishery. In 1966, the threadfin shad was introduced into the lake and since has become a staple in the diet of the trout. Ideally, they reproduce prodigiously, mature at 3-4 inches and do not compete with other species for food.

Nearly 250,000 Coleman rainbow trout, 4 to the pound, are planted annually. A mixture between Kamloops and steelhead, this

strain is dually famous for both its fighting quality and its voracious appetite. Thanks to the ever-present shad, specimens have been known to gain up to 6 times their normal growth in Berryessa!

Sometime in the fall the lake "turns over" and large schools of trout work together to chase the shad into coves and keep them cornered for considerable lengths of time while dining on them. The key to successful fall/winter trouting is to locate these concentrations.

While specialists like Claude Davis and Buster Hertzberg use downriggers 30-60 feet deep to take their summer trout, the drifted minnow technique is the most popular late season tactic. "Hooked under the dorsal fin

and fished with little or no weight in 5-20 feet of water, the minnow is a deadly bait," advises Davis.

An ultra-light spinning rod and reel with 4-6 pound line is more than adequate equipment to handle the hefty trout. While shore fishing can be torrid, a boat offers the flexibility to follow the fish wherever they move.

Most productive winter locales are found in the lower 1/3 of the lake near the dam. Spanish Flat, Skier's Cove, Wragg Canyon, Portuguese, Little Portuguese and Markley Coves are good initial choices.

Truckee River

Noted as one of California's blue ribbon waters, the Truckee originates from Lake Tahoe at Tahoe City, courses a 30 mile, pine-studded loop before entering Nevada's high desert, where it proceeds through downtown Reno before terminating 80 miles north of here in vast Pyramid Lake.

Though thousands pass its banks daily, most are intent on beating the odds in the Biggest Little City in the World 35 miles to the east. These travelers, however, are missing sure jackpots right in California — bright payoffs which occur in the form of various sized rainbows and browns!

By far the most pressured stretch is the 15 mile loop between Tahoe City and Truckee. Paralleled by Highway 89, it is planted regularly by the D.F.G. with rainbow catchables. Forty to sixty feet wide, brush lined and laden with food, the area always seems to produce. Huge boulders and rocks form ideal pockets and pools which seem popular with both trout and anglers.

Red salmon eggs, worms, and assorted spoons and spinners work well on the 7-12 inch planters while worms, night crawlers and heavily weighted, dark bodied flies are good choices for the up to 5 pound browns which occur throughout the river. Aggressive wading, which allows anglers to probe holding areas, is a key to consistently taking trout on these sometimes heavy flows.

Gaining muscle from tributaries, the river becomes tougher to wade as it nears Hirschdale and the Wild Trout section. Huge rocks, which cut the flows, form ideal water for the angler willing to work. While care must be taken by waders, this section yields some hefty trout.

My favorites here include meaty looking green Matuka, Sculpin and Muddler Minnow patterns (sizes 6-8). Short casts dabbled downstream in swirls or eddies to avoid drag and get deep are necessary. Takes are usually light but definite in the sometimes discolored or murky waters.

Bridgeport Reservoir

Sitting amid a sage-filled valley, this 4,400 foot elevation lake is fed by snowmelt from nearby High Sierra peaks which is delivered through the East Walker River and Buckeye and Robinson creeks. Thanks to a wise D.F.G. management plan and a plethora of

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nutrients and forage, trout in this Mono County impoundment, called the most fertile lake in the Eastern Sierra, put on left rapidly. Measured in pounds instead of ounces, fish consistently range between 2-4 pounds here.

In addition to the weekly plants of catfishes, the D.F.G. stocks over 5000 rainbows in the 5 pound category annually. Blessed with a winter trout closure, these 'bows put on weight rapidly over the winter. It is small wonder the season opener is so anticipated.

To catch big fish consistently here, a boat is virtually a necessity. Rapalas, Rebels and flasher/worm combinations fished near the surface account for many early season catches while Needlefish, Z Rays and Water Demons worked with lead core line or downriggers are productive later in the summer. Night crawlers, fished on the bottom near the dam, produce very well during late fall when weed bloom covers the inlet areas.

Best areas are, without question, the 3 inlet bays, especially early in the season. Large rainbows and browns hold and feed here. Bait cast into the moving channels produce until weed growth impedes action. Red salmon eggs, worms, marshmallows and Velveeta cheese are all popular here.

Fall finds browns, some between 10-20 pounds, on the prowl, gorging heavily in preparation for their spawning runs up the feeder creeks. However, they are extremely wary.

Fly angling can be very tough here. Not only is it easy to spook the trout along the fringes but the weeds prove to be an enemy of 4 pound leaders and an ally to the fish. However, the fact that anglers can consistently tangle with 2-5 pound trout makes it one of the finest impoundments in the state.

East Walker River

Originating as seepage from several High Sierra peaks, the East Walker is formed by the merger of Virginia, Green, and Dog creeks in a huge, open valley with the resultant river flowing into Bridgeport Reservoir. It is the river below this impoundment that gains new life from steady releases as it courses a willowy and brushy 16 mile path before entering Nevada. The upper 14 miles, reputed as the "best brown trout stream west of Yellowstone," are under 2 fish limit, 14 inch minimum and single barbless hook regulations.

The overall size of the browns on this water has increased steadily since the special regs according to Rick Rockel, a local sportsman. "Currently this section yields more large brown trout per mile than any stream west of the Rockies," he informs. This section consistently produces 14-20 inchers with fish to 8 pounds regularly showing. "I have seen fish as long as your arm in that section," he adds!

Thick shoreline willows and a steady current make the big trout hard to land. Later in



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the season when releases are cut down and the stream becomes wadeable, the odds turn more in favor of the angler. "However," Rockel points out, "a 5-10 pound brown is still a tough customer to land anywhere."

To stand a chance at one of these leviathans, one must be specially equipped. For the spin fisherman, a medium to heavy action rod and reel loaded with 8-12 pound mono is fine. Top lures are 3-5 inch Rebel or Rapalas in gold or rainbow finish. Fly anglers find a rod designed for 6-8 weight line with 4-8 pound leaders best. Top patterns are Muddler Minnow, black and yellow Marabou and Sculpin in sizes 4-8.

Chest waders are a big plus early in the season and hip waders come in handy later in the year. No matter what season of the year, a landing net is an absolute necessity.

Owens River

Renowned for its wild and wily rainbow and browns as it bisects towering Sierra and White mountain crags nearly 2 miles above, the Owens has 2 distinct faces. Snowmelt from eastern Sierra peaks, seepage from Big Springs plus contributions from noteworthy tributaries (Hot Creek is one) produces flow for the upper Owens as it courses the 12 miles to Crowley Lake, a major source of Southern California water.

Below Big Springs, worms and red salmon eggs are the rule as this section is under heavy pressure and subsequently heavily planted by the D.F.G.. Beyond here the gradient virtually disappears as it enters the lush and meandering Long Valley. Here, the Arcularias Ranch with private guest cabins offers fine flyfishing for native rainbows.

Springtime finds anglers flocking to Benton Crossing about a mile above Crowley hoping to intercept lake run 'bows up to 3 pounds. Wooly Worm, Marabou streamers, salmon eggs and worms take these husky spawners, which should be released to complete their mission. Sizeable spawning browns also use this route in the fall.

Light action spin or fly gear with light lines or tippets are more than adequate on these upper courses.

Releases from Crowley nearly double the flow of the lower Owens and give it a year-round dimension. The 5 mile stretch below Pleasant Valley Reservoir is managed as a Wild Trout stream with a 2 fish limit. The resident browns here grow to healthy proportions with most averaging between 10-15 inches, though 3-5 pounders are common.

One must accept a challenge here as the river not only has heavy flows, steep banks and abundant shoreline brush but is impossible to wade. However, local guide Joe Faint searches for river bends where water swirls and eddys form. Sink tip lines enable him to present his offerings near the bottom. He also finds early and late in the day best.

Caddis fly hatches occur regularly. Faint uses Caddis dry for surface action and Caddis Pupae, Caddis Larvae, Mayfly, Flying

Ant and Scud imitations as his wet choices. A medium to light action fly rod helps present the above.

Spin fishermen need medium action rods, 4-8 pound line and plenty of weight to get and keep their offerings deep. Night crawlers worked deep in slack areas produce extremely well.

Bear Creek

Anglers who enjoy combining a rugged hike or pack trip with their fishing should visit this lofty drainage. Nestled near the clouds in the John Muir Wilderness, this backcountry basin consists of over 50 lakes and 25 miles of stream and is dedicated to the perpetuation of the most colorful of all the trout — the gaudy golden.

The upper courses of Bear Creek, including the East, West and South Forks, join Hilgard and Orchid Creek tributaries in contributing flow to the main branch. An abundance of fiesty goldens ranging in size from 7-10 inches populate the clear, turquoise pools and riffles located between steep bedrock slicks or chutes. Watching one of these crimson shafts dart to intercept a properly presented fly and the ensuing flash of its vivid cadmium sides as it catches the sunlight makes it obvious why its Latin name translates to "pretty in the water."

Since growing seasons are short and food forms small among the jagged spires of the Sierra Nevada backbone, goldens over 11 inches are considered trophy size.

A number of Bear Creek's high altitude lakes, ranging in size from 124 acre Lake Italy to small 1/2 acre tarns, feed the network of arteriole streams. While the majority of these waters abound with pan-sizers, a few house specimens to 24 inches! Over the past few seasons, I have been fortunate to establish 3 fly rod and 2 line class world records from a pair of these foreboding lakes.

Matching the hatch isn't essential as stream residents seem to prefer wet Royal Coachmen, Wooly Worm, Black Gnat, Zug Bug, Mayfly, Damselfly and Caddis nymph patterns. Dry Mosquito patterns are also popular.

Larger lake residents, usually a little more selective, feed heavily on scuds and midges. Ginger Quill, Leech and Caddis nymph, presented with feather soft casts, take their share of larger goldens. Gold plated spoons or spinners worked deep and retrieved slowly are also deadly on the "granddaddy goldens."

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Guarded by precipitous cliffs, jumbles of loose talus and icy snowfields, Bear Creek's golden country is only reached on a pair of sturdy, enduring legs or a sure-footed mountain horse. Whether probing for a 6 inch "nugget" or dredging for a one pound trophy, Salmo Aqua-bonita is beyond a doubt the crown jewel of the salmonid family and well worth the effort to try for it. □

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