

TRUCKEE TROUT GAMBLE

FROM LAKE TAHOE
TO RENO'S
GLITTERING CASINOS,
THIS RIVER KICKS OUT
FISHING JACKPOTS ON
BOTH SIDES OF THE
STATE BORDER

BY DON VACHINI

Of the thousands of people who pass the banks of the Truckee River daily, most are intent on continuing their pilgrimage toward Reno's gambling houses to the east in search of easy winnings. However, many of these travelers would do well to become more aware of the trout bounty finning in the river's rapid, blue-green waters, which offer more appealing odds than do the casinos of this northern Nevada resort city.

Deemed an ideal trout stream by anglers and fisheries personnel alike, the Truckee is noted for regularly producing fish of ample proportions. Even though three seasons of drought temporarily tarnished its big fish reputation, it now appears back on track again.

As Lake Tahoe's only outlet, the Truckee leaps to life at Tahoe City, California. From there, it snakes 30-plus miles in a northeasterly direction as it proceeds through a wide, pine-studded canyon before entering Nevada's high desert. Past the state border, the stream meanders through sagebrush, cattle country and sparse housing developments, courses through downtown Reno, and finally terminates 80 miles north of the resorts in vast Pyramid Lake.

Although rainbows are the mainstay of the fishery, browns also exist in respectable numbers throughout its California and Nevada sectors. Most Truckee trout fall into the nine to 12-inch range, with a good population of 13 to 14-inchers as well.

"Stream surveys from both states also indicate a surprising number of one to three-pounders, with individual fish up to five or six pounds," says Mark Warren, a fisheries biologist with the Nevada Department of Wildlife.

Benefitting from consistent year-long flows, an excellent food base is present in the river.

"While stomach samples indicate the trout depend heavily on caddisflies, mayflies and stoneflies, crayfish, Tahoe suckers, sculpin and whitefish also provide high caloric forage," says Warren. "The fishery certainly appears healthy."

Though a surprising number of large fish exist throughout the river, they are not easily duped. According to Randy Johnson, who has operated a guide service on the California side for eight years, the Truckee is an expert-class water offering great fishing only to those who can unlock its secrets. Much the same as a serious gambler seeks to develop a system to beat the odds, Johnson has increased payoff possibilities by utilizing his own extensive entomological research and perfecting a few advanced techniques on this water, which he has dubbed, "a classic reading man's water."

The high flow period between May to mid-June is Johnson's favorite season, since fish will be scattered throughout all kinds of water. During this time, water temperatures will be 48 to 52 degrees, much too cold for most hatches, so he relies almost exclusively on streamers and nymphs.

During the 1987-88 drought years, the river's insect life dropped markedly, according to Johnson's findings, and this adversely affected the fishing.

"The big trout moved downstream, bunched up in the remaining holes and became extremely skittish," Johnson reports. "However, increased flows of '89 brought a regeneration of the insect life, and along with it many of the larger trout are migrating back into the upper river."

Early season flows commonly fluctuate between 2200 and 4000 cubic-feet-per-second. In this high water, trout of all sizes choose the path of least resistance, holding behind rocks or boulders where the current is subdued. To take trout in these conditions requires a certain level of skill or expertise. While being able to read water and to wade aggressively are partial keys to success, Johnson parts with what he feels is the real odds beater.

"Fly penetration into the water is a must," he hints. "Getting the fly down quickly and keeping it there is crucial. Otherwise, the current will just whip it out of the pocket."

To achieve this penetration below

Western Vacations

Anglers must pay extremely close attention since most strikes this time of year are sluggish. "Eyeball the strike indicator while keeping as much tension on the leader as possible," Johnson instructs. "Set the hook at any hesitation or movement of the indicator."

This technique can be effectively performed only by aggressive wading. Since trout will be facing the current, anglers should work upstream, testing productive looking water with short flicks. Neoprene waders, wading shoes and a staff are recommended. As the river gains muscle from numerous tributaries, increased flows can make wading treacherous. Johnson suggests exercising due caution on this river.

A seven or eight-foot fly rod matched with floating fly line, a strike indicator placed just past the leader knot, and several small split-shot pinched on a foot or so above the nymph, rounds out his setup.

Making use of his ongoing studies of insects, Johnson has identified 10 kinds of mayflies as well as caddisflies and stoneflies. While Quill Gordon, Cahill and Adams patterns in tan to olive shades provide suitable imitations for early season success, he uses a selection of self-designed nymph and streamer patterns. Johnson's Snork-Tailed Streamer (size 6-10) and Johnson's Maribou All Purpose Streamer (size 10-14) are most productive. He does not weight his nymphs or streamers.

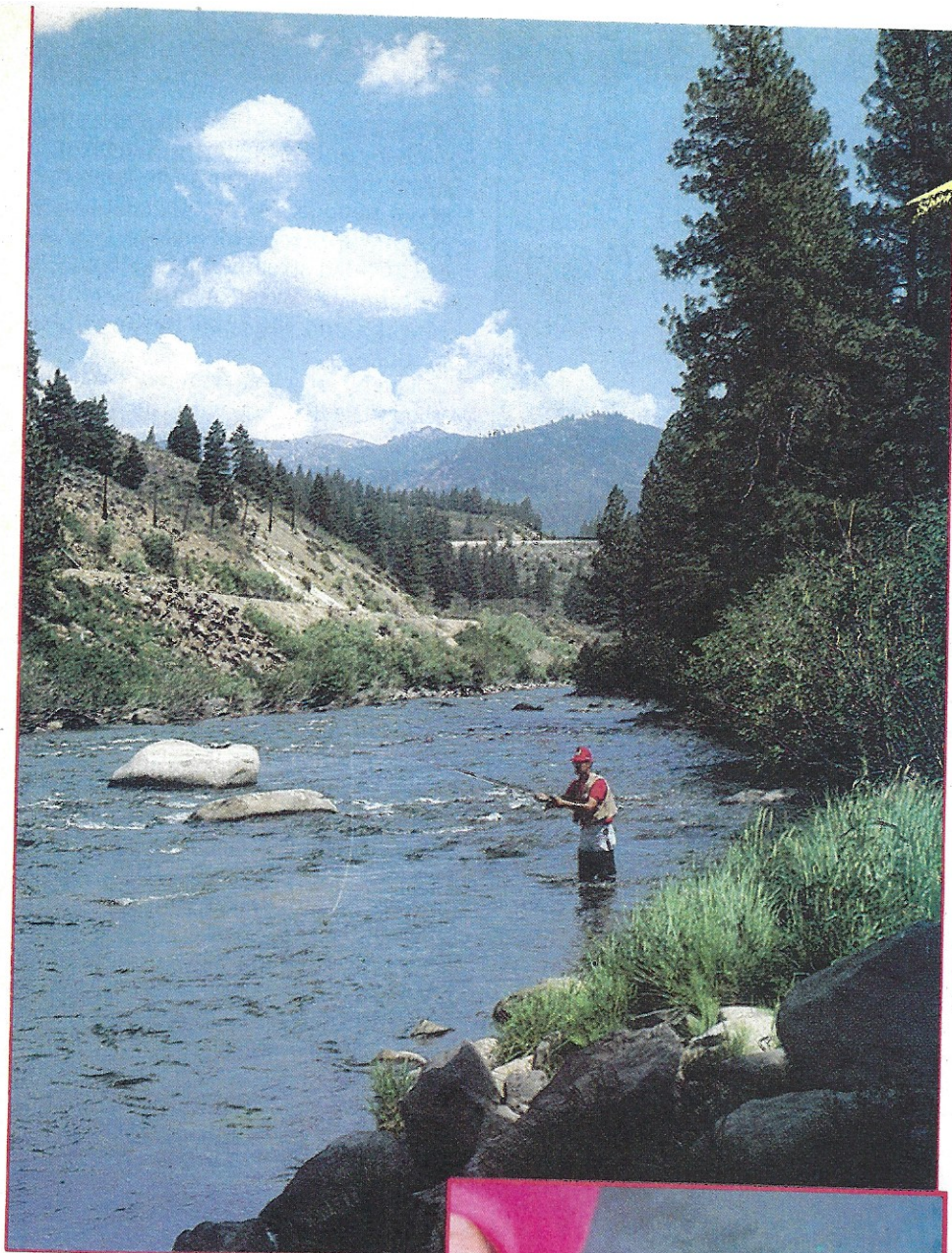
Spin fishermen would do well to utilize Johnson's techniques for bait fishing, dabbing worms, nightcrawlers, crickets, salmon eggs or crawfish tails deep into fishy structure while wading. Maintaining slight tension on the line throughout the drift will help telegraph any pickups.

A light-action rod and reel loaded with four or six-pound monofilament is a suitable choice. The terminal tackle should include enough split-shot to keep the offering on the bottom, but allow it to move.

While spinners will occasionally take fish, spoons seem to have the correct weight and design to operate con-

◀ *Rainbows of the Truckee aren't easily duped, but they strike hard. This handsome trout in spawning colors took a No. 18 nymph.*

(Ron Spomer photo)

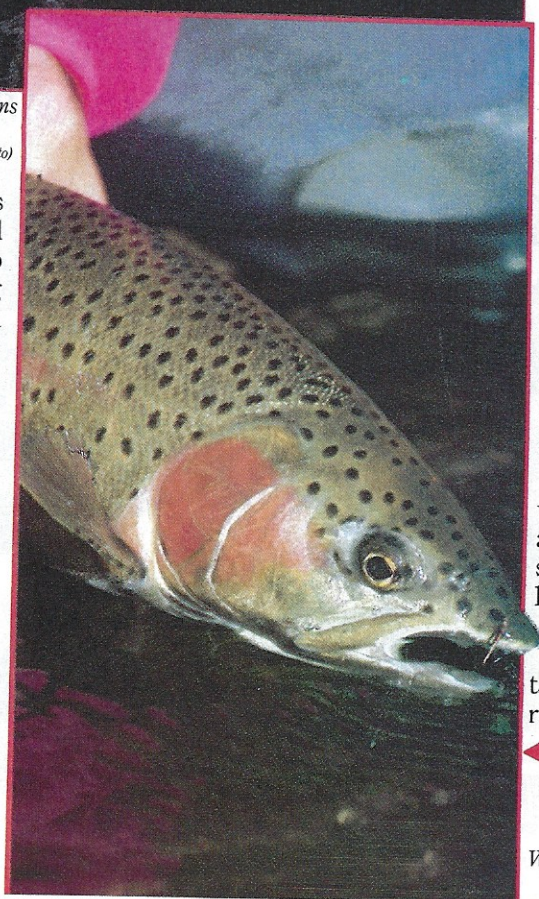


▲ *One of the Truckee River's two wild trout sections offers solitude and scenery as well as great fly fishing.*
(Don Vachini photo)

the surface, Johnson has developed his "ace in the hole," a specialized nymphing procedure. Wading into position below a pocket and executing a short cast to the quiet water behind a boulder, he uses a high stick technique to keep most of the fly line off the water. This allows the weighted imitation to stay current-free and deep, where it is most effective.

Johnson rates proper placement of the fly more important than long casts. According to him, trout occupy a feeding station of about two cubic feet, expending as little energy as possible to intercept what drifts by.

"If an offering isn't in this lane, they aren't going to move to it," Johnson says. "By recognizing the locations where trout are stationed and putting the food almost in their mouths, success rates are high."



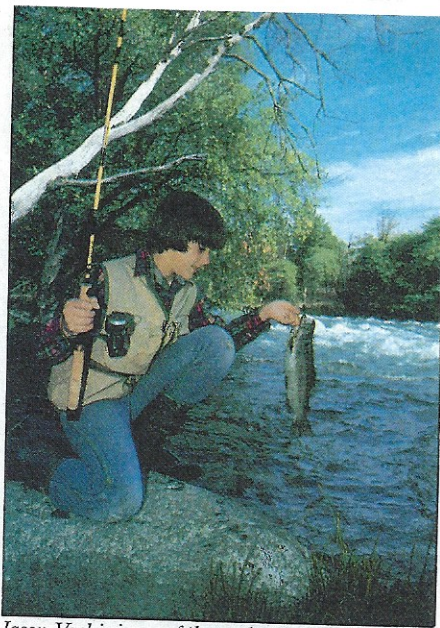
sistently on the bottom. Kastmasters, Little Cleos, Z-Rays and Daredevles are productive in heavy waters, while plug-type Hot Shots, Wee Warts, Rebels and Rapalas work well in the swirling currents of the deep holes.

Probably the most popular area is the 15-mile section between the river's origin and the town of Truckee. Closely followed by Highway 89 along this entire stretch, the stream is heavily planted with rainbow catchables by the California Department of Fish and Game.

Red salmon eggs, worms and marshmallows consistently take the planters, while Pheasant Tail, Hare's Ear and Black Ant patterns in sizes 10 to 14 work well for fly tossers.

From the town of Truckee downstream past the town of Verdi, Nevada, the river contains only native trout.

The Truckee supports two wild trout sections with virtually the same regulations. California's special regulations are in effect from the confluence of Trout Creek in downtown Truckee to the Boca Bridge. Nevada's special waters run from the state line four miles downstream to Verdi. Two trout limits and artificial lures-only apply here. California's minimum size is 15 inches; Nevada's is 14 inches.



Jason Vachini, son of the author, admires a nice rainbow trout taken from the Truckee River early in the season. (Don Vachini photo)

While wading fly anglers working the white water pockets between pools score regularly, bait and lure anglers likewise do well on the many deep holes of this somewhat secluded canyon, which is bypassed by a lot of anglers.

On the Nevada side, Dave Stanley of the Reno Fly Shop is partial to his state's wild trout sector, where he successfully works nymphs and

streamers deep and slow. Though rainbows are the main fare, he enjoys the challenge of fly fishing for big browns which have been known to approach seven pounds. To coax these lunkers, Stanley favors meaty-looking Sculpin or Crawdad streamers (sizes 6 and 8) twitched slowly on the bottom. Matuka and Muddler patterns also produce.

The Nevada Department of Wildlife plants the Truckee with catchables in areas of public access where the river approaches Reno, with some of the better angling taking place within a stone's throw from casinos.

"If you like planted trout, the river where it courses through the city park receives bountiful plants," Stanley says.

Past Reno, the river continues to wind in an open valley, becomes channeled in some areas, and houses more rough fish as it warms slightly.

Despite adequate spawning habitat on several stretches of water, natural recruitment is not enough to maintain a total, self-sustaining fishery. So, the river is stocked with more than 300,000 catchable trout each season. While California stocks solely rainbows, the Nevada Department of Wildlife deposits a mixed bag.

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"Approximately 150,000 rainbows and 25,000 brown trout catchables are released annually," Warren says. "Twenty thousand fingerling browns are also placed in various locales to compensate for limited spawning in parts of Nevada."

Some private land borders the river, but its entire course is considered a navigable water. By parking and walking the railroad tracks or side roads which generally parallel it, one can usually gain legal admittance to the riverbed.

First-time visitors intent on playing a few serious hands with Truckee's resident trout should seek the services of a professional guide. Intimate knowledge of the river, its best lies, proper rigging and best patterns under prevailing conditions, prove absolutely invaluable.

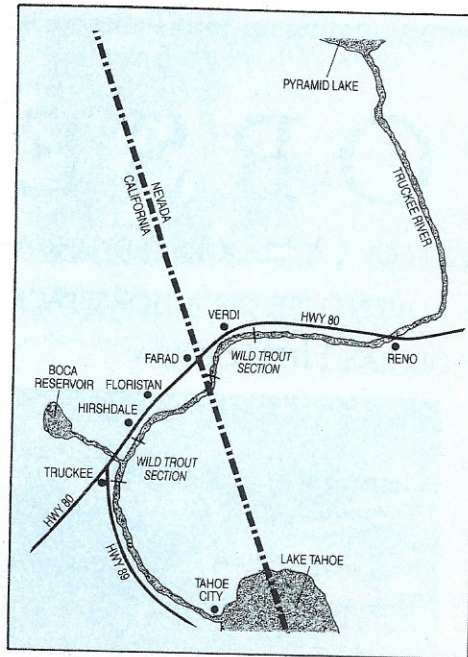
While the Truckee in California is subject to the general trout season, it is all-year water in Nevada. The entire river has a five-trout limit on sections not superseded by other regulations. If in doubt, consult the current angling regulations of both states.

With its fast flows and wary trout, the Truckee is not an easy water to fish, posing both physical and mental challenges. However, if one spends a

little time learning its secrets, the river can produce bright payoffs. Aggressive wading, proper presentations and willingness to explore less-attainable stretches will many times provide the winning combination.

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Author Don Vachini lives in Petaluma, California, and frequently fishes both sides of the Sierra Nevada.



TRUCKEE TRIP FACTS

HOW TO GET THERE: From Sacramento, take I-80 east to Truckee. From there, Highway 89 follows the river 14 miles to Lake Tahoe. From Truckee, I-80 parallels the river all the way to Reno.

WHERE TO STAY: Restaurants, motels and hotels are available in Tahoe City, Truckee and Reno. Tahoe National Forest campgrounds are abundant.

BEST SEASON: Late spring through mid-June are best for wet fly and bait anglers. Warm weather hatches hold up throughout October.

APPROXIMATE COSTS: An annual California trout fishing license costs \$19.25, while a one-day license is available to both residents or non-residents for \$6. An annual, non-resident Nevada trout license costs \$40, a three-day permit is \$17, and a 10-day permit runs \$25.

WHO TO CONTACT: For fishing or guide service information in the Reno area, contact Dave Stanley, Reno Fly Shop, (702) 827-0600. For information in the Truckee area, contact Randy Johnson, (916) 525-6575; Truckee District USFS office, (916) 587-3558; or Reno Visitors Center, (702) 329-3558.



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