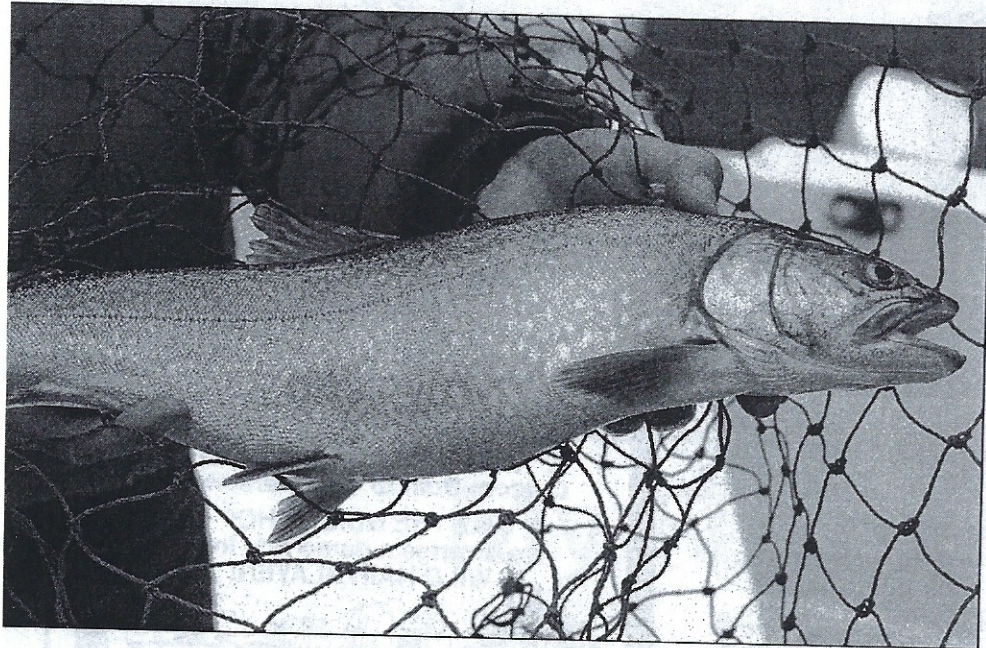


Although the chilly May morning necessitated gloved hands and wool caps pulled over ears and a faint northerly breeze added a slight chop to the water's surface, we were warm with anticipation. Glaring intently at his sonar, our guide nervously adjusted and re-adjusted his course. The snow-dusted

Light Line Lakers



Though macks are found between 70 and 400 feet, they are accessible all year long.

Modern technology

enables anglers to

enjoy the sporting

qualities of this

deep-dwelling char

Don Vachini

peaks to the west were engulfed by darkening cumulonimbus while a storm was already pounding the north shore over 20 miles away, indicators that our stay on the lake would probably be limited.

"Bottom is at 110...100...95...holding at 95 feet," announced Dennis Mitchell, our guide for the day. "Get ready for some action, gentlemen," he excitedly chimed as he cut the engine. "We're sitting right on top of a good concentration of fish."

Our party, which consisted of friends Pete Ottensen and Terry Knight plus myself, was not only plying the south shore of California's sprawling Lake Tahoe in search of its reputable lake trout but was about to try a relatively new approach on them.

Situated 80 miles east of Sacramento, Lake Tahoe is likened to a freshwater sea surrounded by mountains. Filling a basin that formed two million years ago when a valley between two faults sank and was dammed by lava, it is the largest mountain lake in North America. Its natural rim sitting at 6,223 feet elevation within the Tahoe National Forest. The third deepest lake on the continent, two-thirds of this 12

by 22 mile body of water is found in California, the other third in Nevada. While 63 tributaries tumble into Tahoe, the Truckee River at Tahoe City is its only outlet.

Recognized as the largest growing char, the laker has an enormous natural range, covering nearly all of northern North America. Though successfully introduced in the west, the species is basically restricted to waters which exhibit thermal stratification and possess an adequate supply of oxygen throughout deeper locals. Wherever found here, they are reclusive, deep dwellers commonly preferring water temperatures between 44-50 degrees.

Transported from Lake Michigan sometime after 1885, mackinaw were solidly established in Lake Tahoe by the 1920s, shortly thereafter in nearby Donner and Fallen Leaf lakes, a pair of deep-bottomed waters which are also a part of the upper Truckee River system. Finding the submerged canyons to their liking, they have flourished in both numbers and sizes, basically unpressured by fishermen for nearly 70 years.

When first trying for them at Tahoe in the mid-'70s, however, I was somewhat disillusioned. Heavy rods, reels loaded with leadcore line and outsized lures worked at depths near 300 feet were the modus operandi. When fish were hooked, most of the battle consisted of steadily reeling against little resistance for upwards of five or more minutes, not really fighting but merely retrieving great amounts of line while hauling the catch toward the waiting net—not an extremely challenging activity.

The main problem seemed to be the laker's habitat, especially in California homes, where they exist at depths virtually inaccessible to anything but specialized gear. However, in Alaska and parts of Canada, water temperatures and conditions are more conducive to locating them nearer the surface where they can be coaxed quite easily with conventional light tackle. Thus, my main reason in pursuing this fish above the Pre-Cambrian Shield in 1980 was so I could experience their true fighting qualities. Here, in the frigid shallows, they proved to be all I expected and then some. Though most specimens only ranged up to eight pounds, which is small by their standards, I experienced countless battles which tested both nerves and tackle. Wild, bottom-seeking runs caused reels to screech and limber rods to strain as they often resembled an upside down "U"!

The hyper char left such pugnacious impressions that I abandoned California's mackinaw fisheries for over a decade, content to live off the memories of the light tackle skirmishes put forth by their eager northern cousins. However, on a fishing trip in the Truckee area during June of '90,

I listened in on a conversation that made my ears perk. Over coffee, two gentlemen were discussing techniques being used by a group of Tahoe guides. It seems as though these pro's had uncovered a few "deep holes" holding large numbers of these fish and were exposing them to clients. Of special interest to me was the fact that they were introducing light tackle methods to utilize the "newly discovered" fishery. A few quick phone calls, and I was again in business.

While positioned over a large pod of trout at 6:00 a.m., we were instructed to let our jigs drop straight to the bottom, crank up a foot or so and then commence an up-and-down pumping action. Just about the time I developed a rhythm, I detected a light bump against my lure and reacted appropriately. Reeling rapidly to maintain tension, several telltale tugs confirmed a hookup and minutes later, a thrashing 16-inch was removed from the net by a grinning Mitchell. "A runt," he laughed loudly as he slid the pale-hued laker back to its domain. My immediate thought was that there aren't too many places where trout this size are referred to as runts!

After nearly half an hour plying the Golf Course Hole, which was in plain sight of South Shore casinos, Mitchell suggested we change locales. Though we had released five more macks from this sweet spot, enjoying their spirited battles, they were all in the same smallish category.

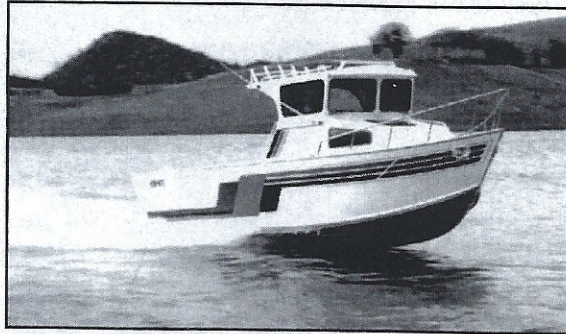
Though the wind and chop increased on the main lake, Emerald Bay remained relatively sheltered. Here, working in near flat conditions, we continually drifted back and forth across a small sunken island protruding in 185 feet of water. Since the sonar revealed depths of near 300 feet on either side, Mitchell had to constantly monitor the screen to keep us over productive structure.

Approaching our third drift, I set the hook on a barely noticeable tap and instantly sensed something vibrant on the other end. The hidden force gave a good account, repeatedly boring straight down and then undertaking several freedom-seeking rolls as it envisioned the boat—a typical laker ploy. Though the six minute subsurface battle seemed longer, each downward surge and run was very much imprinted on my mind well after the husky 22 1/2 inch, three pounder was netted. "Now that's more like it," congratulated Mitchell.

We continued to work across this 40-yard-wide submerged peak until 11:00 a.m., calling it quits after releasing six more fish, the largest just under four pounds.

According to Mitchell, finding the correct structure is important for the numerous ridges protruding sharply upward from the bottom usually hold fish. Characteristically, lakera tend to share the same

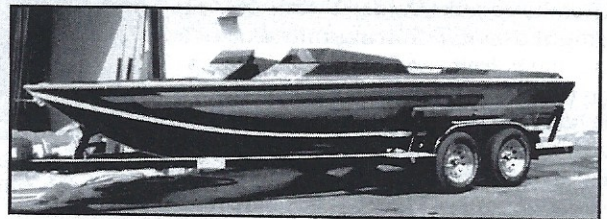
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humps, domes or shelf-lines. While his statistics show large concentrations of smaller fish tend to hang out in the shallower depths, usually between 70 to 150 feet, the larger fish are generally a bit deeper. "They like to hide in the grasses found along these locales, ambushing prey as it swims near. Working along these structural points is consistently productive," he adds. "As a general rule, the larger trout will stay on the outside of a ridge, the smaller fish, right on top of it."

Since this char tends to hang close to the bottom specialized techniques must begin with the use of a fish locator and depth finder. "First, one needs to locate the fish, then determine their exact depth to effectively put jigs right over them," Mitchell informs. "There is plenty of empty water around them," he laughs.

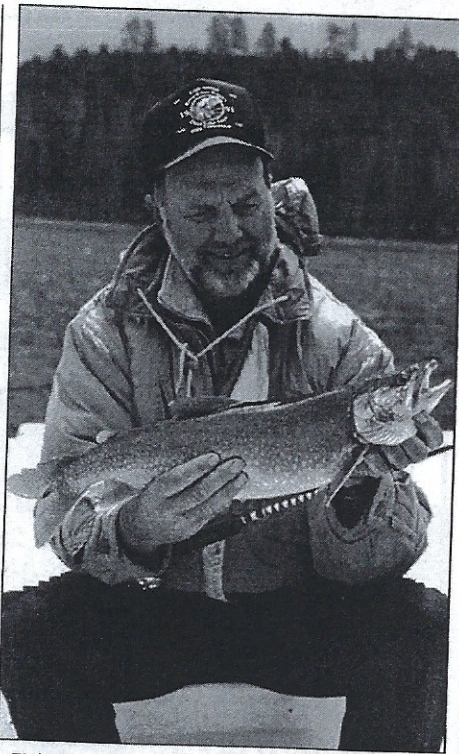
Once these trout are pinpointed, Mitchell recommends letting the jig straight down, bouncing it foot or two from the bottom, and paying strict attention to your senses. "Lakers commonly hit the lure on its downward flutter, so set the hook on any slack line," he advises. "since they are not prone to move great distances to take the bait, you must literally hit them on the head with it."

On this particular trip, I hooked two fish as I began to retrieve the lure back to the boat to begin a new drift. Mitchell speculates that char will commonly ignore the lure when it is right next to their noses but the instant it looks as though it's getting away, they'll attack it. "An occasional yo-yoing action is always worth a try, especially if action is slow."

Either Buzz Bombs or chromed Apex jigs in combination with a threaded minnow and presented on eight-pound line are Mitchell's standbys. A ball bearing swivel helps avoid line twist and allows the lure to work freely.

Although juveniles subsist almost entirely on crustaceans, they soon progress to the main courses which include whitefish, suckers, sculpins and shiners. Fledgling rainbow and brown trout plus kokanee salmon are also included in their diet. Since adult fish are highly piscivorous, drifting live minnows with light spinning gear can be extremely deadly. Regulations stipulate, however, that all live bait must come directly from the lake. Redsides and shiners, the most effective of these, can easily be procured via a minnow trap.

Without the electronic advantage, many anglers will just be working blindly over empty water. Friend John Haman, a pro bass angler from Sacramento, often visits Tahoe with his bass boat, utilizing the technical experiences honed by his competitive tournament angling. Though jigging and drifting are the most productive techniques when fish are located, he feels Tahoe anglers need to learn how to fully operate their radar. "This is the key



Tahoe Basin mackinaw average three to five pounds with specimens up to 20 pounds fairly common.

phase to the whole operation of light-lining," he maintains.

First, he uses his graph to scope the depths and to locate fish. Then, he lowers a live minnow right over them and, keeping his eyes glued to the screen, drifts back and forth over the ridge, continually maintaining position with his electric trolling motor. Often the minnow tips off the intentions of a nearby fish by frantically dancing, which is transmitted to the rod by faint little taps. "When the minnow appears to swim, lower the rod tip and wait a few seconds for the trout to fully take the bait," he instructs. "Then," he adds, "perform a large, upward, sweeping motion to set the hook. At these depths, a lot of bow must be taken out of the line, thus the sweep."

While he prefers six-pound line, his rod choice is a 6 1/2 foot graphite with a stiff butt section and very sensitive tip to detect the ever-so-delicate take. A size 4/0 baitholder hook with barbs on the shank, which prevents the minnow from sliding off, and a small amount of weight to keep the offering deep yet allows it freedom to swim naturally is the perfect setup.

Trolling with downriggers is also an increasingly popular method among light tackle users, especially when fishy structure has been identified. Not only does it cut down on rod wear and tear but fish can be hooked and battled without hindering weights needed to get deep. Some productive lures for this endeavor include Shakey Pete, J-plug, Flatfish or Rapalas. The lures are commonly garnished with minnows.

Popular north shore locales include Kings Beach, Dollar Point, Crystal Bay and

Tavern Hole while Emeralds Bay, Camp Richardson, Ski Run and the Golf Course are productive south shore destinations.

Depending on the season, fish will be found anywhere between 70 to 400 feet. However, Mitchell feels they remain accessible virtually all year. "While nasty weather keeps people off the lake, dedicated guides will often find brief time slots to safely get on the lake."

These fish often become reckless and vulnerable during times of inclement weather. "The poorer the weather, the better they seem to strike," he concedes. "However, when the wind kicks up, it is time to get off the lake!"

Russ Wickwire, a Department of Fish and Game (DFG) fisheries biologist for the Truckee Basin, foresees a solid future for Tahoe area mackinaw from a management point of view. "With deep dropoffs in their middle sections offering food, sanctuary and habitat, Tahoe, Donner and Fallen Leaf are structural bonanzas," he explains.

Concerned that populations might even be too high, the DFG is currently studying numbers, fish growth and harvest figures. However, preliminary surveys indicate all three waters possessing extremely high trophy fish potential. While the Tahoe record fish is a whopping 36 pounder, specimens at this trio average three to four pounds, with fish commonly taken up to 12 pounds. "Several times a season fish over 20 pounds are weighed in, and there are plenty of fish approaching 30 pounds lurking among weedbeds," adds Wickwire.

While Wickwire is doubtful that any of these lakes could be over-fished given their expanse and depths, measures are nevertheless being taken by DFG and sportsmen alike, to ensure this fact. Although current regulations allow a limit of two macks of any size, many anglers, under the encouragement of their guides, are releasing their catch, especially undersized fish. "Lakers up to four pounds are commonly let go," Wickwire mentions, using guide records to illustrate this point.

When dredged from the deep water, macks commonly bloat, inflating their air bladders to compensate for decreased pressures. By carefully probing a hollow hypodermic needle under a scale, inserting it into the bladder and squeezing gently, air escapes much as a ball is deflated. "Basically, the fish is more apt to survive with this consideration, since it can swiftly retreat back to the depths," Wickwire adds.

Though modern technology can find fish and light tackle has rejuvenated their pugilistic qualities, Tahoe basin lakes remain a difficult nut to crack. First time visitors should enlist the services of a guide to learn laker basics. Mitchell can be reached at (916) 577-6834. For complete list of area guides, contact The Outdoorsman at (916) 541-1660. □