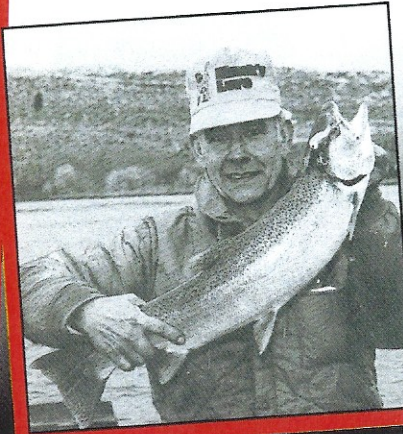


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Kirkwood Trout

This popular wintertime locale houses no less than six trout species within a five mile radius

Don Vachini



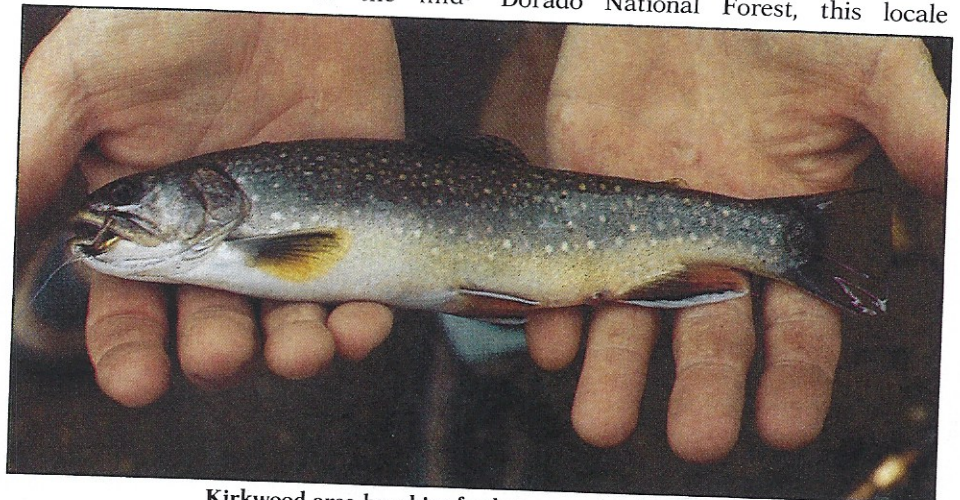
The gaudy golden trout is found in a pair of backcountry lakes.

With nimbus clouds steadily enveloping 7,900-foot Carson Spur, the lake simultaneously calmed into glassoff. As a few sporadic drops drew concentric circles on the surface, my daughter's rod tip began another telltale dance. Setting the hook not only resulted in an arced rod but an ear-to-ear grin as she skillfully worked the pan-sized trout toward shore. Moments after releasing the silvery 10-inch rainbow, the heavens grumbled with claps of thunder and sheets of rain started falling on the far side of the lake. Hastily scrambling the hundred or so feet to our tent, we waited in campers' comfort as the mid-

afternoon shower beat a rhythmic staccato on our rainfly.

My nine-year-old daughter, Angela, and I were camped at California's Kirkwood Lake in late June, 1990. We planned on using this campground, which is located a short distance from the Kirkwood Meadows Ski Resort, as our base for a few days, while sampling some of this area's famed trout fishing.

Sitting roughly 30 miles south of Lake Tahoe, this 10-mile swath of the Sierra Nevada Mountains is home to over 18 lakes and nearly 30 miles of creeks and rivers. Sitting amid mixed conifers and granitic vistas of the El Dorado National Forest, this locale



Kirkwood area brookies feed ravenously after ice out.



The vast selection of waters is suited to both fly and spin anglers.

river entered a light forest canopy and several large rocks diverted the main current. Drifting an Elk Hair Caddis over a lengthy shape languidly finning in a shaded pool proved the payoff combination, and, after 10 minutes of unspectacular action, I turned the tide of battle. While its flaming orange slash marks identified it, the size of its bronzed, lightly spotted body really amazed me. Reviving itself in the shallows, the 22-inch leviathan brought explorer John C. Fremont's account of this fish to mind. In his 1844 journal excerpts, he described them as "...generally two to four feet in length" and labeled them "salmon-trout." This monster gasping at my feet certainly lent credence to that description!

After watching Angela release a brace of hatchery rainbows dredged from a deep hole, we drove the paved 15-mile road to the Blue Lakes. Surrounded by a thick conifer forest and, beyond, stark granitic peaks, some over 10,000 feet, these four waters are classic High Sierra lakes. Ancient rock bowls carved by glacial action, they are filled each year by snowmelt and are usually near brim-full. Three of the lakes, Upper and Lower Blue plus Twin, are loaded with planted rainbows. Catching enough for a fry is as simple as towing a

(Continued on page 63)

houses no less than six trout species in a combination of man-made impoundments, backcountry lakes and snow-fed streams. West slope waters drain into the South Fork American River, itself a Sacramento River tributary, while east slope waters add flow to the West Carson River, which helps quench Nevada's parched high desert thirst.

With over four days allotted to fish, we entered into a low-key plot to try for as many of the half-dozen species as the area had to offer. Following Hwy. 88 over Carson Pass, we dropped into Hope Valley to test the West Fork Carson River in the pristine meadows section near the junction with Highway 89. Though heavily stocked with rainbows, rumor had it that the Department of Fish and Game (DFG) had planted approximately 50 surplus broodstock Lahontan cutthroat a few days prior to our visit.

Before the coming of the white man, *Salmo clarki Henshawi* was the sole trout inhabitant in the entire Lahontan Basin, which included the Truckee, Walker and Carson River drainages. Lahontan cutthroat were noted for their extraordinary size. Overharvesting, dams which cut off spawning access, and the introduction of non-native species drove them to the brink of extinction by the early 1940s. Saved from this fate by refugioriums such as nearby Heenan Lake, they are nevertheless present today in less than five percent of their historic range.

Remembering this subspecies' propensity to seek slower flows, I meandered downstream to where the

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KIRKWOOD TROUT

(Continued from page 77)

nightcrawler behind a set of flashers or soaking a variety of scented Power Baits along the shore. A hike to nearby Meadow Lake not only offered some aesthetic views of Faith Valley but native rainbows and brookies.

Following the road to its termination, we visited Summit and Tamarack lakes, where we enjoyed a sack lunch and a startling vista of Raymond Peak. Raymond Lake, a hike in, is also reputed to hold golden trout.

Driving past Kirkwood Meadows on our way back to camp, I noticed rises on tiny, willow-lined Kirkwood Creek where it flows briefly near the roadway. Appealing to the creek freak in me, its small flow drew me like a magnet. Flicking a size 14 Mosquito along undercut banks and below low-lying branches tempted a pair of ravenous, six-inch brookies, their olive vermiculations and white-edged fins notable features in the cold, clean flows.

We spent the remainder of the afternoon soaking bait at 20-acre Kirkwood Lake, a natural, springfed water popular with swimmers, canoers and anglers alike. The DFG stocks it with hefty rainbows, and Angela enjoyed their consistent action for over an hour before a rapidly developing thunderstorm chased us off the lake. Power Bait dunked along a visible dropoff, in combination with two-pound line and sliding sinker, proved just the ticket for the always-hungry stockers.

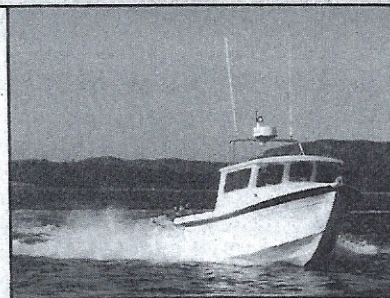
Whenever we were in camp, I could usually find Angela contentedly plying this section, often with a lot of success. On one memorable occasion, while peeking from a short distance, I watched her hook and release three trout in succession. However, noting the care she exhibited freeing the trout made my chest swell with pride, for catch and release had finally taken hold with her!

Originally called Summit Lake during the 1850s, then progressively Clear Lake and Twin Lake up until 1921 when a P. G. and E. dam took away its double feature, this water was renamed Caples Lake in 1970 honoring James Caples, who operated a way station here during pioneer times. Located adjacent to Hwy. 88 a short distance below Carson Pass, this 604-acre, man-made impoundment, which rests at 7,800 feet elevation, was our following day's choice. Though noted for large populations of rainbows, browns are also quite common, and, to a lesser degree, mackinaw and brook trout.

With rented boat and necessary information from Bruce "Bruno" Huff, a guide from Caples Lake Resort, we criss-

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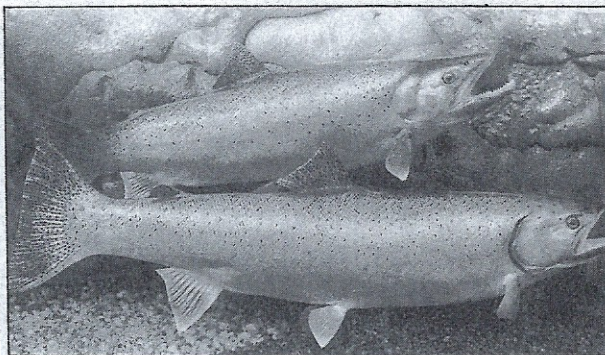
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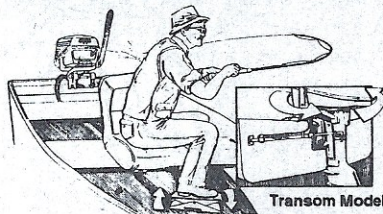
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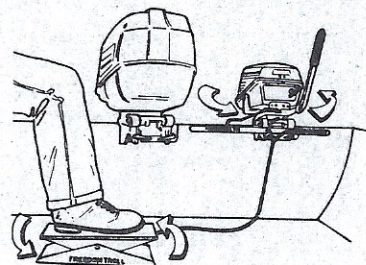
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crossed several recent hotspots while towing chrome flasher blades with orange beads at various depths. Usually highly productive bikini, frog and fluorescent Needlefish only accounted for two small rainbows in nearly two hours' time, so we opted for a change in tactics.

Drifting near a group of exposed rocks well offshore, I hit paydirt almost immediately. Borrowing Angela's ultralight outfit, I tied on a two-inch silvery plug and began casting among the rocks. Letting the lure sink deep and retrieving in jerky patterns brought several vicious strikes. Within a span of 45 minutes we released five nice planters up to 13 inches.

Back at the dock, I questioned Huff about the lake's elusive mackinaw. "Though macks are present here," he admitted, "they are more of an incidental catch to those after larger 'bows and browns."

He was quick to point out that anglers should enlist the services of a guide for this tricky endeavor. According to him, the big forktails, which range up

to five pounds, are present in fair numbers but hold out in the deepest parts of the lake, making them hard to come by. "This usually necessitates special tackle and techniques to reach the 120-150-foot-deep flooded creek channels where they consistently hang out," he informed.

While luminescent Flatfish are Huff's favorite, he has also had success using downriggers with Rebels and Rapalas worked through the old creek channel near the dam. Besides dredging the depths, he suggested trolling along the dropoffs to deeper water early and late in the day. "Some of the wiser macks are accustomed to gobbling up easy-pickin' planters as they swim near this structure during the summer."

Next morning, we awoke early and drove to a pullout at Carson Pass. A brisk hour's walk along maintained trail plus a 15-minute cross-country scramble brought us to a sparkling gem tucked right up against the snow-laden Sierra Nevada Crest. Opting for the steep, rocky side of the lake, we began testing the azure water with tiny gold spinners.

The hearty strike set the early morning water on fire as startling arrays of vermillion, lemon yellow and flaming orange tipped off the scrappy seven-incher's identity. Wriggling in the shallows, it was easy to see why *Salmo aqua-bonita* rightfully translates to "pretty in the water." Though it proved to be our only golden of the day, it was well worth the effort to reach it.

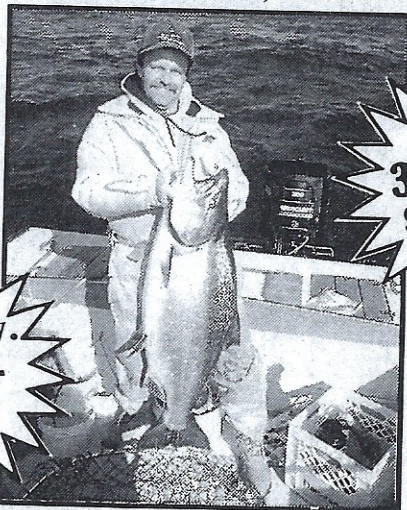
Tiredly trudging back to our car amid harsh taunts from a bevy of Clarke's Nutcrackers, we capped off the day with a late afternoon swim and roaring evening campfire. While attempting to identify constellations and reminiscing about the day's successful backcountry venture, we eased into our sleeping bags, tired muscles indicating we would sleep like logs.

While browns exist in fair numbers in many area waters, we had absolutely no sight of one on this trip. However, on a trip a few years back, I tangled with a dandy where an inlet creek briskly tumbles into Caples Lake. While retrieving a four-inch brown Rapala among the submerged boulders where previous heavy flows had gouged out a deep channel, I noticed small baitfish scattering in panic and hugging the rocky contours. Directing my next cast in the direction the minnows were facing proved to be the right catalyst. Opening a huge maw as it bolted from the depths, the near four-pounder engulfed my lure with gusto and then indignantly displayed rage at the lure sticking its lip. In the clear waters, I watched it repeatedly ram a rock with my lure in an attempt to either punish it or remove it from its jaw! Moments after locating sharp corner of granite, it not only left me with limp line but spirits as well!

Gazing at a map of the vicinity, the variety of waters becomes apparent. Besides Caples, Kirkwood, the Blue Lakes and the West Carson River, other drive-to waters include Silver, Red and tiny Burnside Lakes, while Margaret, Woods, Fourth of July, Raymond, Winnemucca and Frog lakes plus Hot Springs and Pleasant Valley creeks require short walks to sample their wares. Still other offerings are available to those who really like to get away from it all. The Mokelumne Wilderness, available via several Kirkwood trailheads, beckons those who wish to sample backcountry rainbows, brooks or goldens. For an extended stay, a free wilderness permit is necessary. The tough hike to Meiss meadows, which drains into the Lake Tahoe Basin, offers another scenic option.

The vast selection of water and trout types is suited for both spin and fly angling. With a little research and planning, one can suit their particular type of

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action. According to Huff, fly hatches occur regularly, so anglers can't go wrong with size 12-14 Caddis and Hare's Ear nymph patterns in light to olive shades, or dry Adams, Mosquitoes and Irresistibles. Spin anglers are faced with a variety of choices, including the reliable Panther Martin and Rooster Tail spinners as well as small Rebel or Rapala plugs. "The spinners should range from white to orange on the color scale, while plugs should be either brown or rainbow finish," Huff informs.

Although red salmon eggs, worms and nightcrawlers are effective, the vast arsenal of scented Power Baits is especially deadly on the planted trout.

While late-spring on through summer are prime times to sample roadside waters, a mid to late June timeline best suits the backcountry lakes. Alpine residents are usually ravenous just after ice out.

Besides angling, other pleasurable side trips are available. Numerous and well-maintained trails offer hikers short or circuitous routes to area peaks and vistas. Caples Falls, located a mile or so downstream from Caples Lake, is a pleasant change of pace. The nearby town of Markleeville not only houses an historical museum but Grover Hot Springs as well, an economical way of washing off trail dust and soothing tired muscles.

More famous for its wintertime activity, Kirkwood Meadows is one of a growing list of Golden State resorts which offer summer lodging. For the more outdoor minded, rustic cabins are available at Silver and Caples Lake and Hope Valley, while Forest Service campgrounds are abundant throughout the region on a first-come, first-served basis. For lodging information, contact Caples

Lake Resort, (209) 258-8888; Silver Lake Resort, (209) 258-8598; or Hope Valley Resort, (916) 694-2292. For up-to-the-minute angling information, contact Bruce Huff at Kirkwood Meadows, (209) 258-7304.

Before leaving for home, I pulled out at Carson Pass. Looking down the canyon toward Nevada, I pondered the days of the pioneers, particularly explorers Kit Carson and John C. Fremont, who recorded so much of this locale's early history. Leading their horses and wagons up this lofty route during the 1850s, they looked upon this arduous trail as their passageway to new promises. Whether dapping a fly for tiny brook trout, trying to dupe an elusive brown, pursuing the legendary "salmon-trout," or climbing toward the clouds for a golden, this area still retains these promises for the pioneers of the '90s, who come by car. □

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