

# When The Weather Is Cold, Eagle Lake is Hot

*Housing a rare, fast-growing strain of rainbow,  
this trophy trout water produces plenty of weighty catches.  
Angler's odds seem to shift during the worst weather.*

Don Vachini

A steel-gray stratus blanket hung low in the sky while increasing gusts of icy November air blew directly into my face. Though somewhat protected by a rim of volcanic rock, choppy water lapped increasingly higher on my chest waders, while further out on the lake, a flock of canvasbacks dodged through an obstacle course of frothing whitecaps and swirling winds. Disregarding the biting chill, I continued working my lure parallel to the edge of some shoreline tules. Warmth was provided by envisioning the hefty trout which had to be lurking nearby.

Despite the debate as to my sanity, I was thigh-deep in northeastern California's vast Eagle Lake at a time of the year when it is one of the most dependable trophy waters in the state. Joining me in this late 1989 rainbow trout venture were fellow outdoor writers George Carl and Paul Wertz.

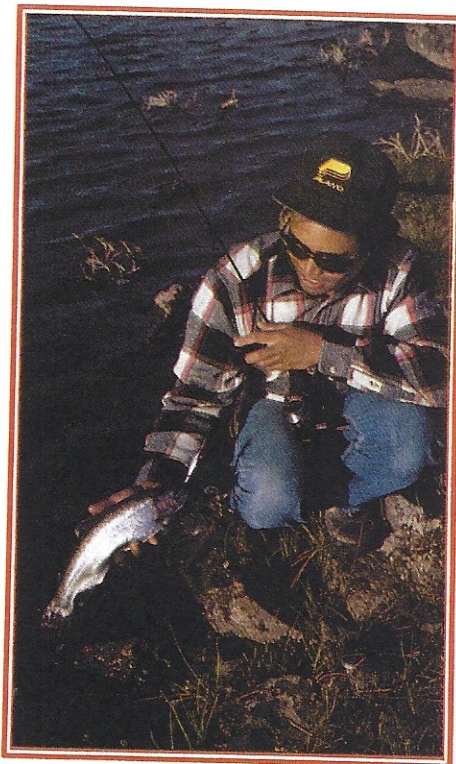
Located 14 miles north of Susanville, the second largest natural lake in the Golden State sits at the 5,100 foot elevation near the edge of Lassen National Forest. To the east lies the Great Basin while its western shore is flanked by the Modoc Plateau. Guarded by the Warner Mountains to the north, the lake's amoeba-like configuration is surrounded by an unspectacular setting of bluish-sage and high desert. Some scientists feel that at one time the lake, which the native Americans refer to as Acapsukati, was probably connected to ancient Lahontan Lake, the prehistoric inland sea which covered much of Nevada's northwestern landscape.

The trout we were seeking are a remarkable story. Most notably known as the Eagle Lake rainbow, this strain is the only trout capable of surviving the lake's highly alkaline waters. Biologists marvel at its ability to thrive in these conditions, as most trout here average between two and five pounds with four and seven pounders

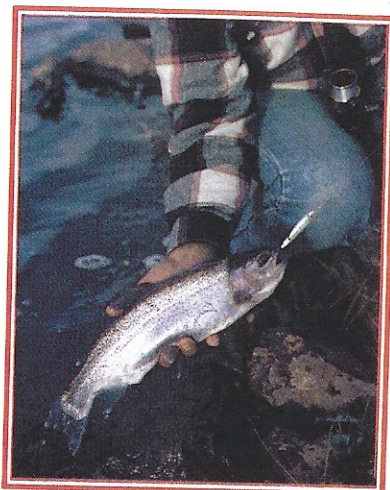
more common later in the season. This latter figure made it obvious why we were braving inclement conditions.

On a particularly blustery morning Carl, who owns a local radio station, drove us to a small cove near Spaulding Tract along the western shore. Enduring an unproductive hour of traipsing the tule-infested shoreline, steadily deteriorating weather and eye strain from watching my rod tip for telltale signs, I began to second guess my decision to be here. At that precise moment, however, something gargantuan snatched my plug, causing me to ignore the elements. Appearing to be in several locations at once, the trout tested both tackle and nerves. On this occasion, wise use of my drag plus steady pressure bore bountiful results as a robust, silvery rainbow was soon cradled in my hand.

While reviving the gasping two pounder in the murky waters, shouts, barely audible over the wind hissing violently through dry sage, testified that my cohorts were simultaneously into action. Within the next hour, we hooked a combined 10 fish, landing a half dozen. While only one specimen pushed four pounds, the others



As temperatures drop, large trout are found close to shore. Facing page: Boat anglers are highly successful in the early season.

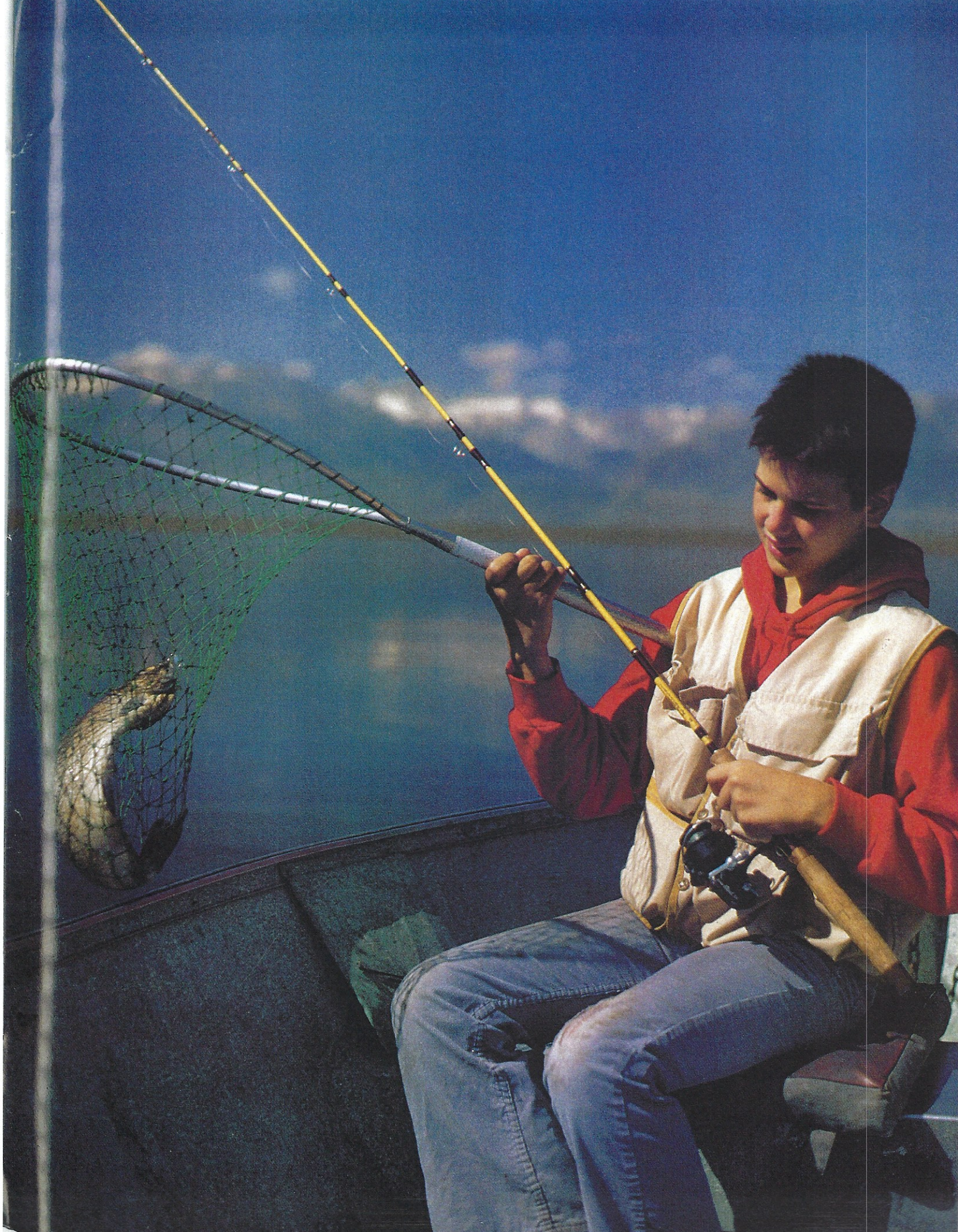


Chub-imitating lures dupe many winter trout.

were each very respectable two to three pounders. "Babies," snorted Carl in mock disapproval.

The lake's fishery is really a tribute to fine DFG management. According to Wertz, who is an information officer with the Department of Fish and Game's Region I office, the Eagle Lake rainbow was nearing extinction by 1950. Basically, this rare trout could not successfully spawn due to unreliable flows from its feeder streams, and the few fingerlings making it to the lake had a tough time competing with the larger tui chub populations. In the early '60s, the

*(continue on page 54)*



## EAGLE LAKE

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DFG officially began the Eagle Lake Management Program by collecting eggs from a portable egg taking station on Pine Creek, the lakes main tributary. During a discouraging month-long period, only six female spawners were trapped when this program was initiated! From these six fish, the DFG developed the ensuing trophy trout program into one of the most successful in the state. Today, close to 300 spawners produce over a million eggs. These eggs are hatched and reared at a nearby hatchery and each fall 150,000 trout, averaging one pound each, are restocked back into the lake. "This department policy of planting only larger trout ensures they will compete successfully with the chub population," mentions Wertz.

Once in the lake, these trout grow in a hurry, reaching outsized proportions in little more than a year. With their genetic makeup seemingly programmed for prodigious growth, the lakes ecology virtually guarantees it. The rich, alkaline waters are laden with tui chubs, shrimp and leeches, which, according to Wertz, provide high caloric forage. "First year fish normally approach three pounds and are locally referred to as 'babies'," he informed. "While one to two year holdovers will average five to seven pounds, three year-olds and over will commonly push ten or more pounds," he added with a pleasurable look on his face.

Besides abundant food, Wertz also feels that the January through May closure has a beneficial effect on the fishery.

While early season is a good time to catch fish because they're widely distributed, action slows down drastically during June, July and August and doesn't pick up again until late fall. In 1985, sons Matt, Chris and I sampled the water during mid-July when the weather was warm and dry. True to form, we found the fishing frightfully slow. Despite covering several suggested locales over two full days, Matt accounted for our only trout. The fact that it was a 3 1/2 pounder lent credence to the saying that any trout caught at Eagle Lake is good sized!

While the lake can produce the kind of action that wears out even the stoutest forearms, fishing here is not easy. The lakes 100 mile shoreline offers a diversity of underwater structure and habitat. During the summer, anglers do best trolling the deeper water with leadcore line for the trout which have scattered and headed for the cooler depths, usually between 40 and 60 feet. The use of a fish finder is a great

asset, not only for locating trout but the baitfish they relentlessly pursue as well. Eagle Lake can also be treacherous since it often experiences big winds and, because of its relative shallowness, can turn sloppy in no time. While boating is allowed from sunrise to sunset, the lake is no place for floating craft when this occurs.

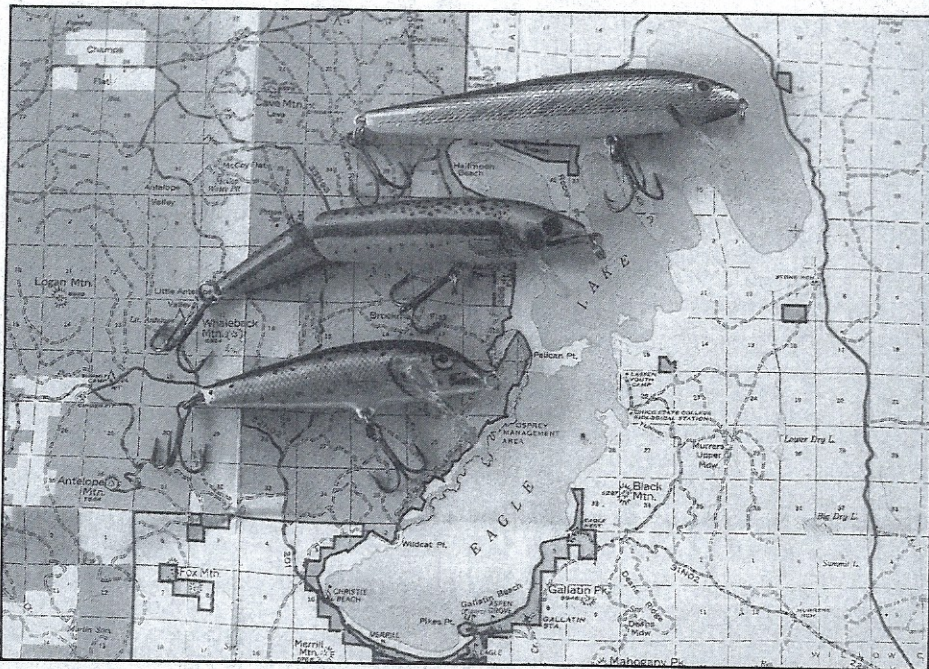
While Rapalas, Kastmasters and Krocodiles towed at slow speeds and varied with erratic, zig zag maneuvers take a lot of trophies, it is the common nightcrawler/flasher setup that is most popular. Whether trolled or stillfished, anglers commonly thread one or two husky worms on a No. 6 long-shank hook and inflate them with air to keep them out of the submerged weeds. It should be noted that worms are the only live bait allowed on the lake.

While fishing can be somewhat frustrating during summer, Carl feels that

darted for deep water as my line touched water.

Though several guides in the area favor drifting crawlers or trolling oversized flies with a sinking fly line just offshore, Carl introduced me to another productive wintertime means a few years back. "While a boat probably affords more mobility, it can spook a lot of fish especially with a motor," he cautioned. "However," he continued, "Some remarkable results can be attained by carefully moving right among the tules, either with waders or a float tube."

Though extremely difficult in calm weather, this method is really productive with a ripple or chop on the water. According to Carl, rough water not only hides the angler from the trout's window of vision but covers up most angling faux pas. Good week growth occurs along the shores of Rocky Point, Lassen Youth Camp, Pelican Point, Buck's Point, Stone's Landing and Spaulding.



Four to six-inch Rapalas are deadly lures for winter anglers.

angling odds greatly improve as the season wanes, especially when mother nature is most raucous. When the mercury drops later in the year, fish begin to migrate into the shallow water around the lakes edge and tend to be a little more predictable. Frequenting the northern half of the lake where the average depth is close to 10 feet, the really big trout will crowd schools of chubs right up against the tule growth, keep them cornered and dine on them for lengthy periods. During calm periods, their dorsal fins sometimes break the surface as they forage, belying their position. However, their senses seem at their keenest during this time as I found out on two separate occasions. Despite cat-like stalks and careful casts, big fish unhesitatingly

Minnow-imitating plugs or meaty looking streamers worked adjacent to the reedy growth will turn on some unbelievable trout which are never far away from this structure. Four to six inch silver or gold Rapalas with black backs appear to be the trout's number one choice, no doubt because of their chub-like similarity. Orange or fluorescent shades of this lure also dupe many trout as do No. 2 bikini or frog Needlefish, 1/4-ounce Super Duper, Z Rays and Phoebes. I have found a light to medium action spinning rod and reel loaded with four to eight pound monofilament to best fit the fighting abilities of these rainbows.

Fly tossers, though successful, have difficulty battling the strong winter gusts.

Large, meaty-looking offerings are best presented with short, well placed casts, since lengthy attempts usually meet brushy obstacles. Number four through eight Woolly Worm, Woolly Bugger, Invitation Shrimp, Leech and Marabou patterns in shades ranging from light tan to black are very effective. A seven to eight foot, medium action fly rod matched with a sink tip line is more than adequate to prevent the above.

Besides slow and meticulous shoreline walking, which sometimes resembles a combination of slogging through marshy swampland and tripping over small boulders, Carl feels that the key to unforgettable wintertime angling is working the reedy, shoreline growth in bad weather. The chilly blasts which buffet this vast water on a daily basis are made to order for the shore angler, churning and clouding up the water. "Anything from a light ripple to a heavy chop are perfect conditions," he advised. "Generally speaking, the lousier the weather, the better the fishing."

During our brief three day stay, we found Carl's advice prophetic. Operating early in the day, we could locate feeding trout during the calm and then try for them as the weather turned beastly. Of the 33 trout we landed while fishing the tule beds, most were in the two to four pound range. Although Carl released a pair well over five pounds. Each of us also dutifully took a turn losing a trout of sizeable proportions.

While the current limit is two fish, it is perfectly acceptable to catch and release as many as you wish. In fact, many locals stress releasing the smaller two to three pound "babies" in order to allow them to reach real trophy size.

Since this huge body of water can be intimidating to the first time visitor, enlisting the use of a guide is a worthwhile investment.

The lake itself, accessible via County Road A-1 from either Highways 36 or 139, offers a full range of winter concessions. For angling information or guide referral service contact Eagle Lake General Store (916) 825-2191. For lodging contact; Lakeview Inn in Spaulding (916) 825-3223; Heritage Land Company (916) 825-2131 or Eagle Lake RV Park (916) 825-3133. An airstrip at Spaulding provides yet another travel option.

On my last afternoon at the lake, I fished alone as dark clouds gathered ominously above me. Somewhat protected by a small igneous peninsula, I was able to flick amazingly accurate offerings to several fish foraging next to a pod of tules. During the first 20 minutes, a brace of three pounders succumbed to my fly rod and were released. Momentarily distracted by the sting of icy water on my fingers as I con-

tinued to twitch my No. 8 Black Leech, the Big One took me by surprise. The reverberations in my fly rod conveyed that the hidden battler was a least eight or nine pounds. However, within a millisecond, frantic V-wakes from its bulbous body moved purposefully into the tules, the growth literally moving as the heavyweight thrashed about among them. Amid sounds similar to an angered buffalo snapping canebrush, tippet and trophy soon parted company!

With snowflakes steadily pelting me, progressively numbing digits and hypothermia a distinct possibility, I retreated to my cozy cabin. As the elements howled outside temperatures dropped below freezing, I offered a silent tribute to Eagle Lake. There is little doubt the artificial spawning and rearing program, reaching its zenith when the weather is at its worst. Where else are three-pound trout practically scorned and referred to as babies?

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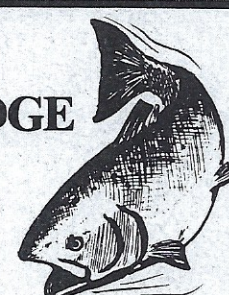
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