

Urban Trout

Four man-made impoundments near the hub of populous Marin County offer a variety of trophy trout fishing in a near wilderness setting.

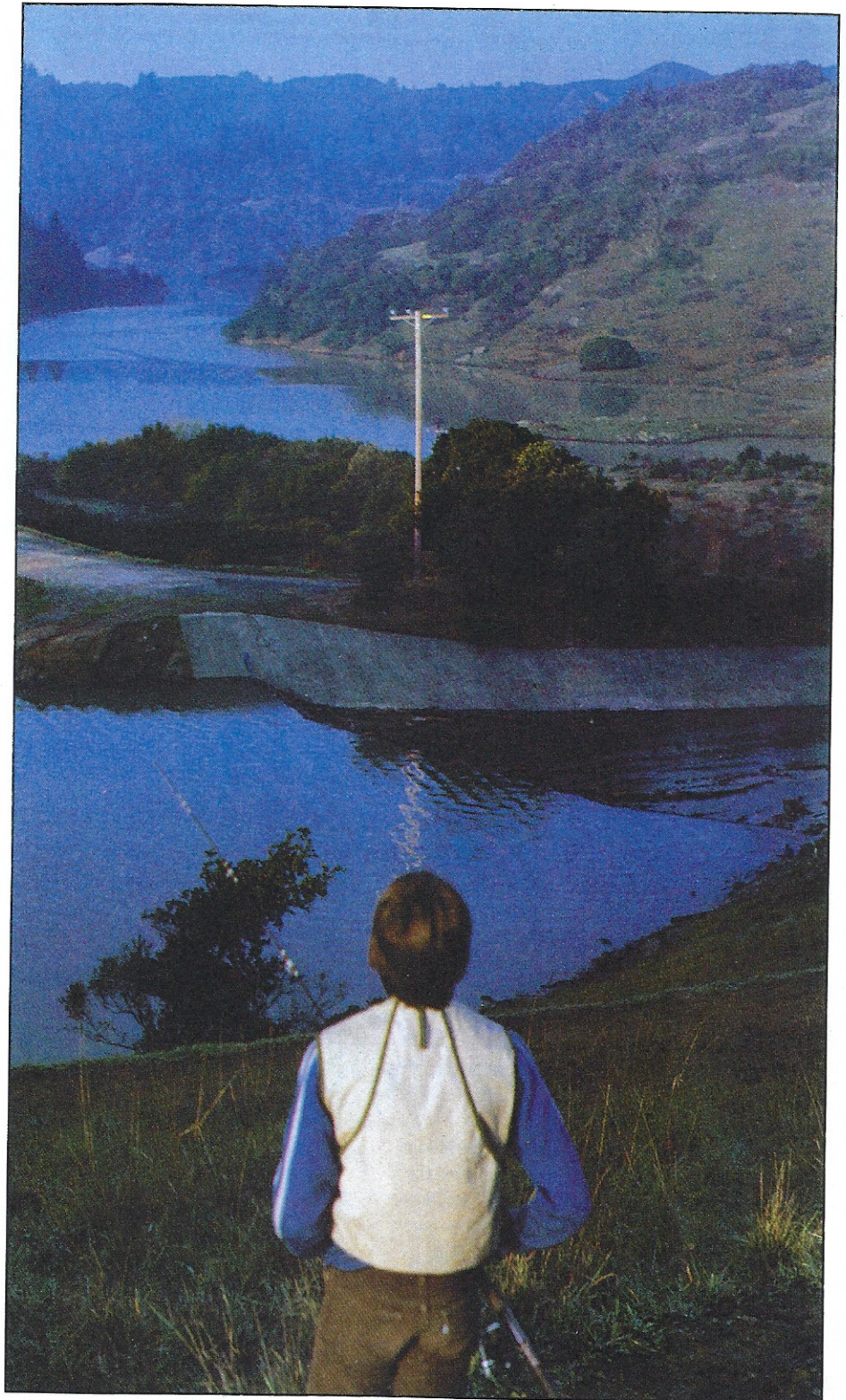
By Don Vachini

The invigorating freshness of rain-cleansed air pleasantly infiltrated my nostrils as I slid the bright, 15-inch rainbow back into its domain. While a low mist partially obscured the opposite shoreline, a kingfisher's harsh rattle rudely shattered the mid-morning stillness. It was hard to convince myself I was not in some faraway wilderness but a mere 10 minutes from a concentration of densely populated municipalities. On this particular December day, I was fishing Kent Lake, one of four man-made impoundments on Marin County's Lagunitas (a.k.a. Papermill) Creek, which eventually empties into Tomales Bay.

Located about 15 miles north of San Francisco, Lagunitas, Bon Tempe, Alpine and Kent lakes all originate on 2,200-foot Mt. Tamalpais. Administered by the Marin Municipal Water District (MMWD), a public corporation whose purpose is water dispersment among thirsty county residents, these stepladder lakes are tucked along the northeastern slope of Bolinas Ridge, a redwood and Douglas fir-shrouded crest separating the cities of San Anselmo and Fairfax from Stinson Beach and the Pacific Ocean.

While the concentration of tightly packed communities is special for its intricate blend of high-tech industries, corporate headquarters, open space and forested mountains, it is the bragging-size rainbow trout housed in these lakes that account for a unique and diverse urban trout fishery. Amazingly, specimens generally range between 1-2 pounds with 3-4 pounders not uncommon!

These fisheries are a well-kept secret among many Marinites, thus, they endure very little



pressure from the outside world. Fishing activity generally peaks during winter when most Sierra Nevada waters are either closed or frozen. The following is a breakdown of how to take advantage of the particular fishery each lake offers:

LAGUNITAS LAKE

Created in 1873 by an earthen dam at the confluence of the East, West and Middle Forks of Lagunitas Creek, this 23-acre lake is the smallest and oldest of the four MMWD lakes. Under the Lake Lagunitas Fishery Enhancement Program, which combined the efforts of the Department of Fish and Game, Cal Trout, MMWD and the Marin Rod & Gun Club, this jewel is currently managed as a natural water under special regulations. A two-fish slot limit is in effect whereby all fish between 10-16 inches must be released. Only artificial lures or flies with single, barbless hooks are permitted.

Best spots for success include the deep hole gouged out at each of the three inlet streams and the sharp dropoffs found along their sub-

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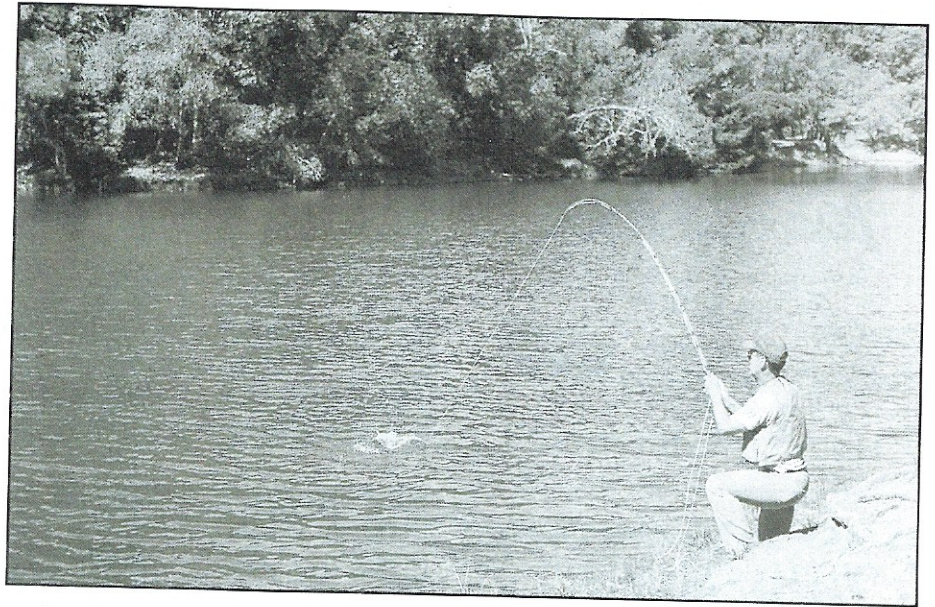
merged creekbeds. When plying these steep dropoffs, I have best results working my offering parallel to the bank.

Since the Calibaetis mayfly is the most abundant insect in the drainage, imitations of their life stages are very productive here. Top dry fly choices here are Adams, Thorax Calibaetis and Elk Hair Caddis in sizes 14-16, while wet fly anglers tossing No. 12-16 Pheasant Tail, Zug Bug, Hare's Ear and Olive A.P. patterns will score. Dark to olive shades of leech and scud imitations twitched along the shoreline weedbeds work especially well for me.

An ultra-light spin rod and reel loaded with 4 pound mono is a sporting choice for the spinfisherman while flytossers will find a 4-6 weight flyrod with matching line just right for here.

BON TEMPE RESERVOIR

Completed in 1948, this 144-acre impoundment is located about 100 yards downstream from Lagunitas. It features easy car access, an excellent trail system which



circles the lake plus a handicapped ramp available along the entrance road. Bon Tempe depends directly on hatchery rainbows for its success.

This has become an extremely popular locale for people intent on either taking home trout for dinner or just enjoying a leisurely outing. When Lagunitas ceased to be a put-and-take fishery, this water became the direct beneficiary, as it received the former lake's quota plus its own. In accordance with new statewide regulations, the limit is 5 trout.

While schooling planters can be taken from just about any point of land jutting out to deeper water, the most productive area here is along the wooded southern shoreline where the water is pumped up from Alpine Lake. This well oxygenated spot, which usually bubbles quite visibly on the surface, is popular with both anglers and trout alike. During summer months, any holdover trout are likely to be found here.

Worms, nightcrawlers, salmon eggs, corn and marshmallows soaked on the bottom take

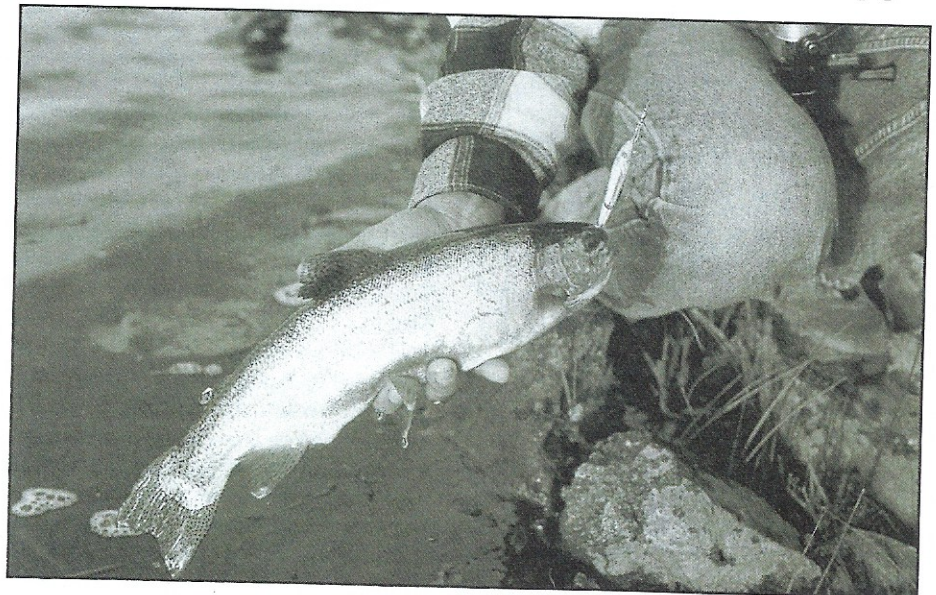
their share of cruising fish, but Berkley's Power Bait has really proven its deadly worth on the hefty planters. An ultra-light to light small gold treble hook and sliding sinker best complement the above baits. A variety of small spinners and spoons normally cull the more gullible fish up to a day or two after the bi-weekly plants.

ALPINE LAKE

The spillway from Bon Tempe empties directly into this next impoundment, which physical structure differs greatly from the two reservoirs above it. A concrete arch dam poured in 1918 backed up water which once flowed through a narrow canyon, forming this three-mile long body of water.

For those willing to walk, there is really no part of this 219 acre lake that is inaccessible, though in some places brush and steep inclines make travel difficult. A footpath follows the southern bank from the dam all the way to

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RAINBOWS NO CITY SLICKERS

Mount Tamalpais, the tallest peak in Marin, garners up to three times the average rainfall of nearby locales. Collected directly or via underground springs, the ensuing runoff ensures this quartet of MMWD impoundments has acceptable year-round parameters for trout.

The DFG has managed the trout stocking program at these picturesque reservoirs since 1921. With the exception of catchable rainbows in Bon Tempe, all are currently inhabited by healthy numbers of the Coleman rainbow. According to John Emig, a fisheries biologist with the DFG's Region 3 office, this strain, which is a cross between Kamloops and steelhead, is ideal for coastal-type drainages.

"They're noted for their pugnacity, tendency to scatter and ability to spawn in winter when most streams are gushing," he said. "This rainbow is made to order for these Marin County lakes."

Although lakes residents feed heavily on zooplankton, tiny baitfish and various insects, it is the crayfish, present throughout the drainage, which they relish for their high-caloric value.

Some natural propagation takes place on Kent and Alpine but populations in both are sustained by annual springtime plants of 40,000 fingerlings in each. In the presence of deep, cold water, adequate food forms and vast, unpressured areas, the non-scholastic fish at these two reservoirs tend to disperse and grow to their optimum. Planted fingerlings surviving a year are considered natives. "While yearling specimens will attain about 6-8 inches, trout up to 5 pounds are landed annually," according to Emig.

Lagunitas Lake received a one-time plant of 9,000 fish in the 10-14 inch range during 1987. These adult fish actively use the three feeder streams to maintain a self sustaining population and also benefit from an aerator system which pumps oxygen to the bottom during the heat of summer. Healthy specimens in the two-pound category attest to the lake's ongoing success.

For specific information on Lagunitas, contact Fly Fishing Outfitters: (415) 781-3474.

For fishing and access information on Kent or Alpine, contact Warren Selmann at Western Boat: 101 Third St. San Rafael, CA. 94101; (415) 454-4177.

the spillway at Bon Tempe. Anglers opting for this trail will discover verdant ferns and mosses as they stroll through a thick forest canopy of oak, bay broadleaf maple and redwood.

Though casting and moving about the shoreline is not too difficult, fishing this lake effectively is. While the turnover keeps winter trout anywhere from 2-10 feet below the surface, larger specimens are commonly located near moving water. Lengthy January hikes to the Swede George and Van Wyck Creek coves have produced some nice results for me, probably due to the influx of vibrant, incoming runoff. Small hammered spoons, spinners and silvery plugs retrieved in erratic, herky-jerky motion along finger points of land all work on occasion. But the reliable nightcrawler seems to produce the best magic in these secluded coves. While some anglers use a marshmallow to keep the annelid just off the bottom, I prefer to drape mine 4-6 feet below a clear plastic bobber. This method, however, requires constant monitoring and adjustment.

KENT LAKE

Constructed in 1953, this four mile-long, ribbon-thin lake sits in a steep, wooded canyon with extremely limited access and no trails around its immediate shoreline. In winter, high water often reaches its brushline and further restricts movement. But the late fall draw down allows a little more freedom along the heavily-inclined but exposed lake bottom.

Thanks to numerous underwater springs, the Big Carson, Little Carson and Lagunitas Creek inlets provide probably the closest thing to a sure bet on this vast water, which gives up its bigger fish rather grudgingly. Shiny spinners, plugs and spoons retrieved within 5 feet to the surface produce good results in the fall, nightcrawlers and crayfish rails dunked near shore work best after the big storms have raised the level and clouded the water. When using these small freshwater crustaceans, peel the shell off a fresh tail-section, impale the white meat onto a number 6-8 hook, cast the whole rig into the lake and let it settle. Since a cruising trout will often mouth the free-drifting bait gingerly before ingesting it, an open bail helps prevent detection.

When my son, Matt, was still a teenager, we make several wintertime treks into the Big Carson area over two seasons. While Matt landed a rotund 2-pounder and I released a pair just over 15 inches, eight different trips yielded only those 3 fish—typifying the fact that action for big trout is certainly not fast as either Kent or Alpine. However, despite the empty creel stories, their potential is sufficient to keep knowledgeable anglers coming back.

Either viewing it from the city limits of San Rafael or on the descent from the Waldo Grade, Mt. Tam's dark, forested prominence

not only dominates the landscape but its brush-and-tree woven slopes serve as collecting arterioles for a chain of reservoirs which present the essence of primitive angling while in the midst of a flourish metropolitan area. Harboring one of the first urban wild trout waters in the west, a pair of secluded impoundments which challenge both physical and angling skills and a generously stocked put-and take fishery, this bountiful watershed truly has something for everyone!



ACCESS TO MARIN LAKES

Incorporated in 1912, the Marin Municipal Water District currently oversees 26,000 acres of the Mt. Tamalpais watershed, which includes Ross' Phoenix Lake in addition to Lagunitas, Bon Tempe, Alpine and Kent. A network of more than 150 miles of dirt roads and trails, originally carved for district travel and firefighting, intricately link all of these waters. Though vehicular travel is not allowed, popular day-use activities include hiking, jogging, picnicking, horseback riding, bicycling and fishing are permitted.

First-time anglers at any of these lakes, which are open year round, should beware that there is a strict policy against any water contact activities. Since boats, float tubes, swimming and wading are prohibited, anglers are totally committed to a shoreline venture.

To reach Lagunitas or Bon Tempe from Fairfax, turn left on Broadway, another left onto Cascade and yet another left at the sign to Lagunitas Lake. Car entry at Sky Oaks Entrance Station costs \$3. Foot entry is free but no overnight camping is allowed. Gates open at 8 a.m. and close at sunset.

Bolinas Road out of Fairfax crosses Alpine Dam, offering the possibility to a two-car shuttle between there and Bon Tempe Dam.

Kent Lake, however, is only reached by bipedal locomotion. Best entry routes involve hiking or biking along either ridgetop's dirt road (Bolinas Ridge of Pine Mountain roads) and then cross-country scrambling down to the lake through thick scrub brush. A daypack (with food and water) and packrod comes in handy. The closest trailhead is reached from Sir Francis Drake Blvd. near the town of Lagunitas, while a more direct, albeit lengthier approach is via dirt road from Alpine Dam.

For entry information, contact either the MMWD at (415) 924-4600 or a Mt. Tamalpais watershed recording at (415) 459-0888.