

From across the room, Bob Roberts' voice boomed loud and clear. "As soon as you're unpacked, we'll go after some two-pound trout," our smiling host proudly proclaimed as he extended a warm handshake to a member of our group. Needless to say, adrenalin surged as I impatiently sought to stow my gear.

Our party, which consisted of friends George Buxton, Dick Murdock plus myself, was visiting the newly-opened Spanish Springs Ranch, which is owned and operated by Roberts, in early November, 1989. Located about 45 miles northeast of Susanville, California via Highway 395, this working cattle ranch sits among a vast

Skirting the lake ahead of us, Frederickson pointed to a significantly darker strip of water leading toward a thick concentration of reeds. "A good portion of this water is very shallow, so one must locate the submerged creekbeds. Trout consistently cruise along the edges of these deeper channels," he counseled.

Foolishly forgetting the afternoon sun was behind me, I cast a lengthy shadow onto the water and dejectedly watch three large dorsal fins vanish into deeper water. Spending less than half and hour on this open water with a treeless shoreline, we lurched a few miles up the rocky jeep road to Dodge Reservoir. Here, with the day waning rapidly, we hurriedly plied its steep shoreline. Almost at dark, Dick and I each missed a pair of savage strikes, while George let out a whoop from the inlet, signifying he was into a nice fish. However, by the time he released the burly rainbow, which he guesstimated to be over a pound, Frederickson announced we had reached the legal light constraints. "There'll be plenty more like that one tomorrow," he consoled, obviously sensing our frustration at having to quit.

That evening while enjoying the warmth of a cozy fireplace in the spacious main lodge, Frederickson explained a little about the Spanish Springs trout project. Though rainbows from a private hatchery currently make up the bulk of the fish in ranch waters, Robert's goal is to produce and maintain a trophy trout experience, not just a put and take scenario. To achieve this end, he initiated a system to rotate angler use among clients, much the same as a farmer rotates his crops. Since the ranch is so expansive and waters so diverse, it was feasible to do so. "In some cases, trout will grow for two years before anglers ever fish for them."

While this plan seems destined to provide large fish, a consumptive fishery could ruin this scenario in a hurry. To minimize depletion, the ranch professes a real common sense approach to angling on its property, without imposing any special rules. "Though catch and release is encouraged, we are not going to begrudge a client the chance to take home a fish or two," Frederickson said.

Day two dawned 28 degrees and crisp with an increasing high cloud cover. Our destination was a brace of springfed ponds tucked in the foothills of the south Warner Mountains, which signify the extreme northern boundary of Spanish Springs territory. We stepped out of the heated van at Lower Davis to a sparse juniper forest scenario. The air, though cold was sage-scented and invigorating while a brilliant

High Desert Trout



Author admires a typical Spanish Springs rainbow.

Don Vachini

*Rainbows on this
privately managed
guest ranch
consistently range
from one
to two pounds*

high desert plateau near the 5,500 elevation. Though more noted for its pronghorn antelope, chukar, duck and geese hunting, this Lassen County spread also supports a little-known trophy trout fishery scattered throughout its 60,000 acres, explaining our reason for being there.

Anticipations high, we commenced our journey with Lorn Frederickson serving as our guide. With him driving the ranch van, we negotiated a 30-mile maze of dirt roads while bouncing across an open sector of the Madeline Plains. Besides pointing out a dozen or so antelope and a coyote, Frederickson entertained us with tales of old West cattle drives and Indian legends such as Chief Smoke Creek Sam. "Dominated by sagebrush, bitterbrush, juniper trees and lava rock, this land has changed little since then," he informed.

We arrived at Cold Springs, a small, spring-fed water, in just under an hour.

orange and cardinal sunrise painted an aura over the Skedaddle Mountains outlining the distant easter horizon.

On this particular man-made impoundment, we geared up with spinners and plugs since the shoreline slid off rapidly into deep water. Frederickson, though, beckoned us to follow him. "Trout in these lakes tend to school up and hang out near incoming water," he informed. "There's a huge underground spring about 50-60 feet from here," he whispered as he pointed across the mirror calm surface. "Springs and inlets are always a good initial bet," he confided.

Almost on cue, my rod bowed under a sizable weight while the tranquility of the land was disrupted by my whining reel. Not really expecting trout as big as promised, I was initially shocked while experiencing the magnitude of its repeated surges and writhing tactics. The rainbow seemed capable of taking line whenever it chose. Fully relishing the combat, I was further astounded as it performed five consecutive steelhead-like pirouettes, etching concentric rings across the heretofore placid pond. Rolling its eyes indignantly at me as I removed the lure, I could literally feel its muscles ripple prior to its mad escape dash from my hand!

The morning session was filled with similar encounters before we grudgingly retreated to a small line shack for a hearty beef stew lunch. During our break, a significant change in weather took place. Gray clouds were now caressing some of the loftier hills and there was a noticeable drop in temperature.

For the afternoon round, we were shuttled to Upper Davis where George and I opted for fly rods while Dick stayed with spinning gear. This water offered a rocky shoreline structure and willing trout, which were scattered all over the lake, continued to give us an experience we'll not soon forget. During our post-lunch foray alone, we tallied 26 plump adversaries as the weather continued to deteriorate!

According to Frederickson, October through November is the peak time of year as lower temperatures create favorable conditions for the trout. "During late fall, the fish certainly let down their guard," he informed. "As you have just noticed, bad weather often signals a major feeding spree."

Between 13-16 inches and heavy bodied for their length most trout we landed fit into the one to two pound category. However, as the sun dipped low in the west, something noticeably bulkier ravaged my dark nymph and stressed my three-pound tippet to its max. After repeated sizzling runs, head shaking tantrums and surface rolls, I slowly worked what must have been the grand-daddy of all ranch

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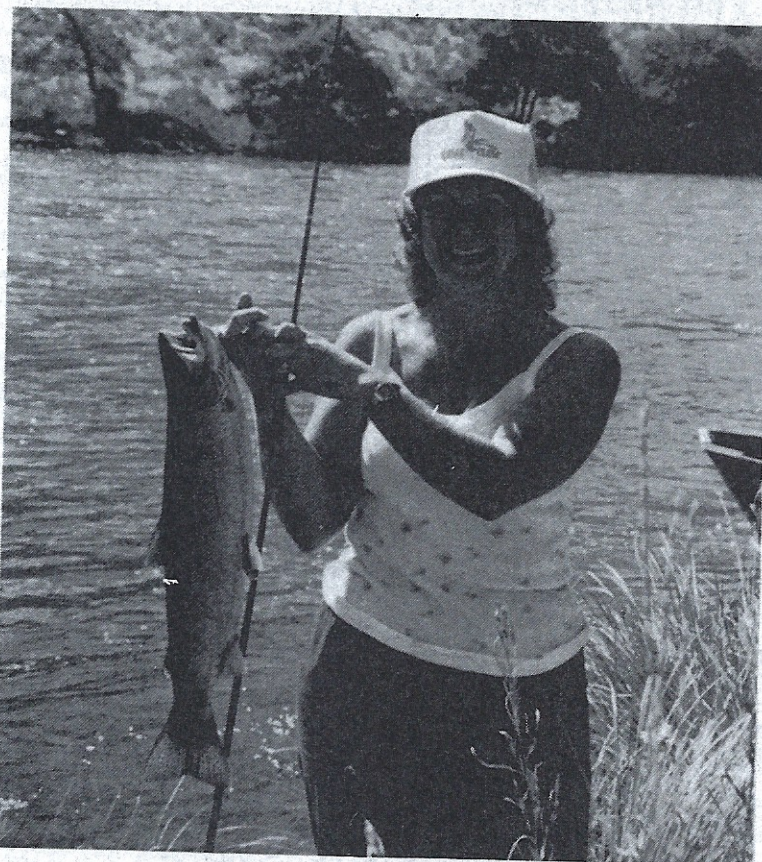


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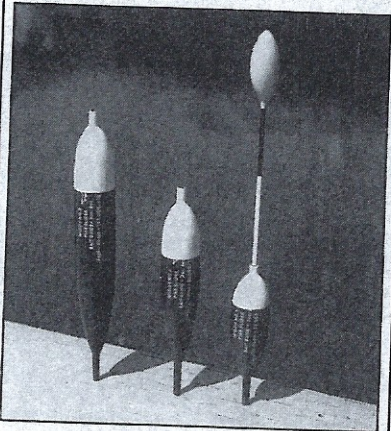
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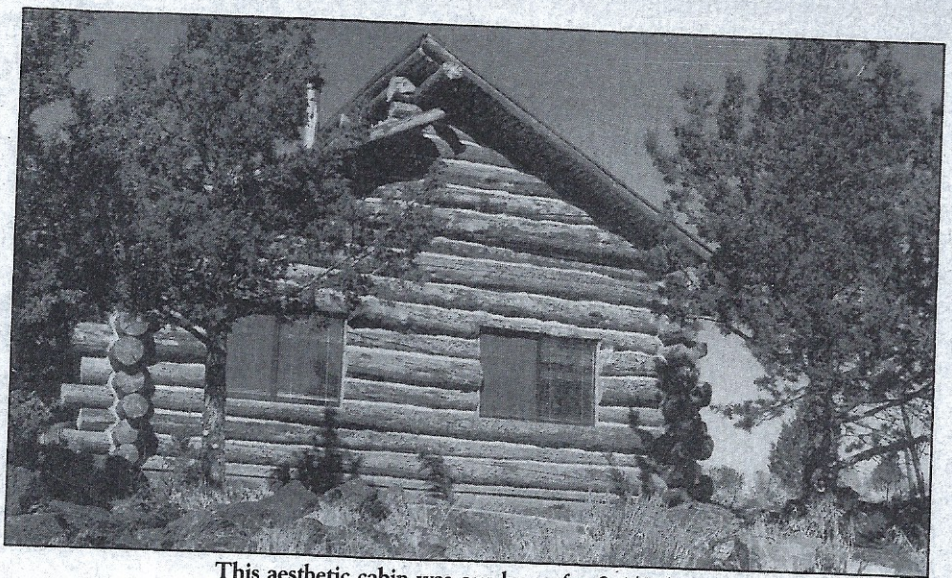
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This aesthetic cabin was our home for 2 1/2 days.

residents into the shallows. Adorned in bright pearlescent hues with striking pinkish lateral, the broad-chested battler easily approached four pounds. Within the blink of an eyelash, however, the trout rolled onto a rock and my Woolly Bugger instantly fell loose. As the lunker languidly finned to its freedom, it became clear that fishermen are not always the victor here.

During our 2 1/2 day stay, we were escorted to an array of springfed waters ranging from four to five acre ponds to lakes

and reservoirs up to 30 acres. Wherever we caught trout, however, their thick bodies and smallish heads signified rapid growth. Frederickson happily revealed to us that these rainbows normally gain up to 3/4 pound per season. He attributes this prodigious growth to the abundant nutrients found in these moderately alkaline waters, which account for an extremely healthy food chain. "Besides numerous insect species, pond snails and leeches are plentiful in ranch waters," he mentioned. "There is little doubt that these high caloric invertebrates provide the key to rapid weight gain."

Both fly and spin anglers will be right at home on these waters. A 4 or 5 weight fly rod matched with either a floating or sinking line will cover most trout options. One can't go wrong using a selection of size 10-12 dark nymph patterns including Scud, Leech, Woolly Worm, Caddis and Woolly Bugger patterns. Since snails and leeches are found on the bottom, I used a floating fly line with a sink tip to work my offerings deep with a slow, deliberate twitching action.

Anglers wishing to enjoy the vigorous fighting qualities of these hefty trout will also find a ultra-light to light action spin rod and reel loaded with 2-4 pound monofilament to be a sporting choice. Even though no baitfish inhabit these waters, small minnow-imitating plugs worked slow and deep and imparted with an erratic zig zag motion proved deadly. Size 0-2 Mepps and Panther Martin spinners in yellow and silver shades also proved their worth. Ours were adapted with single, barbless hooks for efficient release.

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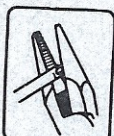
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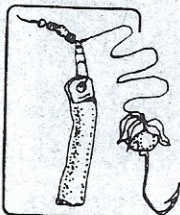
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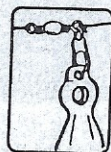
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