

# Marin's Unknown Trout Lakes

*Many upscale suburbanites of this San Francisco-area county remain unaware of the excellent fishing in their water supply reservoirs*



**T**inged with a pungent smell of pie, the rain-cleansed air infiltrated the finger ridges of the steep gorge. From its lofty, dead-snag perch, a solitary osprey scanned the thickly forested shore of the lake, itself partially cloaked in a swathe of low-hanging mist, while the tranquil morning stillness, broken only by an occasional weighty “kerplunk” of a feeding trout, seemingly froze time.

Though reminiscent of some faraway Canadian wilderness, the setting was only minutes removed from a concentration of densely packed California cities. This particular scenario was being enacted at Marin County's Kent Lake, one of four man-made impoundments on Lagunitas Creek, (also known as Papermill Creek).

Historically, Lagunitas Creek drained the

wrinkled face of 2200-foot Mt. Tamalpais, cutting unimpeded through a steep canyon on its 25-mile journey to the Pacific coast at Tomales Bay. However, an ever-increasing south county population and its thirsty demands necessitated the construction of the four water storing reservoirs during the last 118 years. The Marin Municipal Water District (MMWD), a public corporation whose objective is water dispersment, currently oversees 26,000 acres of the Tamalpais watershed including Lagunitas, Bon Tempe, Alpine and Kent lakes. A well-kept secret among Marin County anglers, these stepladder lakes are tucked along the northeastern shoulder of Bolinas Ridge, a redwood and Douglas fir-shrouded barrier separating Stinson Beach and the Pacific Ocean from the cities of San Anselmo, San Rafael and Fairfax.

*Rainbows of the Marin lakes often will go acrobatic like this trout that appears to be standing on its nose. There is no lack of large fish in these hidden impoundments.* (Paul Updike photo)

Though Marin County is noted for its special blend of corporate headquarters, open space, high tech industries and forested knolls, it is the bragging-size rainbow trout finning in these lakes which have Marinite anglers tight-lipped. Located about 20 miles north of San Francisco, these waters offer a one-of-a-kind trout fishery.

John Emig, a fisheries biologist with the California Department of Fish and Game's (DFG) Region 3, believes these lakes, which are beneficiaries of a special strain of trout, epitomize an urban trout fishery. The Cole-



man rainbow, a cross between Kamloops and steelhead, was introduced by the DFG nearly 30 years ago, and currently occupies three Marin lakes.

"In addition to their vigorous fighting qualities and tendency to scatter and not school up, they are winter spawners, making them ideal for coastal-type drainages like Marin," Emig said.

County meteorological reports indicate that "Mount Tam" garners triple the average rainfall of nearby locales. Collected directly or via underground aquifers, the ensuing runoff ensures this quartet of lakes year-round habitat for trout, according to Emig.

"In the presence of deep, cold water, adequate food forms and vast, unpressured expanses, this species tends to grow to its optimum" Emig adds.

Indeed, preliminary surveys at Lagunitas Lake, a specially managed natural fishery, reveal most trout to be in the 12 to 15-inch category, healthy and robust.

"While yearling specimens at Alpine and Kent lakes will attain six to eight inches, trout here consistently range between one and two pounds, with individuals up to five pounds not uncommon," Emig says.

Besides the suitable natural conditions, Emig believes that certain administrative factors also contribute to the lakes' propensity to produce hefty trout (and keep them that way).

First-time anglers at any of these lakes, which are open all year, should be aware that there is a strict MMWD policy against any water contact activities. Since boats, float tubes, swimming and wading are prohibited and anglers are rigidly committed to a shoreline venture, Emig reasons the odds shift heavily in favor of the trout, since anglers can't pursue them.

"Once away from shore, the trout can live and grow virtually unmolested in a deep water sanctuary," Emig says.

Originally constructed for maintenance travel and firefighting, a network of more than 150 miles of dirt roadways and paths link all of these lakes. Though closed to public vehicular travel, these interconnecting trails many times offer the only reasonable access to water, further curtailing angler pressure.

While there is no paucity of large fish in these lakes, Emig admits that both locating and catching them are not easy feats.

"However, the fact that anglers face a healthy challenge provides the true essence of a real wild trout fishery," he says.

Following is a lake-by-lake rundown of how to best utilize each fishery:

### ● Lagunitas Lake

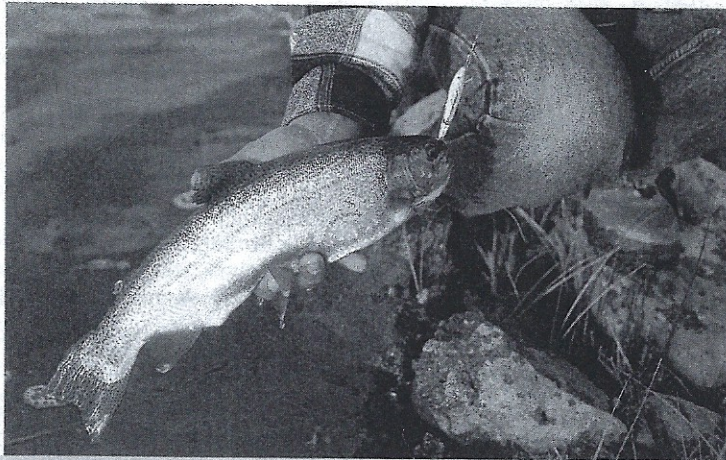
An earthen dam built in 1873 at the confluence of the west, middle and east forks of Lagunitas Creek created this 23-acre lake, the smallest and oldest of the four MMWD drinking sources.

Initially stocked with rainbow catchables in 1921, this popular lake changed directions in 1987. Under the guidance of the Lake Lagunitas Fisheries Enhancement

Program, which combined the efforts of the MMWD, Cal Trout, Inc., DFG and the Marin Rod and Gun Club, this jewel is currently managed as a natural water under special regulations. While artificial lures or flies with single barbless hooks are the only permitted means of take, a two-fish slot limit is also in effect, whereby all fish between 10 to 16 inches are to be released.

While the jury is still out on this project, it has provided some remarkable winter results as it enters its fifth season. Former streamkeeper and frequent angler Emil Gehrke has personally observed natural propagation taking place as well as a noticeable growth rate among the girthy residents, which seem to follow an isolated, non-scholastic pattern. He hints that this lake is best worked from a structural point of view.

"When the lake was drained in '86 to perform repairs and install an aerator system, its underwater layout revealed all of the main creek channels possessing sharp dropoffs which follow the shoreline contour," Gehrke says.



*Rainbows of the Marin lakes are mint-bright and heavy-bodied, showing the result of healthy water and forage conditions.*

*(Don Vachini photo)*

### Hard-Fighters Inhabit Lakes

With the exception of catchable rainbows in Bon Tempe, the remaining three MMWD lakes are all inhabited by healthy numbers of the Coleman rainbow. According to John Emig, a fisheries biologist with the DFG's Region 3, this strain is not only a pugnacious battler but a voracious predator as well.

Although lake residents readily dine on various insects and zooplankton, they relish the prevalent crayfish and tiny baitfish, relying on them for their high caloric staples. Thus, where permitted, patiently soaking natural baits such as worms, nightcrawlers and crawdad tails either on the bottom or under a bobber often rewards anglers with time on their hands.

These rainbows often mistake minnow-imitating Rebels, Rapalas, Krocodiles, Kastmasters, Tor-P-Dos or Flatfish, randomly worked at various depths and with erratic actions, for bite-size morsels.

Preferring depths of 80 to 100 feet during summer, they will move near the surface as turnover occurs, usually when

While retrieving a fly or lure parallel to these ledges often enhances a hookup, casting into the deep, gouged-out holes 50 or 70 feet from each inlet is also a profitable Gehrke tactic.

Since *Callibaetis* mayflies are the most common insect form in the drainage, Gehrke feels imitations of their life stages are smart selections. While his dry fly preferences include Thorax Callibaetis, Elk Hair Caddis and Adams in sizes 14 and 16, nymphal forms are best imitated by size 12 or 16 Zug Bug, A.P., Hare's Ear and Pheasant Tail patterns in light green to olive shades.

"Black or brown scud or leech patterns are especially effective wherever abundant shoreline vegetation is present," Gehrke says.

Gehrke also points out that tiny mosquito fish inhabit the lake, providing an excellent forage source without impacting the trout. Spin fishermen working small jointed plugs in silver or rainbow finish adjacent to weedbeds often experience heart-stopping takes, while small yellow or white crappie

topwater temperatures approach a suitable 50 to 55 degrees.

At Lagunitas, which received a one-time plant of 9000 fish in the 10 to 14-inch range in 1987, plus a supplementary load of 1000 broodfish in '90, these trout actively use the feeder streams during winter when they are usually gushing. Colemans here also benefit from an aerator system installed to pump oxygen to them during the heat of summer, since it is a fairly shallow body of water. Healthy two-pound specimens attest to the ongoing success of the project.

While some natural propagation takes place on both Alpine and Kent, they are sustained by annual springtime plants of 40,000 fingerlings each. "Three to five inches in length and weighing less than an ounce, most attain moderate growth the first season," according to Emig. "Though some serve as forage, fish surviving three or four years will approach one to two pounds."

*Don Vachini*



jigs and Needlefish worked in the proximity of shoreline structure also produce their share of excitement.

### ● Bon Tempe Reservoir ●

About 150 yards downstream from Lagunitas sits this 144-acre impoundment. Completed in 1948, it features drive-to access, an encircling trail system plus a handicapped ramp along the entrance road.

Entirely dependent on hatchery impounds, Bon Tempe has become an increasingly popular rendezvous for people intent on either enjoying a leisurely outing or taking home a five-trout limit, especially since Lagunitas' former quota of trout plants is also deposited here, thereby doubling its annual allotment.

While just about any point of land jutting out into deeper water will produce schooling trout, the most reliable location is the wooded southern shoreline where water is pumped up from Alpine. This well-oxygenated spot bubbles noticeably.

While Berkley's Power Baits have proven deadly on the numerous planters, bait-dunkers using worms, nightcrawlers, corn, marshmallows and salmon eggs also take their share of trout. An ultra-light rod and reel, 2 or 4-pound test line and small treble hooks with a sliding sinker best complement the above baits.

While fly fishing opportunities are present on the more open sections of the lake, a variety of tiny spinners and spoons usually cull the more gullible stockers for a few days after the biweekly plants. Yellow and orange-hued Rooster Tails and Panther Martins seemingly work the best magic.

### ● Alpine Lake ●

A concrete arch dam, poured in 1918, backed up water once flowing through a narrow canyon, forming this 219-acre, three-mile-long lake which differs greatly in physical structure from the reservoirs above it.

Though brush and rapidly ascending slopes make for difficult access in places, no part of Alpine is inaccessible if one is willing to walk. A trail follows the entire southern bank from Bon Tempe spillway to the dam. Strolling this sometimes sketchy footpath, anglers will view verdant ferns and mosses beneath a forested canopy of redwood, bay laurel, oak and broadleaf maple. The possibility of a two-car shuttle between spillway and dam remains a popular option.

While access problems are solved easily, fishing this lake effectively proves difficult. However, Warren Sellmann, an MMWD employee who fishes these lakes regularly, parts with a few basics which help shift the odds ever so slightly.

"Winter is the absolute prime time for the best results. Since Alpine (and Kent Lake likewise) is deep and narrow, its water tends to stratify. From late November through February, turnover keeps the trout in the upper 10 feet," Sellmann says.

The inlet coves of Cataract, Van Wyck and Swede George creeks are reliable bets, especially after storms swell these tributaries. Sellmann often locates large rainbows near their cascading waters.

"Probably attempting to ascend these creeks to spawn, they become more vulnerable than at any other time of the

season," he says. "These brief pre-spawning gatherings are as close to schooling up as the Colemans will come."

While silvery plugs and hammered spoons, worked in erratic motions off these coves, take their share of trout, it is the reliable nightcrawler that seems to be most productive. Since turnover keeps the winter trout between two and 10 feet of the surface, Sellmann favors draping the annelid four to six feet under a bobber, providing the angler continually monitors and adjusts the rig.

### ● Kent Lake ●

Completed in 1953, Peters Dam created the last of the impoundments on Lagunitas Creek. Raised an additional 45 feet in 1981, the dam forms a four-mile-long, ribbon-thin body of water which collects in a tapering, orthogonal valley virtually devoid of human contact. Bounded on the west by Pine Mountain Ridge and on the Pacific side by Bolinas Ridge, it has extremely limited access.

Since there are no trails around its immediate shoreline, the lake is only reached by hiking. Best entry route involves hiking or biking along either ridgetop road and then cross-country scrambling downhill to the lake through dense scrub brush. A daypack containing food and water, plus a pack rod, best suits this type of travel.

"Once on the shoreline, there is no guarantee of further movement as high winter flows often raise the water level to brushline," Sellmann says. "However, during the fall and early winter drawdown, some freedom of movement becomes available along the steeply inclined, exposed bottom."

A medium-size Kastmaster with a silvery streamer fly attached three feet behind it is another setup with merit.

Fed by numerous submerged springs, the Big Carson, Little Carson and Lagunitas Creek inlets provide the closest thing to a sure bet on this vast water.

"The Big Carson arm often produces the largest specimens," says Sellmann.

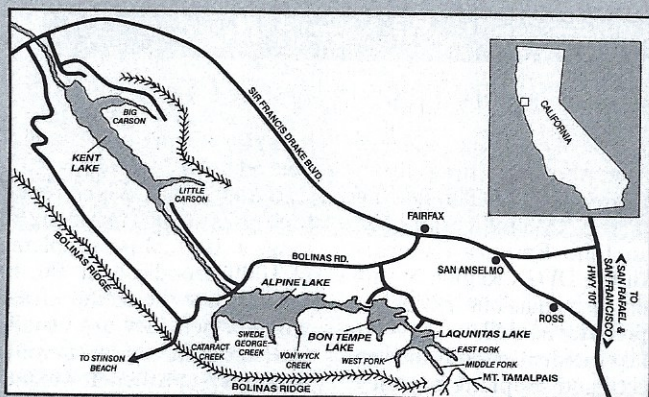
Typically, strenuous hikes to uncrowded terrain do not necessarily guarantee results on this water. "You might get only one fish in five or six trips," maintains Sellmann.

Visible from most parts of the county, Mt. Tam's hulking prominence not only dominates much of Marin's landscape but its thickly forested slopes also provide a group of lakes which represent the essence of primitive angling while in the midst of a bustling metropolis. Harboring a pair of secluded reservoirs which challenge both physical and angling skills, a model urban wild trout lake and a generously stocked put-and-take fishery, it is small wonder why more and more Marinites are singing the praises of these waters which truly offer something for everyone.

WO

*Author Don Vachini finds plenty of trout fishing near his hometown of Petaluma, California.*

### Marin Lakes Trip Facts



**HOW TO GET THERE:** From Highway 101 north or south, take Sir Francis Drake Boulevard to Fairfax. Turn left on Broadway, another left onto Cascade (Bolinas Road), yet another left at the sign to Lagunitas Lake.

**WHERE TO STAY:** The Marin area abounds with various priced accommodations.

**BEST SEASON:** From late November through February are the prime times.

**APPROXIMATE COST:** Car entry to Lagunitas or Bon Tempe costs \$3, while foot entry is free. A valid California

fishing license for residents costs \$22.60, and \$60.65 for non-residents. A one-day license for residents or non-residents can be purchased for \$6.75.

**WHO TO CONTACT:** For specific information on Lagunitas, contact Emil Gehrke, Selective Angler, (415) 461-6655, or Fly Fishing Outfitters, (415) 781-3474; Kent or Alpine, notify Warren Sellmann, (415) 459-5267, or Western Sport Shop, (415) 456-5454. For entry information, contact either MMWD, (415) 924-4600, or Mt. Tam Watershed recording, (415) 459-0888.