



A streamer worked parallel to shore can be deadly.

## Lake Lagunitas Goes Wild

This small Marin County water offers a self-sustaining wild trout population in an urban setting

Don Vachini

**T**he early morning air was crisp and clear while the sun was barely emerging from behind the forested eastern ridgeline. A pleasantly invigorating scent of pine infiltrated my nostrils as I stalked the lake's shoreline, periodically gazing at the forested crest of partially-hidden Mt. Tamalpais looming above. A soothing melody played by a gurgling tributary helped me become momentarily lost in my woody surroundings.

However, a weighty "kerplunk" abruptly reminded me why I was here. At least 17 inches, the trout purposefully broke the calm surface with its dorsal fin while languidly cruising back and forth beneath the safety of an overhanging bay laurel. It was hard to convince myself I was not in some faraway wilderness but a mere five minutes from a concentration of densely-populated municipalities.

On this particular December morning, I was visiting Marin County's Lagunitas Lake, a little-known lake with a one-of-a-kind trout fishery. Located 20 miles north of San Francisco, this tiny water currently sports the only program like it in the western United States—one which provides a populous metropolitan area with wild trout.

Nestled just south of downtown Fairfax, California on the northern slope of Mt. Tamalpais (2,200 feet), this 23-acre impoundment offers an urban wild trout fishery under special management. A two-fish limit is in effect whereby fishermen must release all trout between 10-16 inches. While anglers may catch and release as many fish as they desire, only artificial lures or flies with single, barbless hooks may be used.

Constructed in 1873 by an earthen dam at the confluence of the East, Middle

and West Forks of Lagunitas Creek, this lake, which is owned and operated by the Marin Municipal Water District (MMWD), initially served as a source of drinking water for the city of San Rafael.

An ever-increasing south county population and its thirsty demands have led to five additional water storing reservoirs over the past 80 years. The MMWD currently oversees 26,000 acres of the Tamalpais watershed, which now includes Bon Tempe, Alpine, Kent, Nicasio and Phoenix lakes. Originally carved for district travel and fire fighting, a network of dirt roadways and paths intricately link all of these except Nicasio. Besides fishing, hiking, picnicking, horseback riding and mountain biking are some of the recreational options on this public corporation property, which has over 150 miles of inter-connecting trails.

Sometime in the early 1920s the MMWD entered into an agreement with the Department of Fish and Game (DFG), which commenced an annual stocking program. Taking place only during the winter months when water conditions were suitable, this program was expanded to include most neighboring MMWD lakes as they were constructed.

Probably due to its well-maintained access and large numbers of stocked trout per its small size, Lagunitas proved to be overwhelmingly popular, especially for young children and senior citizens. Content to soak bait and enjoy the placid, solitude-filled woodlands, most visitors were only a few minutes away from the comforts of home. A fresh trout dinner was often the reward for such an endeavor.

On many past occasions, my sons and I visited here to tempt the planted trout, especially during the winter months when they were both numerous and hyperactive. For us, this lake usually proved a soothing panacea for the cabin fever incurred when our favorite Sierra Nevada waters were either closed or frozen over. Rarely skunked, action always seemed imminent.

Over the past eight years, however, both the overall size and numbers of these planters seemed to steadily diminish. An increasing number of disgruntled visitors began to convey the message that the lake always seemed to be "fished out," and the few trout that were caught were puny runts in the seven- to eight-inch range. Concerned anglers loudly voiced their discontent to several conservation groups, DFG personnel and anyone else who would listen. Their general consensus was that the fishery was begging for a change.

However, their pleas did not fall on deaf ears, and wheels were eventually set in motion. In 1986 Cal Trout, working in cooperation with the MMWD, the Marin Rod and Gun Club and the DFG, initiated the Lake Lagunitas Fishery Enhancement Project, a proposal designed to revitalize the fishery by managing it as a natural water.

A few geographical factors were also made to order. It is no secret that Tamalpais, the highest peak in the County, together with the adjoining Bolinas Ridge, has a beneficial effect on local weather, often garnering up to three times the average rainfall of nearby locales. Small wonder that most streams in the area are blessed with good seasonal flows, a prime prerequisite for native salmonids. According to Dick May, president of Cal Trout, the main reason Lagunitas was chosen for enhancement was due to the presence of its three feeder streams, which dump as much as 30,000 gallons a day into the reservoir, helping to maintain a fairly constant level, especially during summer. Additionally, the surrounding forest canopy, which primarily consists of dark evergreens with a scattering of deciduous species, helps keep creek temperatures at an acceptable parameter. "While we had a lot of support to improve fishing in the area, the presence of a suitable spawning habitat turned the tables toward this lake," May informed. "What we are trying to do is emulate the natural system in an urban area," he added.

The program was finally implemented during the fall of 1987 when the lake was drained, fish were netted and transported to nearby lakes, and habitat work was performed. Among the most significant works of the project was the installation of an

aerator system. This \$50,000 piece of equipment pumps oxygen near the bottom of the lake, enabling trout to live during the crucial warm temperatures of the summer when oxygen becomes depleted at these low elevation waters. (Lagunitas sits at 784 feet.)

Once December and January rains filled the reservoir, the DFG fulfilled their end of the bargain. While the lake was initially planted with Shasta strain rainbows, it has been restocked with Coleman 'bows to help solve a unique problem. In the years immediately preceding the project, a growing colony of cormorants began invading the lake at about the same time local anglers began complaining to the DFG about the small quantities of trout plants in their twice-monthly visits. Actually the DFG wasn't cutting back on numbers, but the birds were taking a real toll. On several occasions I witnessed them repeatedly dive and surface with trout after trout just after the hatchery truck departed. The colony numbered between 40 and 50, enough to do plenty of damage.

This problem appeared to continue after the DFG made its initial plant for the project, which consisted of Shasta strain rainbows, predominately in the nine- to 10-inch range. Characteristically, these fish tended to bunch up in large schools and were perfect for the fast-swimming predators, who probably wiped out most of them in the first few months. However, according to Bill Cox, a DFG fisheries biologist who was very instrumental in the project, this problem was quickly remedied with the introduction of another special rainbow—a cross between Kamloops and steelhead. "Not only were larger specimens

This hefty 15 incher fell for a dark-bodied nymph.





These nymph patterns successfully imitate the abundant *Callibaetis* mayfly present in the lake.

planted, but the Coleman strain tends to be spread out and not be so social," he said. "Especially noted for their pugnacious qualities, they spawn in the winter when feeder streams are usually swollen with runoff, making them an ideal selection for Lagunitas," he continued.

Recently small numbers of three- to four-inch trout were observed darting about in the shallows so apparently the first year of spawning was somewhat successful. In addition, most of the cormorants have

taken up residency at nearby Bon Tempe and Phoenix lakes, which are currently heavily planted with catchables.

While the jury is still out, it appears at first glance that the project has succeeded. While people used to the ways of planted trout find it frustrating because the trout don't come easily, my sons and I have managed to uncover some of the mysteries of this fishery. Since the trout can be scattered anywhere, locating them is sometimes a problem. First-time anglers should be aware that the MMWD has a strict policy against any water contact activities in any of their reservoirs. Since no boating, swimming or wading is allowed, anglers are totally committed to a shoreline approach at Lagunitas.

Basically relying on the information I stockpiled while fishing the lake over the previous years, I attacked the lake from a structural point of view, pinpointing the old creek channels, which were usually good locales. When the lake was drained, I was able to make accurate and detailed revisions while updating its underwater layout.

There are sharp dropoffs all along the three main channels. I try to work the

points of land jutting out into the lakes because these dropoffs follow the contour of the shoreline. My favorite trick is retrieving lures or flies parallel to the shoreline instead of perpendicular. On a recent trip, I was working a rainbow-finished Needlefish spoon along a favorite ledge, which descends sharply about six feet off shore. I watched a V-wake zero in on my lure and hit it a mere four feet from the water's edge. The silvery rocket became airborne and nearly beached itself in the shallows! On three separate occasions I have watched from above while one of my sons worked this shelf and have actually observed trout stalking the lure!

I have also found trout within 50-70 feet of the inlet shallows where some large holes have been gouged out by incoming water. By casting into the moving water, one can actually tumble their offering into these pockets, enhancing the chance of a hookup.

There are some locales near the shallows which are weed infested. I have found this underwater growth to be loaded with aquatic life and consistently observe some large trout working near or in them. On one bright February morning I noticed a nice trout rising along the edge of the Middle Fork inlet. Crawling a little closer, I presented my offering a short distance ahead of it, and, before I was able to twitch it twice, the fly was unceremoniously engulfed. Keeping the battler from running into the vegetation was an admirable task on light tippet, but soon the 15 incher was doing a baleful stare at the black nymph sticking in its lip while recovering in my palm. Mint-silver sides displayed a pinkish-hued lateral line as the rainbow appeared healthy—a solid tribute to the plan's success.

To fish the lake effectively, one will find an assortment of flies and lures

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beneficial. Since *Callibaetis* mayflies are the most common insect form in the drainage, imitations of their life stages are good choices. While Adams and Thorax *Callibaetis* in size 14-16 are popular dry selections, I have found nymph stages best imitated by size 12-16 Pheasant Tail, Zug Bug or olive A.P. patterns. My personal favorites, however, are dark leech or scud imitations worked over or along the edge of weedbeds.

A No. 4 fly rod with matching fly line is best for the existing conditions, with light leaders most sporting.

Care should be taken when casting due to the low, overhanging trees and brush in some spots, which can make lengthy fly casting an effort in futility. The inlet areas and the dam offer some unobstructed fly options.

While a selection of various lures and spinners is necessary, the spin fisherman should be aware that tiny mosquito fish provide excellent forage without impacting the trout. For this reason, I favor small jointed plugs in silver or rainbow finish or tiny crappie-sized white or yellow jigs. I especially enjoy working these small lures along the abundant weedbeds wherever I notice the presence of these tiny baitfish. Be prepared for bass-like surface explosions! However, the plugs must be adapted with single, barbless hooks to be legal.

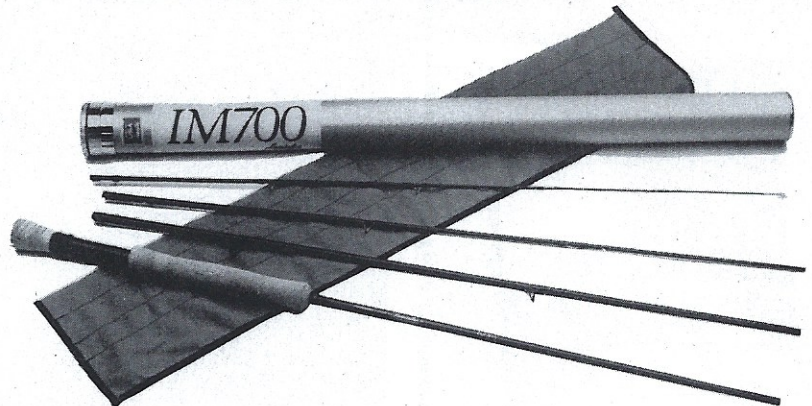
The spin fisherman will probably find four-pound line to be the ideal monofilament choice for this situation.

A regular visitor here, I have never managed to locate more than two or three trout at any one time. Apparently the Coleman strain is living up to its potential in terms of both fighting spirit and non-scholastic traits. Thanks to the Natural Trout Management concept promoted by Cal trout whereby trout habitat is protected or restored, fish reproduction is heightened and the impact on the trout population minimized, Lagunitas appears on its way to a model urban fishery. Though extremely challenging to fish, more and more Marinites are singing its praises as they realize there aren't too many metro areas that offer this type of quality in virtual solitude yet only minutes away from bustling shops and restaurants.

To reach Lagunitas from Fairfax, take a left turn on Broadway, another left on Cascade and yet another left at the sign to the lake. Car entry requires a \$3.00 fee. The gates open at 8:00 a.m. and close at sunset. Foot entry is free, but no overnight camping is allowed.

For more information on the fishery contact Western Sport (415) 454-4177, Fly Fishing Outfitters (415) 781-3474, or Cal Trout (415) 392-8887. □

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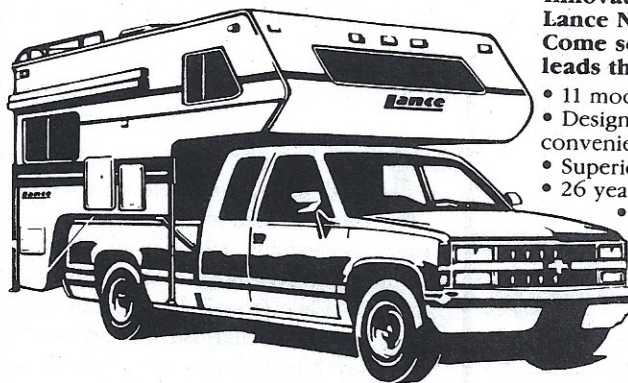


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