

# Truckee Area Trout

*Home to seven trout species, this locale offers far brighter payoffs than nearby gambling houses.*

By Don Vachini

**E**VEN THOUGH FLOWS were low, the pleasant gurgle of rapidly moving water soothed my senses as it echoed through the pine-studded canyon. From my perch on a streamside rock, I watched the gangly teenager, firmly braced against the current, carefully toss his weighted nymph into a quiet swirl behind a partially exposed boulder. On the subsequent drift, the strike indicator vanished and his flyrod was instantly transformed into a vibrating parabolic arc. Periodically struggling to regain balance on the slippery, rock-strewn bottom, he continued an ear to ear grin as he calmly led a frisky, 12-inch rainbow to net.

Before morning shadows were chased from the riverbed on this particular day in late-June, my son, Jason, and I had managed to release a mixed bag of rainbows and browns ranging to 13 inches while probing a difficult-to-reach stretch of California's blue-ribbon Truckee River. Since our itinerary called for visiting the Truckee area for several days, we were trying to do justice to as many of this North Sierra's prized trout waters as possible.

Encompassing nearly a 70-mile swath of the Tahoe National Forest, this region harbors no less than seven salmonid species. While rainbows are the dominant members in the Tahoe Basin, the smorgasbord also includes brown, brook, Mackinaw, cutthroat and golden trout plus kokanee salmon. They reside in a variety of snow-fed lakes, streams, man-made impoundments and specially managed waters.

The hub of this fishery, characterized by both semi-arid, sagebrush and ponderosa pine forest, is the Truckee River. Originating from Lake Tahoe at Tahoe City, it snakes 35 plus miles in a northeasterly direction through a fairly open, evergreen-studded canyon before entering Nevada's high desert. From the border, it meanders through downtown Reno, terminating 80 miles north of here in vast Pyramid Lake.



*Backcountry enthusiasts will find exceptional golden trout fishing in the Sierra Nevada.*

According to Russ Wickwire, a fisheries biologist with the California Department of Fish and Game, the Truckee is an ideal trout stream. Forty to 70 feet wide, brush-lined and possessing an abundance of food forms, its huge boulders and rocks form innumerable holding pockets and current deterrents.

"Though several seasons of drought have temporarily tarnished its reputation, it remains a viable fishery, noted for regularly turning out fish of ample proportions," he noted.

Rainbows are the mainstay of the fishery but browns also exist in reputable numbers throughout all California sectors. Though statistics compiled by Wickwire reveal that most residents fall into the 9-12 inch range, with good numbers of 13-14 inchers as well, there is no paucity of trout up to 7 pounds either.

No doubt, Wickwire feels the excellent food base present in the river accounts for this

proportional size range. Mayflies, stoneflies and caddisflies, crayfish, sculpin, Tahoe suckers and whitefish provide the high caloric forage necessary to maintain girthy residents.

The river's most popular area is the 15-mile section from Tahoe City to Truckee, which is closely paralleled by Highway 89. With numerous forest service campgrounds gracing its banks, it is frequently visited by the planter truck. Though the normal assortment of tiny spinners cull good numbers of the newly planted trout, red salmon eggs and the new arsenal of power baits are amazingly effective.

Two-trout limits, 15-inch minimum size restrictions and artificial lures with single, barbless hooks are in effect from Trout Creek in downtown Truckee to the Boca Bridge. Since Wickwire feels this Wild Trout section is too heavily pressured, he instead suggests anglers opt for the difficult-to-reach canyon stretch below Hirshdale.

"Walk the railroad tracks to gain access then stay in the riverbed to avoid brushy tangles and difficult climbs," he informed. "The whitewater pockets between pools regularly produce in this less-visited locale."

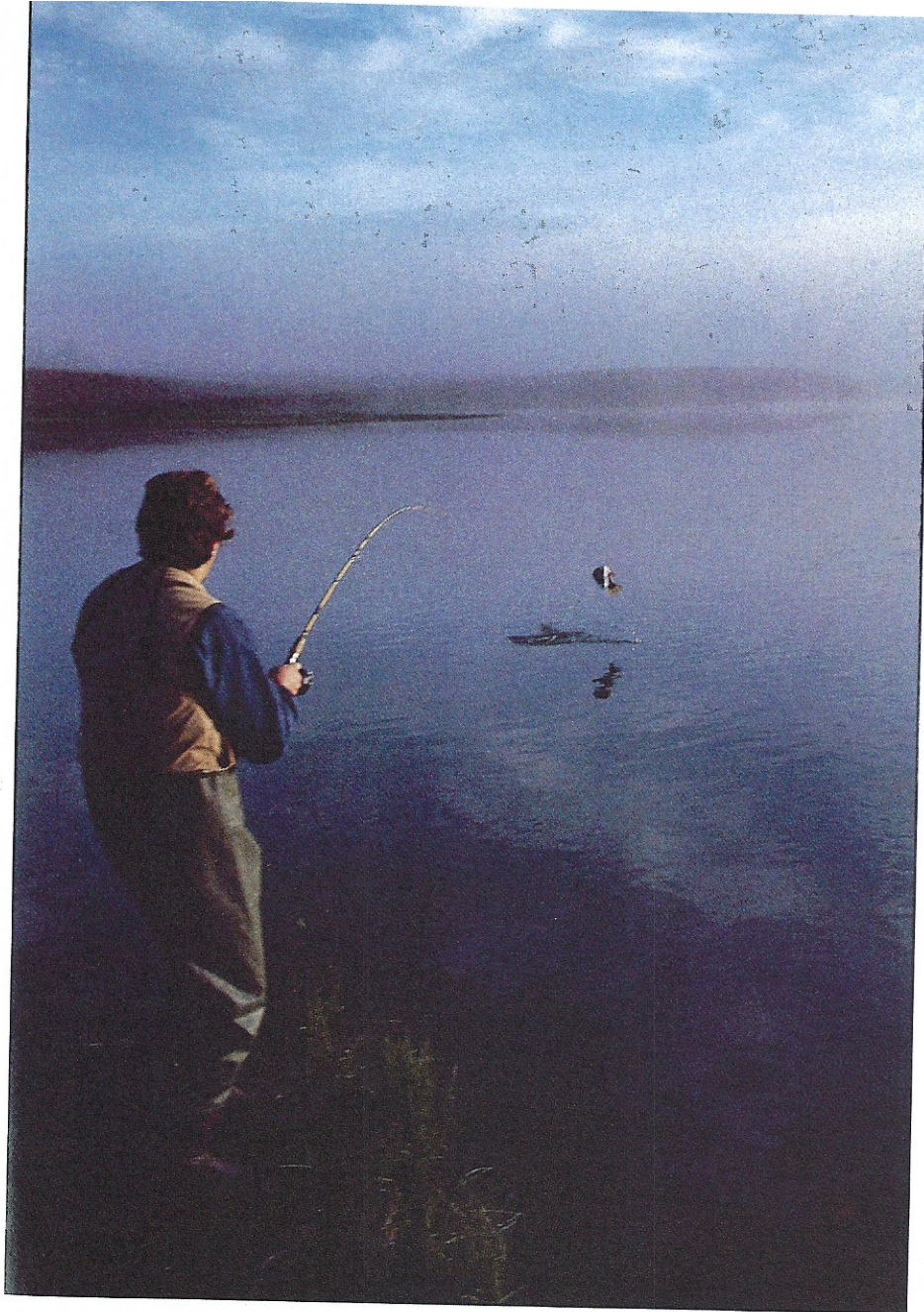
Fly anglers working meaty, size 6-8 Sculpin or Crawdad streamers along the bottom or knowledgeable spinfishermen who dredge plugs or bait through deep holes in the more inaccessible locales are often rewarded with rainbows up to 5 pounds and browns approaching 7 pounds. A 16-pound brown is the current stream record.

## TRY YOUR LUCK AT TAHOE

The figures on Lake Tahoe are staggering. A massive body of water 12 by 22 miles, this high-altitude jewel sits at an elevation of 6,229 feet, is over 1,600 feet deep and its azure water is the tenth clearest in the world. Equally popular for its shoreline casinos as it is for rainbows, browns, Mackinaw and kokanee, it has charter boats available for all species.

Downriggers, lead-core line and depths of





*Stampede Reservoir, Boca and Prosser Lakes feature superb trout angling from the bank or boat.*

100 to 300 feet are common practice for the big Macks, which commonly run from 4-12 pounds. Drifting live minnows with light line is also a deadly method, especially when they enter the shallow shoals to spawn during May-June. In fact, the current state record laker (37 pounds, 6 ounces) was taken via this technique in 1974.

A more advanced technique, which not only increases success but release rates as well, involves graphing the productive shelves where these char lie and vertical jigging for them. Once located, they seem to have an almost insatiable appetite for flashy Apex or Diamond Jigs. Dacron line with a short monofilament leader allows for a surer hook set, especially in depths over 100 feet.

The lake's only outlet forms the mighty Truckee. A visit to Fanny Bridge is a must.

Since the first 1,000 feet downstream is closed to angling, large numbers of trophy-sized rainbows and browns — many pushing 10-15 pounds — congregate below the gates. As people lean over the bridge to gawk at these leviathans below, a humorous array of posteriors is visible from a short distance (hence the label Fanny Bridge!).

### DONNER DOES IT WITH TROUT

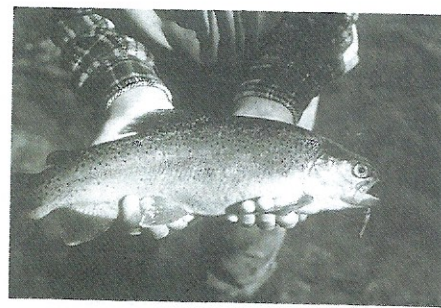
Near the city limits of Truckee sits Donner Lake and its namesake creek which contributes to the main river. Named for the ill-fated Donner Party, this 800-foot deep water is home to rainbows, browns and Mackinaw over its pea-shaped, 3 by 3½ mile dimensions. While planted 'bows supply the main fare for campground visitors, dedicated boaters dredge the 100-200 foot depths with lead-core line

for lakers up to 18 pounds. Big browns are taken late in the fall or just after ice-out by trolling large surface plugs. Six to 9-inch Rebels and Rapalas in rainbow finish, probably resembling easy-picking planters, seem to produce the best results.

Depending on releases from the lake, weekly plants of catchable rainbows help ease the heavy, camper-applied pressure on Donner Creek meandering through Donner State Park. The gouged pools by each bridge turn out some fine stringers.

### LITTLE TRUCKEE PAYS BIG DIVIDENDS

Originating from Lake Webber along Henness Pass Road, the Little Truckee River manages a decent head of steam as it flows through both Stampede and Boca Reservoirs



*The Truckee River offers trophy trout for both browns and rainbows. The trophy trout section is popular among flycasters.*

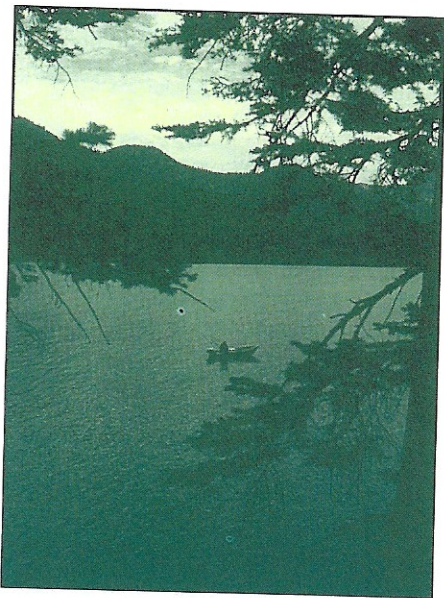
before entering the Truckee near Hirshdale. Traversing an open, flood plain above Stampede, the waters main fare are 7-12 inch stocked and native rainbows. Each season, however, several 2-3 pound browns are taken, usually in isolated, brushy stretches away from Highway 89. These portly trout seem most vulnerable in sections where the river flows are split from the main current. Nightcrawlers carefully poked along undercut banks will occasionally kick out a jackpot.

Between Stampede and Boca, it again meanders over an open, willow-choked valley, offering a prime spawning facility for Boca residents. During the early 1970's, the DFG experimented with arctic grayling for two years in this section. Though never exceeding 6-7 inches, they offered fine sport for a few seasons until costly hatchery expenses terminated the project.

### STAMPEDE FOR KOKANEE

Stampede (elevation 5,900 feet), fed by both the Little Truckee and Sagehen creek, is a fairly shallow, flooded mountain meadow, rich in aquatic nutrients. According to Wickwire, expanding kokanee populations, now firmly established here, have continued to add excitement to this water. "Their sizes and numbers have escalated rapidly the last few





*The scenic Truckee and Tahoe areas have much to offer anglers.*

years, indicating ideal habitat," he mentioned.

While most peak near 14 inches, individuals up to 4 pounds were landed last year. Kokes this size certainly threaten the current state record of 4 pounds, 13 ounces.

Utilizing fish finders and trolling flasher/worm combinations or minnow-imitating lures along the dam or across feeder channels are just the ticket for fooling the super-aggressive landlocked salmon. These highly scholastic salmonids seem to zero in on size 1-2 Needlefish in bikini, frog and rainbow patterns worked on 3-7 colors.

### BOCA, PROSSER TROUT PROSPECTS

Two other man-made water-storing impoundments north of town are noted for fine angling throughout the year, including some red-hot ice fishing in winter. Boca and Prosser (both at 5,700 feet) are heavily dependent on weekly plants and are very popular with local fishermen. Since stockers tend to cruise shoreline coves and contours, bank anglers prefer soaking nightcrawlers, worms and assorted power baits. Four-pound line and sliding sinkers seem best suited to this type of waiting game.

Sonar not only aids boaters in finding concentrations of fish but their depth as well.

### FLYFISHING AT MARTIS

Situated four miles east of Truckee via Highway 267 is Martis Lake (elevation 5,957 feet), a desolate looking body of water which is part of a special Cal Trout, Inc. management project. Initially serving as one of three state refugiums for the rare Lahontan cutthroat, it was the Golden State's pilot catch and release lake. Still operating under single, barbless

## DROUGHT WATCH FOR TAHOE BASIN

As California enters its fifth season of a persistent drought, the Truckee area winter snowpack is approximately two-thirds of normal. Anglers can expect low water conditions this summer; the main Truckee above Donner Creek might be a mere trickle come August. Below Truckee, mandatory flows from Boca will add life to the river, making the section here to the border the best bet for river waders.

If the river doesn't produce, local guide Randy Johnson suggests utilizing the stillwater fisheries. Benefiting from additional plants originally intended for the main Truckee, Boca, Stampede, Prosser and Donner Lakes look to be good bets for '91. Besides water being retained in these lakes, holdover trout approaching 1-2 pounds will sweeten the pot.

"Don't overlook the prognosis for Stampede, which seems on target for some outstanding kokanee action this year," adds Johnson, who has guided this territory for nearly a decade.

Boat launches will be available at all larger reservoirs while float tubes and hand-carried crafts will suffice on others. However, launching at Lake Tahoe could be problematic as water is expected to be well below the rim. Contact guide Mickey Daniels (916) 583-4602 for current lake status.

Pyramid conditions can be obtained by contacting the Pyramid Lake Store (702) 673-3667.

Since the snowpack is light to moderate, the backcountry should be accessible by mid-July. Johnson predicts that adventuresome anglers willing to day hike or backpack to higher elevations can expect torrid, uncrowded action.

For up to the minute information on a specific water or locale, contact either Russ Wickwire (916) 583-6824 or Johnson (916) 525-6575 or (415) 453-9831. The Mountain Tackle & Hardware store, (916) 587-4844, is another source of information.

hooks and zero limit regulations, it is currently famous for Coleman and English Ladies, two rainbow strains noted for both rapid growth and pugnacity. Some brawny browns ap-

proaching 5-6 pounds also call Martis home.

The shallow, 70-acre, flood control impoundment has predictable hatches that include damselflies, caddisflies and mayflies. Size



*Beautiful scenery, great fishing, and close proximity to Nevada's adult playgrounds add up to a great vacation experience.*



## TRUCKEE RIVER FLYFISHING TACTICS

Though a surprising number of big fish exist throughout the Truckee, they are not easily duped. According to guide Randy Johnson, it is an expertise water offering great rewards only to those who can unlock its secrets.

By utilizing his own vast entomological research and perfecting a few advanced techniques on this classic reading-mans water, he has increased payoff possibilities greatly.

"During early-season high flows, trout will choose the path of least resistance, holding behind rocks or boulders where the current is somewhat subdued," he revealed.

The ability to read water and aggressive wading are necessary skills, but Johnson feels fly penetration is the key to success. To reach this end, he uses a specialized nymphing technique, referred to as "high sticking." In an effort to get the fly deep and keep it from being whipped out of the pocket, he keeps the flyrod pointed high, which keeps most of the fly line off the water. The weighted offering is then dabbed behind boulders where it usually stays current-free and deep.

Johnson rates proper fly placement more important than long casts. By high sticking, the offering is put close to the trout's mouth and it expends little energy pursuing the tidbit as it drifts by.

Since most early-season strikes are sluggish, he sets the hook at any hesitation. "Eyeball the strike indicator and keep as much tension on the leader as possible," he tipped. Johnson favors a 7-8 foot flyrod with floating flyline and a strike indicator just past the leader knot. A few split shot pinched on a few feet above the nymph completes the rigging.

Johnson has identified 10 different genders of mayflies in addition to stoneflies and caddisflies. Although size 10-14 Adams, Hare's Ear and Caddis patterns in tan to green hues provide suitable imitations, he uses a selection of self-designed nymph and streamer patterns for early season success. Johnson's Maribou All Purpose Streamer (size 10-14) and Johnson's Snork-Tailed Streamer (size 6-10) are his productive standbys. None of his flies are weighted.

As a conservation measure, Johnson recommends releasing wild trout on any section of the river.

14-18 Adams, Cahill and Quill Gordon patterns in light to olive shades provide good imitations. Black, brown and white Wooly Worms, Nymph and brown Leech patterns, twitched deep along the inlet channel have worked well for me.

Belly boats are very handy early in the season but a small pram is best late when the prodigious weed growth becomes an ally of the trout.

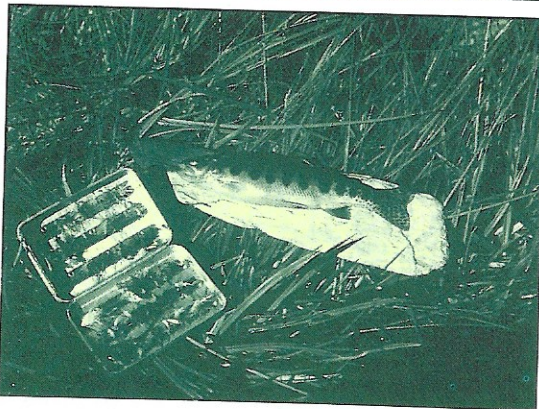
### CUTTHROAT AT PYRAMID

You're best bet for cutthroat remains Pyramid Lake, a vast, highly alkaline, desert sea and historic home to the threatened Lahontan subspecies, referred to as "salmon-trout" in an 1844 account in explorer John C. Fremont's journal.

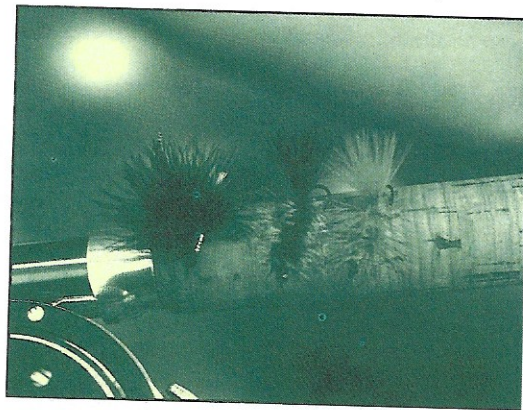
Both fly and spin anglers will need lengthy casts under cold, windy conditions to effectively reach the sandy dropoffs where 16-24 inch gargantuans regularly cruise. While green, black and purple Wooly Worms or Wooly Buggers combined with sinking lines are fly-tosser favorites, trolled Flatfish, Kwikfish or Tor-P-Dos in greenish tints work well on this fast-growing, highly gullible trout.

### WILDERNESS TRIPS WORTH THE HIKE

For small but feisty brook trout, Wickwire feels the vast array of scenic lakes located in the popular Desolation Wilderness can't be



Golden trout fishing is prime in late summer and early fall. Popular fly patterns for Tahoe Basin trout include leech and Wooly Worm patterns



was still rimmed in snow and dimpled by a plethora of concentric rings. The hookup came seconds after my tan caddis riffled the surface. Gingerly coaxed into the shallows, the 7-incher Xashed iridescent blends of cadmium, lemon yellow and Xaming orange, leaving little doubt as to golden trout status and making the difficult trek to reach it worthwhile!

While California's gaudy state fish can be taken on worms, salmon eggs and a variety of tiny spoons and spinners, fly tackle is the most sporting. My personal favorites include minuscule Black Ant, Pheasant Tail and Caddis in light to green shades and presented on two-pound tippet.

### OTHER TAHOE BASIN BETS

Additional noteworthy waters include tiny Milton Reservoir, a well-kept secret for trophy browns, and brush-laden Alder, Prosser and Sage Hen Creeks, challenging tributaries for creek-freaks willing to play a hunch for pan-size 'bows, browns or brookies.

While some specialized tackle is required for certain species (Mackinaw and kokanee), area waters are suitable for both spin and fly tackle. Matched with 4-6 pound line, light to ultra-light rods and reels are both sporting and effective.

Though best times to visit the area will vary,

beat. "The best action will usually occur early in the season, shortly after ice out," he confided.

Two of my sons and I, backpacking near the headwaters of Meeks Creek, enjoyed virtually non-stop action on a past June trip. The ravenous, pan-sized square-tails of Hidden and Shadow Lakes vehemently hit nearly every size 14 Mosquito, Renegade or Black Gnat sent their way.

However, the vast wilderness sitting adjacent to Lake Tahoe's west shore offers other surprises too, as we found out the following morning. Strapping on daypacks, we scrambled off-trail to ascend a demanding, talus ridgeline. Our Phipps Lake destination

the months of June/July usually offer the best odds for most species.

Indeed, anglers are confronted with a myriad of choices ranging from pan-size to trophy. Depending on preference of effort, one can soak a nightcrawler while relaxing on a lakeshore, dab weighted nymphs while wading for wily browns or 'bows, troll in pursuit of a state-record kokanee, vie for the legendary salmon-trout or climb toward the clouds in pursuit of the kaleidoscopic golden. Though thousands travel through Truckee daily, most are intent on beating the odds in Reno 33 miles east. To me, however, the Truckee area is the real jackpot, offering far brighter payoffs than nearby casinos!