

The Yuba Triumvirate

Feisty native trout are the prize for those willing to explore the more secluded stretches of these three forks

Don Vachini

The rushing water played a welcome sonata as it cascaded through the steep canyon which was still enshrouded in shadow. Above, a dark, cloudy sky added to the early morning chill while snow piled high along the upper ridgelines exposed small stands of bay and oak amid the predominantly pine covered slopes. Time seemingly stood still as I began casting to a likely looking drift.

A slight hesitation of my line was all I noticed and I instinctively reared back on my spinning rod. The welcome weight of something hefty suddenly commanded my full attention. Peeling off monofilament in sporadic bursts, the wild trout performed a pair of dazzling aerial maneuvers before it flashed downstream toward a deep hole, immediately creating a dilemma. Between me and this giant pool was a sheer rock wall at least 35 feet high. Shoreline passage was impossible, while going over the top would require tricky negotiations with loose talus, patches of snow and thick brush. It was crunch time as I had to decide my next action!

On this particular opening morning of trout season, I had joined friends Ken Eide, Mike McEntee and Earl Behrens in a particularly hard to reach section of California's Middle Yuba River near Alleghany. For the next two days we would be working some nearly inaccessible stretches of this deep canyon in hopes of tangling with its sizeable rainbows and browns.

The main Yuba, itself a Sacramento River tributary via the Feather River, is made up of three separate forks, all of which collect snowmelt and seepage from a network of minor ranges and deep canyons on the western slope of the Northern Sierra Nevada. Administratively part of the Tahoe and Plumas National Forests, this region, which lies among gold country approximately 70 miles northwest of Lake Tahoe, is better known as the Upper Yuba River Recreation Area. While the gold boom heyday ended with America's entry into World War II, this outdoorsmans' paradise not only continues to maintain fine trout an-

gling but also offers plenty for campers, hikers, backpackers, deer hunters and photographers.

All three upper tributaries of the Yuba, officially dubbed the South, Middle and North forks, head in the 7,000 to 9,000-foot elevation among snow-capped peaks. Though dammed in various spots along their routes, they offer viable trout fisheries throughout their courses.

The South Yuba, which heads at Norden nearby Donner Summit, is probably the most picturesque of the three. Followed closely by Interstate Highway 80 between Lakes Norden and Spaulding, it affords some ideal trout habitat while framed by statuesque granitic edifaces commonly frequented by cross country skiers. While there is a great deal of private land in this upper section, access is especially good along sections of the old abandoned Highway 40 in the Indian Springs area. Frequently planted with catchable rainbows by the Department of Fish and Game, most trout in this locale range in the 10 to 12-inch category. Where the river nears Lake Spaulding is also a prime locale. When bigger trout are landed in this area, they are probably lake-run fish with plenty of savvy and muscle. Below Spaulding, flows are greatly diminished but seepage from the Bowman lakes helps maintain the fishery throughout the season. Despite the fact that it is right next to a major roadway, I have never observed the South Fork to be overcrowded. Many travelers, intent on reaching nearby casinos, are completely unaware of the trout bonanza just off the highway.

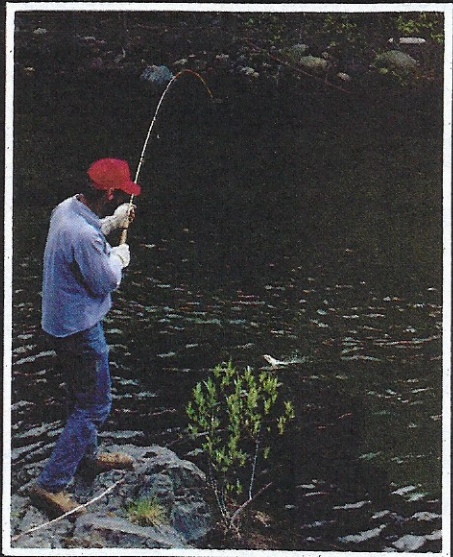
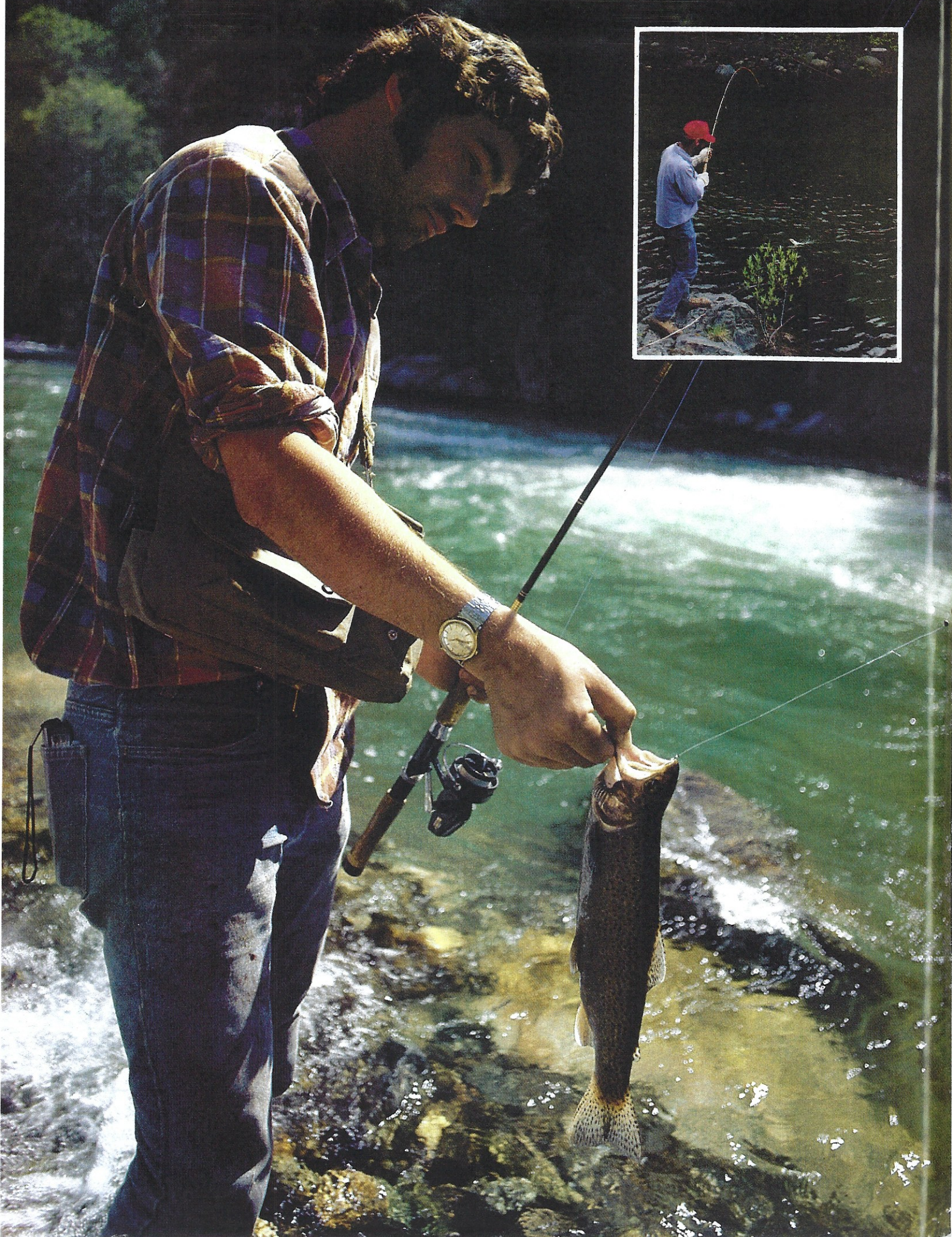
The North Yuba, longest of the three, gathers snowmelt principally from the sprawling Mt. Haskell watershed located near the Yuba Gap. Paralleled by Highway 49 from Yuba Pass to Indian Valley, this 33 mile stretch is one of the most popular and consistent streams in the north Sierra. Gathering flows, it cascades swiftly downstream, gradually merging into an open canyon near Sierra City where it gathers considerable flows from the Gold Lakes and Haypress Creek. Below here the

Downie River adds its heavy contributions at Downieville. Best access is via numerous campgrounds or tiny dirt roads which traverse the steep canyon walls. As is typical of all forks, anglers who put a little distance between easy to get to places increase the chances for more productive angling.

While the North and South forks run near established roadways and are highly accessible to most anglers, the Middle Yuba, which begins in the Jackson Meadows region is characterized by extremely limited access throughout much of its course. Spacious campgrounds, reached by Highway 89 out of Truckee, are located near its headwater sections surrounding lofty Basin Peak (9015 ft.). The 1.5-mile section of stream between Jackson Meadows Reservoir and Milton Reservoir houses a fairly productive fishery for brown trout, probably due in part to the special regulations established for Milton (artificial lures with single, barbless hooks, limit two fish, both smaller than 12 inches). Below this impoundment, the river drops into a steep, virtually inaccessible gorge. Between Milton and Foote's Crossing only two small mining roads intersect this free-moving river. While forest service roads network the area, all virtually hug the upper ridgelines necessitating difficult foot travel down steep inclines. Allow for a 20-30 minute scramble down to the river and a two-plus-hour uphill return. This 20-mile section provides ideal habitat for the wary natives: abundant food, adequate spawning gravel and, since no maintained trails exist, near isolation from man.

On this particular morning, cool temperatures and slightly roiled water made us opt for bait. The moment the rainbow picked up my helgrammite it typified wild. Seemingly in several places at once, it ultimately chose to use the hole as its battle ground. Opting to put pressure on it instead of heading over the outcropping brought immediate results. After another high-flying cartwheel, the silvery rocket torpedoed deep into the dark green orifice where its violent head-shaking antics caused both

Opposite page: Though Yuba rainbow commonly fall between 10-12 inches, a few will range up to 20 inches. Inset: Deep-running plugs will sometimes entice a big brown. Here, Ken Eide pressures a hefty Middle Yuba resident.



my monofilament and spirits to simultaneously go limp. What seemed like an eternity took only mere seconds but left me in a cold sweat.

This battle was symbolic of most involving the wild Middle Yuba rainbows. Not only are they difficult to hook but land as well since they make use of every rock, root, current or undercut bank to maintain their freedom.

Before we paused for a streamside lunch, the four of us managed to release eight rainbows ranging up to 13 inches, each endowed with brilliant pink laterals and heavy black spots peppering their upper torsos. The afternoon session, cut short by heavy snow flurries, yielded healthy 14-inchers to both Mike and Earl.

Though separated by lofty ridges, all three forks possess like characteristics. Shaded by stately conifers and clumpy streamside alders and willows, the moderate to steep gradient has gouged out numerous rocky-bottomed pools and pockets in beds 40 to 60 feet wide. Small and brushy in their headwater sections, they each stepladder briskly over steep gradients, gradually picking up muscle as they progress. In their middle sections the gradient mellows slightly, forming deeper pools and wider, longer glides and offering more room to maneuver.

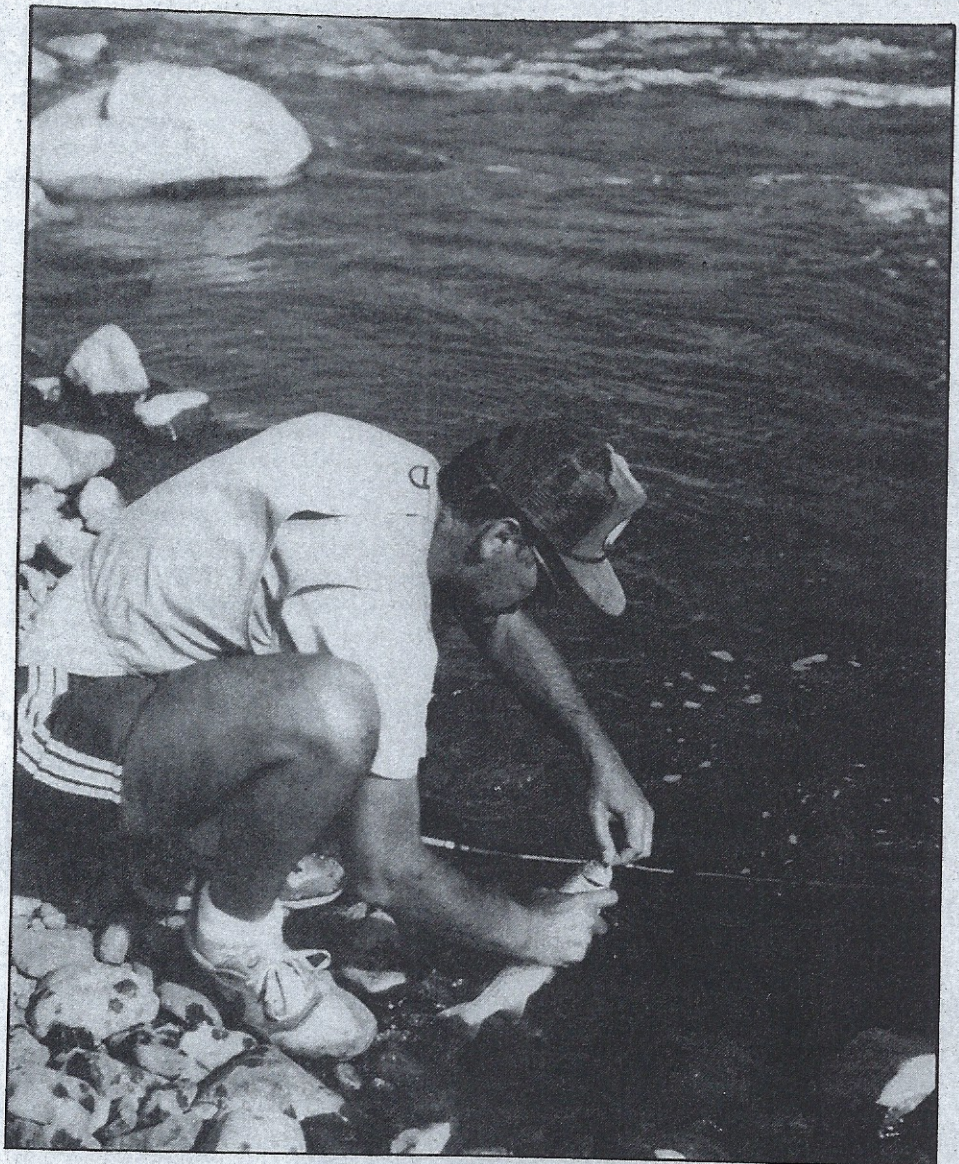
The three forks are not only blessed with a plethora of spawning habitat throughout but abundant aquatic life. Tiny fingerlings, often observed in the shallows, are a tribute to a healthy, self-sustaining population.

When plying these waters, I have found a light action spin or fly rod matched with two to six-pound monofilament to be more than a sporting selection.

While early season runoff clouds the water, virtually necessitating worms, salmon eggs and natural baits from the streambed, I have found standby Mepps, Rooster Tail and Panther Martin spinners (size 0-2) to be effective in the off-color water. As water levels drop and clarity improves, I favor a selection of wet fly patterns. Though predictable and prominent stonefly and caddisfly hatches occur season long, mid-June through late August seems to be the height of activity. During this period, my most productive pattern is a size 12 Stonefly Nymph in light brown to black shades.

I also favor size 10 to 14 Hare's Ear Nymph, Woolly Worm and Black Ant for the real early season. From late July on through the season, Grasshopper, Pheasant Tail Nymph, Caddis Nymph and Caddis Larva in tan and brown hues seem to be in vogue with the feisty rainbows.

While I have had more success with subsurface imitations on the Middle Yuba, a dabbling technique comes in handy for presenting dry flies, especially in the more brushy sectors. Adams and Ginger Quill are popular floating patterns.



Author releases a 15-inch brown to fight again.

House-sized boulders and large rocks have formed ideal sanctuaries, in some instances up to 25 feet deep. Traditionally these giant "swimming holes" have yielded more hefty trout to me than have the pockets or riffles. When pursuing the cautious residents of these massive pools, I commonly seek a higher vantage point to scout the layout. By keeping a low profile and carefully peering over rocks, I can not only locate fish but study the currents and swirls to strategically place my offering so it will drift effectively. Polaroid glasses are a tremendous aid in this endeavor.

While the North and South branches are more famous for stocked rainbows up to 12 inches, the Middle Yuba has accounted for some of my personal bests. On the season opener in 1977, I carefully worked one of these giant bathtubs, allowing my brown Caddis Nymph to drift downstream and slowly tumble along the sandy bottom of the slightly roiled pool. On two successive casts, I landed girthy 17-inch rainbows, both of which were released to fight again another day! While I have never quite ap-

proached that feat again, several broadcasted 'bows up to 14 inches have been subdued. Both Ken and Mike, frequent visitors to the Middle Fork, have consistently released fish up to 20 inches from these deeper pools.

Whether flies, lures or bait are used, presentation is crucial since it appears these skeptical denizens have maintained wariness as a big part of their genetic integrity. Since they seldom smash an offering, I strike at the slightest hesitation or unusual line movement. My personal rule of thumb for the Middle Fork is: miss a strike-move on, as anything out of the ordinary spooks them.

When using this scrambling method to search out trout, one should be constantly aware of rattlesnakes and poison oak. Though I've only had two viper sightings (thankfully from a distance), I have consistently managed to land good cases of the dreaded itch.

While I have caught fish at all times of the day, early and late-day shadows are

most productive. Periods of dark clouds before a storm are also good.

While bait is best in the early season, fly tossers have better luck as the water temperature warms and hatches become more consistent.

Though the rainbow is the mainstay trout throughout most sections of stream, scattered populations of browns are also present. Usually only taken incidentally by anglers after the more available *salmo gairdneri*, these inhabitants are not only extremely suspicious but many times grow to sizable proportions.

Dredging a gold Kastmaster through a Middle Yuba hole last May brought a pleasant, jolting strike. However, instead of the aerial display I was anticipating, the fish flashed glints of bronze as it slashed doggedly through the emerald depths. Even nearing my net, the slender, hook-jawed brown, which measured 15 inches and over a pound, took me by complete surprise.

According to Eide, who is a local trout hooking legend, the brown's propensity to be a big meat eater provides the key to duping them. He suggests any lure which imitates baitfish found in the drainage. "Rebels, Rapalas and Hot Shots in rainbow finish, worked in the current to enhance movement, are as good as any," he advises.

I recently watched him hook a chunky brown on a deep-running plug. He played the leviathan, which easily was five pounds, on even terms for over 15 minutes, giving and taking as the fish dictated. Worked into the shallows, its last gasp roll pulled it free of the hook. "He was a grand daddy trout for this river," he emphasized as we helplessly watched the trout languidly finalize its escape, "... with a big appetite."

Good all around streamer choices include Sculpin, Matuka and Muddler Minnow, especially if slowly twitched on the bottom.

The three forks are not the only waters in the area providing good sport. Noteworthy

feeders include Rattlesnake Creek (South Yuba), Wolf and Kanaka creeks (Middle Yuba), and Haypress Creek and the Downie River (North Yuba) add flow, provide good spawning and contain pan-sized trout. Also, on the high elevation basin between the South and Middle forks exist a group of scenic lakes capable of producing consistent, season long action. Bowman, Faucherie, Fordyce and Jackson Meadows are just a few drainage lakes synonymous with nice trout and majestic settings.

There is no doubt in my mind that these three headwater tributaries of the main Yuba offer a wide spectrum of angling possibilities in a setting that is both gentle and accessible yet wild and harsh. Whether leisurely fishing a roadside stream, probing an alpine lake or accepting the challenge of a steep canyon, the Upper Yuba River Recreation Area has virtually something for everyone!

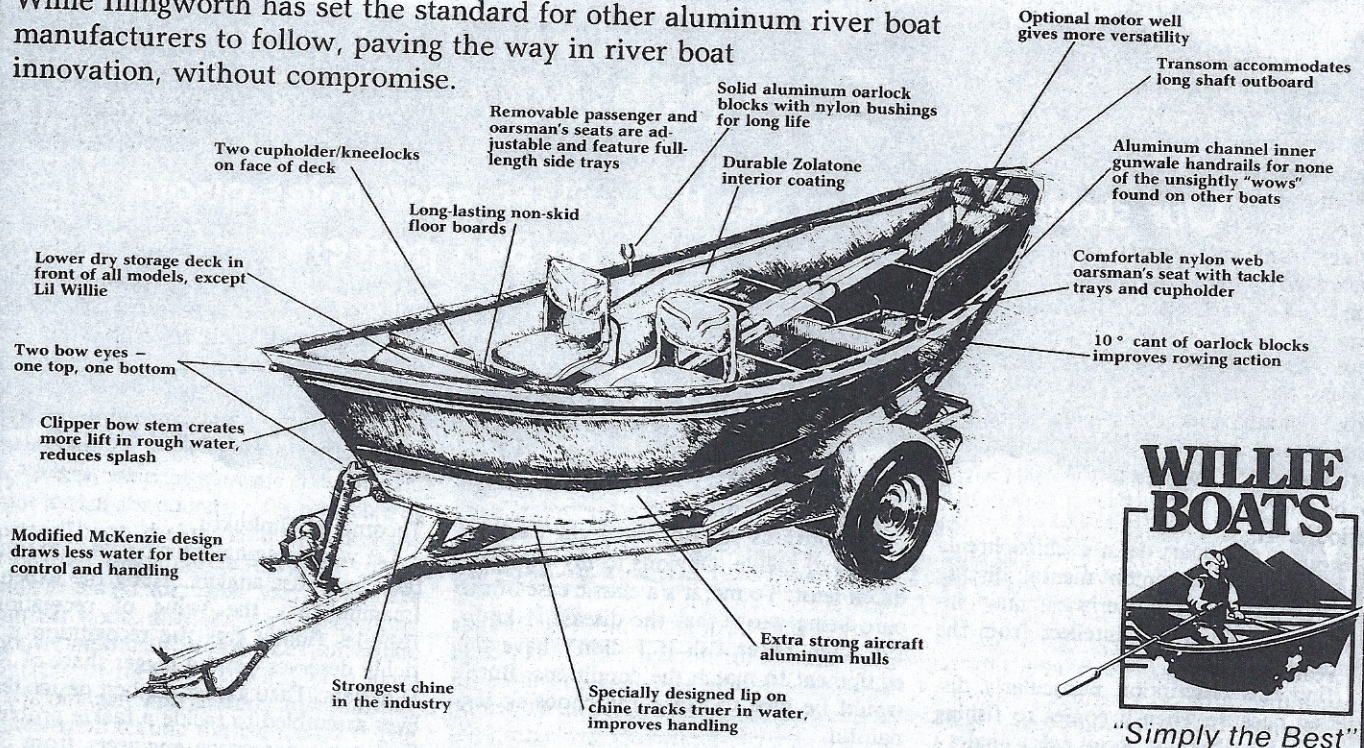
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