

No Drought of Trout

While much of the state suffers under a five-year drought, the tailwater fishery of Putah Creek has both good water flows and lots of trout.

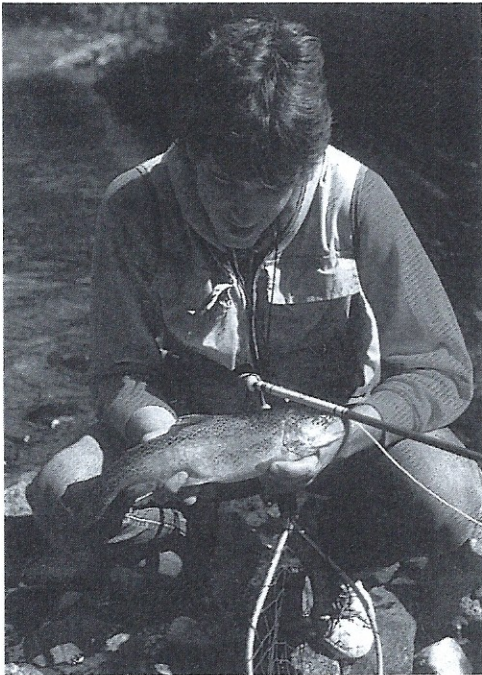
By Don Vachini

A DISCOURAGING STATISTIC from the National Weather Service reveals that the mountains of north central California have received less than 35 percent

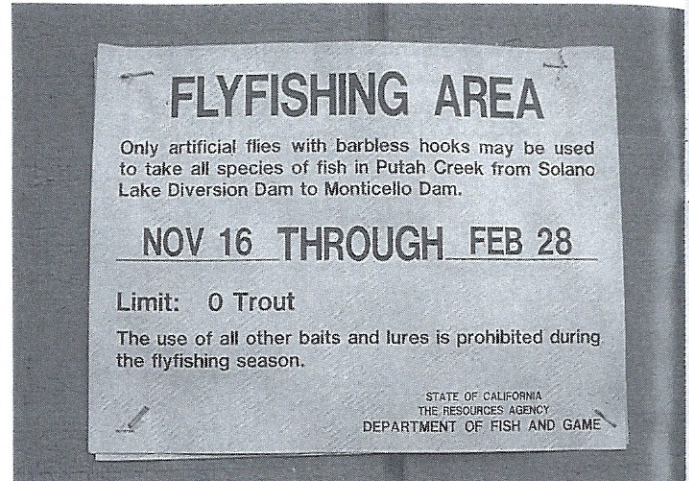
of their normal precipitation over the past five seasons. Unlike the snow-fed Sierra Nevada and Cascade range waters several hours to the east and north, the Bay Area's Coastal Mountains are totally sustained by rainfall. Thus, as high pressure systems dominate winter weather, warding off storm after storm, these low elevation foothills pay the price.

Frightfully low flows, warm water temperatures, limited or lack of structure and stressed trout are just some of the discouraging drought conditions plaguing this locale, particularly for stream anglers. Indeed, a pair of my "secret spot" North Bay creeks have all but dried up and vanished while another is threatened with pollution. However, amid this arid scenario, a little known drought resistant water persists, acting as my "ace in the hole."

On an mild day in early January this year, my oldest son, Chris and I visited an area a dozen miles north of Vacaville. As we stepped out of our car, the lack of rainfall was evident by the parched hills on either side of us. Yet, we were greeted by the gurgle of a healthy flow of water rushing below a canopy of brambles, dormant willows, and alders. Pushing our way through the brush, we soon were on Putah Creek. Stepping into the frigid, silty-green waters, our spirits were rejuvenated not just by the mere abundance of this drought-time water but by its overall reputation for yielding hefty trout. Historically, this stream heads in the Cobb Mountain area near Middletown, gathering muscle from several Lake and Napa County tributaries as it flows first in an easterly direction, then bends south near Devil's Head Peak. Prior to 1956, it cut freely through a steep canyon before meandering into the open Central Valley to its ultimate confluence with the Sacramento River just south of the State Capitol. In a normal season, the creek ran high and cold during late winter rains, low and warm by early fall. However, the construction of Monticello Dam in 1957 created sprawling



Chris Vachini, the author's son, holds a nice rainbow caught from Putah Creek during the winter fly-only season when the water flows are low and the stream is wadeable.

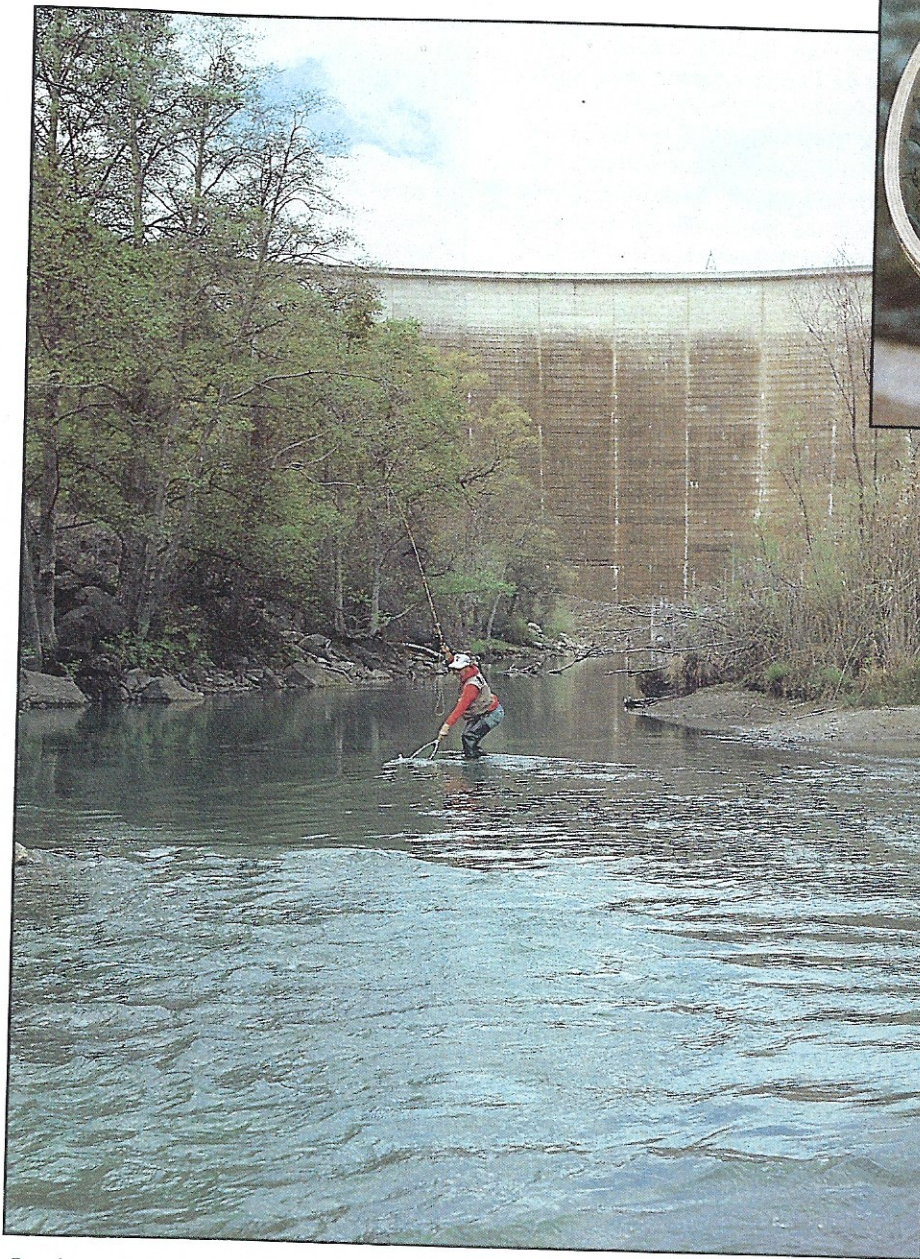


A sign on Putah Creek notifies anglers of the special winter flyfishing-only season on this rich stream.

Lake Berryessa and forever changed this roller coaster trait.

While the isolated upper sections above the lake are still subject to the whims of nature, the three-mile tailwater section below has been reborn with water intended for irrigation purposes. In a gently-widening canyon laden with oak and bay woodlands, this wonderfully diverse stream snakes beneath thickly-woven willows and blackberry growth which cover its many rapids, pools and pockets. Beyond this section, the creek broadens and slows a bit. The remaining few miles downstream to a diversion dam is referred to as Solano Lake, whose stores help quench area agricultural needs. Open to angling all year, the creek is heavily planted with rainbow catchables by the Department of Fish and Game (DFG) from March 1 through mid-November. Good numbers of anglers exhibiting varying skills while soaking salmon eggs, Power Baits, and worms descend on the creek, especially the easier to reach locations where the trout are stocked. However, during the "winter season," the creek is governed by special fly fishing only regulations, which translates to flies with barbless hooks and a zero limit. It is during this

During the 'winter season,' the creek is governed by special fly fishing only regulations, which translates to flies with barbless hooks and a zero limit. It is during this period that I become a frequent visitor, since fishing pressure diminishes greatly.



This is a typical holdover Putah Creek rainbow trout. The Department of Fish and Game stocks the creek heavily and many of the trout avoid angler's hooks and adapt to feeding on the natural forage in the river, often growing into the 15 to 18-inch class.

Putah Creek flows from Berryessa Lake and the tailwater fishery has good flows all year. In the water just below the dam, there are lots of small trout, but the brush-covered stream below holds some bigger fish.

BIG BROWNS LURK IN PUTAH

Though managing to keep a low profile, a tiny population of sizeable brown trout inhabit Putah Creek. Introduced by the DFG shortly after steady flows were established nearly three decades ago, they have found conditions to their liking.

According to Jim Ryan, a fisheries biologist with the DFG Region Two office, the bulk of these hardy trout will commonly range up to four pounds.

"Though extremely wary, specimens up to eight pounds have been discovered in stream census surveys," said Ryan.

Ryan explains that threadfin shad, an extremely prodigious Berryessa baitfish, commonly get washed down from the lake and are easy prey for the big browns. Following their cannibalistic tendencies, they probably exploit rainbow and brown fry plus an occasional planter as well.

Though most locals are tight-lipped about how to fool the big browns, winter anglers can take advantage of the brown's propensity for fishy meals by working silvery, size six to eight streamers along undercut banks or near the base of large boulders. A high-density, sinking line is necessary for this maneuver, however. During the spring and summer seasons whole nightcrawlers, allowed to settle on the bottom of deep pools or along undercut banks will occasionally entice a response. Again, a good deal of weight is needed to keep the bait down. Working diving plugs in hopes of imitating baitfish could also prove interesting.

Since they are fall spawners, late-October and early-November are prime times to try for them.

period that I become a frequent visitor, since fishing pressure diminishes greatly.

Roughly a mile below the dam, Chris and I entered the water and began casting among a series of stepladder pools and rapids. After an hour and a half of setting the hook into roots, snagging underneath rocks, and fishing through blank water, I felt a gentle tug. After setting the hook, I scrambled to battle stations. It was difficult to visualize the drought while fighting a hyper-active, 14-inch rainbow.

Before we emerged from the stream two hours later, we had each released a pair of sleek, silvery bows, Chris taking the largest at just over 15 inches. Exhibiting signs of a healthy stream existence, all were vividly colored and of firm girth.

Although a small population of hefty browns reside here, holdover and planted rain-

bows are the main fare. According to Jim Ryan, a fisheries biologist with the Department of Fish and Game's Region Two office, several types of rainbows exist in Putah Creek, highlighted by the popular Coleman strain.

"A cross between Kamloops and steelhead, they are most noted for their fighting qualities," said Ryan.

Benefiting from near optimum conditions, residents here fall into the 12 to 15-inch range, with plenty of fish up to four pounds. Thanks to releases funneled deep from the bowels of Berryessa, cold water is available year 'round. "Water temperatures in the creek rarely climb above 50 degrees, and there are no appreciable fluctuations from year to year," said Ryan.

These nutrient-rich waters also provide a healthy food base which includes caddis, mayflies, and stoneflies. While there is not much

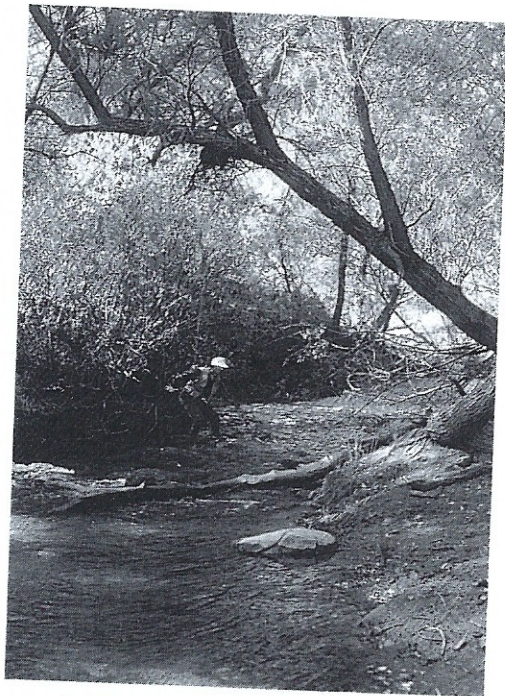
visible sign of hatches during the winter, the nymphal stages of these insects are abundant.

Besides food and water, Ryan feels it is the tangled stands of bankside trees and brambles along with their exposed root systems that provide prime cover for the trout and account for angler frustrations. While some spawning takes place, most winter trout are holdover planters, some surviving more than one season. "The high survival rate of the planters is largely attributed to the brushy nature of this stream," said Ryan.

While flicking short casts into the open riffles immediately below the dam will account for many seven to 10 inches, anglers opting to pursue the bigger fish will find Putah extremely challenging since they will need to probe the multitude of brush piles and root-hewn pools where the bigger trout take sanctuary.

Though only 30 to 40 feet wide in most spots, dense thickets along most sections makes wading practically mandatory. While summer flows often approach 400 cubic feet per second, winter releases are cut back considerably, permitting in-creek wading. Due to the icy water temperatures, neoprene waders are a good bet, whether immersed waist deep in a pool or just moving from one locale to another through ankle deep riffles.

Since Putah Creek trout eat mostly nymphs, working imitations of this aquatic phase is a most successful tactic. Basic techniques for this ploy include getting the fly down quickly and keeping it there, using the dead drift method, and reacting quickly to strikes.



A short fly rod and the ability to fish brushy, pocket water in the stream will allow you to catch more than your share of fish. Many anglers get discouraged by the tangles.

Reading water is also a must to properly present a fly. I search for seams along current lines, pockets behind submerged boulders and drop offs. Trout will hold in the slack waters adjacent to the feeding lanes where they can easily pick up a nymph. While working these edges, I dab the nymph into the faster water and then swing it downstream into the pool. Twitching the nymph up and down then letting it sit and repeating the sequence throughout the retrieve accounts for many of my trout. They will usually take on the up-swing motion of the offering.

I find a short line worked from a wading position enables me to control drift placement and helps eliminate cross current drag. On most nymphing situations, I try to place the fly in a quartering position, then bring it across and downstream before severe drag takes place. Since overhanging growth sometimes proves annoying, roll casts enable me to keep brushy encounters to a minimum. When in tight quarters, I rarely make a full cast, instead opting to position the fly with more of a flip. Only the leader with one to two feet of fly line is out the tip.

Feeding line out of the rod is another trick which helps me prolong a presentation. One of my favorite and most challenging Putah pools, located at about the creek's midpoint, terminates underneath dense, overhanging brush. Reaching across the fast moving chute, I place my nymph on the opposite edge of the current using a high stick maneuver. First gradually lowering, then pointing the rod, I rapidly fed more line out the tip, allowing the leader to be sucked under the willow tangle hovering no more than a foot above the eddy.

On the January trip, the take was both instantaneous and vigorous. Though I have dredged three nice trout, the largest nearly 18 inches, from this well-guarded lie over the past several years, it is the degree of difficulty that really stirs my juices.

My favorite Putah Creek nymph rod is a seven-and-a-half footer with six or seven-weight line potential. This setup not only allows me to manipulate line across tricky currents but to strike quickly as well. I favor a floating line matched with a medium-length leader for drag free drifts. Since the water always has a consistent murky-green tint, tippet size is not a factor. My leaders are usually test out at 10 or 12 pounds. Since Putah Creek trout don't hit the nymph hard, a strike indicator is very helpful.

I favor small to medium-sized nymphs in sizes 10 to 14. While Gold Ribbed Hare's Ear, Olive Caddis Larva, Caddis Pupa and other caddis replicas in varying hues of tan through dark brown are effective for me, Brassies, Bird's Nests, A.P. and Pheasant Tail nymphs plus black or brown Woolly Worms and Woolly Buggers also seem to be consistent producers. However, I have found that it is not so much

HOW TO GET THERE

Located in the northwest corner of Solano County, Putah Creek's trout-rich waters are approximately an hour's drive from both metropolitan Sacramento to the east and San Francisco to the south.

From the state capitol, proceed west along Highway 80. Take Highway 113 north to Winters and then follow Highway 128 to the creek.

From San Francisco, follow Highway 80 east past Fairfield. Take the Lagoon Valley/Cherry Glen exit, following the latter north 12 miles to intersect with Highway 128.

Highway 128 parallels the whole length of the creek. Numerous paved turnouts are present and virtually the whole creek is open to public access, although a small, private campground is located near the dam.

Day use facilities and 50 campsites are available at Solano Lake Park, which is maintained by the Solano County Regional Parks Department. Overnight stays in the campground run \$10 per night Monday-Thursday and \$12 Friday-Sunday. Sites are available on a first come-first served basis. For more information, contact the campground headquarters at (916) 795-2990.

Up to the minute angling information can also be obtained from the Pardehsa Store (916) 795-3850.

the pattern or color but how effectively it is presented.

Though subject to change, I have found the best times to ply the creek are either late November or early December just after flows are diminished, or right after rains have slightly warmed the water. Being winter spawners, the Coleman rainbows will become a bit more active and tend to congregate near the incoming rivulets.

On a drizzly morning before the current drought, I watched Chris illicit a strike by dragging a size eight minnow imitation across the mouth of a rain-swollen feeder. Seemingly in several places at once, the 16-inch accomplished a series of cartwheeling aerobatics, exhibiting the steelhead tendencies within its genes.

Drought or not, I visit this Bay area creek often during the winter because it provides an opportunity to subdue cabin fever. Though light angling pressure and the chance for trophy trout make it desirable, I find it a most appealing and soothing choice because it always has water.

