

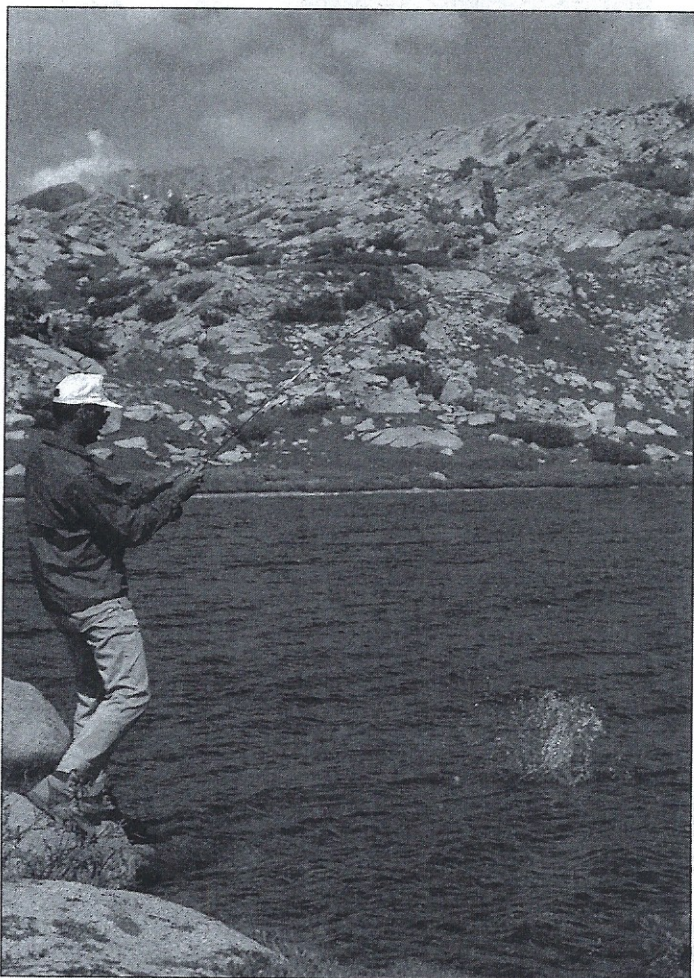
California's Monster Brook Trout Waters

Possessing ideal conditions, a handful of Golden State lakes house brookies that rival their Canadian cousins

Don Vachini

Nearly 25 years ago, I was fishing a small brush-infested creek near the town of Burney—dubbed the Trout Capital of Northern California. Derricking brookie after brookie from amid log jams and brushy holes, I was in angler heaven. Before setting each seven incher free, I marveled at the contrast between olive vermiculations, scarlet dots set in halos of pale blue, and black- and white-bordered fins. The source of this productive, gurgling rivulet was a man-made impoundment a hundred yards upstream. Although ensuring a 125 cfs life-blood to the stream, the 15-acre reservoir was off limits on private property and heavily posted. Standing on top of the dam minus spinning rod, I gazed into the crystal clear water, subsequently causing my chest to pound like a cannon. At least six wide-bodied

A few wilderness tarns possess rotund specimens which battle mightily.



brook trout in the one to two pound category fanned languidly among the tangle of pine snags and weeds—at that time the largest of this species I had witnessed in the wild!

While the brook trout's native range extended from the Arctic Circle south to Georgia, it has been introduced into suitable locations all over the United States. Without a doubt, however, the biggest specimens are consistently found in Canada's Hudson Bay regions and in Labrador where three to five pounders are still relatively common.

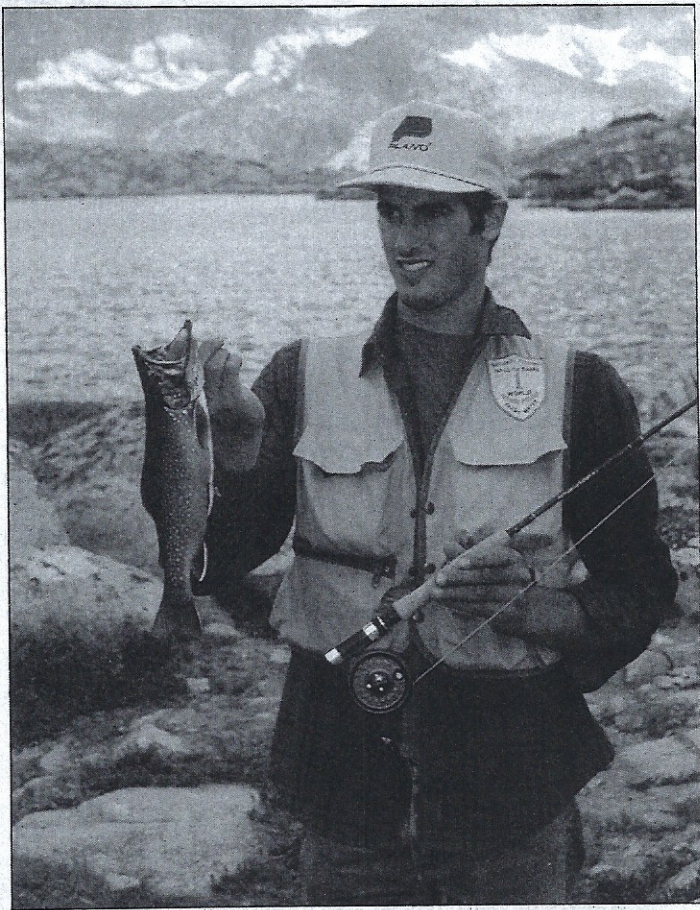
Salvelinus fontinalis were first introduced to California in 1872. From a management point of view, the Department of Fish and Game (DFG) initially viewed them as a god-send according to Darrell Wong, a fisheries biologist with the DFG office in Bishop. Indeed, department records indicate that during the 1930s, fisheries personnel attempted to establish them in virtually every mountainous drainage in the state. Since then, Wong estimates that over 1,000 waters, mostly high alpine lakes, have received plantings. "Wherever deposited, though, they often proved too successful, with populations of stunted six- to eight-inch fish soon presiding," he lamented.

Generally speaking, these "transplants" are more often than not measured in inches rather than pounds. Nevertheless, in a handful of Golden State waters, they have met with optimum growing conditions and achieve leviathan status. Following are a few highly-credentialed waters which maintain other country-type specimens.

In recent years a small cluster of lakes in the Mammoth Lakes region in the Eastern Sierra have achieved a reputation for producing an occasional largish brookie. Mammoth's Twin Lakes (actually one lake with two segments) is one of the richest waters in the vicinity as evidenced by its phenomenal aquatic growth. Although it holds good numbers of wild and holdover browns and rainbows while benefiting from abundant plants of catchable 'bow's, it also contains a small population of generally overlooked brookies approaching three pounds. While prams, canoes or float tubes help shift the hookup ratio slightly in favor of the angler, the dense, submerged growth often becomes an enemy of fine tippets or leaders.

Located 15 miles to the north, a pair of June Lake Loop waters are quietly gaining notoriety. Silver Lake contains limited fish pushing three pounds while at Gull Lake, which did produce an IGFA line class world record 7 pound, 12 ounce specimen as recent as 1988, they occasionally run as large as four pounds. Despite their small size, both lakes are nutrient-rich and offer excellent cover allowing these trout to grow massive even though the area is heavily pressured by anglers after the bountifully-stocked rainbows. Gull Lake is 64 acres and Silver is 80.

Beyond a doubt, the state's quintessential monster brook hangout is Kirman Lake, located off Hwy. 108 near Sonora Pass. With natural recruitment non-existent, this open, scantily-tim-



The author's son, Jason, displays his 1-pound, 4-ounce squaretail, a HOF world record taken on 14-pound tippet.

bered lake resting above 7,000 feet is maintained by yearly plants—normally 15,000 fingerlings. Nicknamed “air-brushed footballs” because of their incredible girth, a legal keeper will run around 1 1/2 pounds. According to Wong, residents here experience rapid growth and attain Schwarzenegger-like proportions thanks to an ultra-rich diet of aquatic life including insects, scuds and snails. “Though these fish only reach about four years in age, the majority tend to max out between 4 to 4 1/2 pounds,” he beams. “Due to the annual plants, trout dimensions vary greatly but one to three pounders are typical, four to five pounders are quite common and fish to seven pounds are not unheard of.”

Though many trout here are taken on Scud, Woolly Bugger and small Matuka patterns the lake is open to any kind of artificials with barbless hooks. A 16-inch minimum size, two-fish limit is also in effect to allow stocks to reach gargantuan size.

Float tubes are practically a requirement for fishing this lake effectively as fish tend to hold outside the tules or in deeper water adjacent to weedbeds. However, these floatation devices, along with their accessories, must be carried in on the three-mile-long trail.

Poore and East lakes, a pair of nearby walk-to lakes likewise noted for jumbo bookies, are open to all types of angling. Care should be taken as their fragile populations, which range between 10 to 14 inches and occasionally reach two pounds, are definitely subject to overharvest.

High elevation residents have things a little tougher as minute food forms, short growing season and their tendency to propagate heartily usually collaborate to keep them well under 10 inches. However, as I recently found out, there are memorable exceptions. Sons Matt and Jason plus friend Andy Gough and myself had established a base camp near 11,500 feet in Humphrey's Basin this past July. More famous for golden trout than brookies, this open, glacier-scoured drainage sits in the half-million acre John Muir Wilderness west of Bishop. Acting on a tip

from Wong, we scrambled over a ridge to 27-acre Tomahawk Lake, which nestles in a hidden, cup-like depression well above Piute Canyon. Even from a hundred feet above, we could make out a few chunky forms on the sandy bottom, prodding us to hastily rig our fly rods.

However, after two hours of steadily removing stringy anachris from our flies with nary a strike, enthusiasm waned as an ever-increasing concentration of clouds began obliterating nearby peaks. Plying a small, protected cove, perhaps 30 yards apart, we methodically repeated our previous efforts—lay out line, let it settle on the bottom and retrieve at a snails pace.

Nervously eyeballing the fast-swirling ebony nimbus, I sensed a slight nudge against my green Woolly Bugger as it crept along the sand. Lightly lifting my rod tip commenced a remarkable, action-packed sequence of events. First came the long-awaited throbbing surge of something weighty tugging on the other end of my line. As I gently snubbed its third run, Jason yelped. While quickly stripping in his line to assist me, his yellow Bingo Bug was vigorously intercepted and, judging from the rod's arc, it too was a quality fish. As this point, things really got interesting! With my fish slowly tiring and Jason now engrossed in full battle, Matt made “just one more cast” before handling net chores. Almost on cue, his 7 1/2 foot graphite wand buggy-whipped violently. The triple hookup set in motion a comically orchestrated rendition of an Italian backcountry fire drill, thankfully including abrasive reel static which helped drown out muttered obscenities!

Cooler heads did prevail, however, and within seconds of landing my fish, Jason pressured his alongside and it too was netted. We then hustled over to Matt, whose seemingly-unrelenting quarry was also about to concede. The four of us fell reverently silent with awe, for gasping in the bottom of the net was the most impressive high altitude brookie any of us had witnessed. Well over 16 inches, its flaming orange underside and definitive black and white-edged fins only helped accentuate its gaping chasm of a maw, which seemed capable of engulfing an entire fist.

Even though forewarned by Wong, we were pleasantly surprised and exceptionally proud of our Tomahawk accomplishments. Measuring between 14 1/2 and 16 1/2 inches, all three exhibited heads disproportionately larger than their rather sleek bodies. Despite their slightly-emaciated appearances, they tipped my certified spring scale at one pound, two ounces; one pound, four ounces; and one pound, eight ounces respectively, each claiming a tippet-class world record with the National Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame!

Besides the lofty Sierra Nevada chain, miserly-scattered cirques famous for bulky brookies are found in the mountainous regions in both northernmost corners of the state. The Cascade Range, whose lakes eventually spill into the Scott, Trinity or Salmon rivers (all Klamath River tributaries), possesses a pair of wilderness tarns which contain rotund 12 to 16 inch prizes.

Located a few hundred miles to the east near Alturas are the Warner Mountains, an under-utilized, mini-mountain range whose snow melt creates the headwater of the mighty Pit River. Exceptional fish to 14 inches, with potentially bigger ones lurking in “secret spot” waters, are sometimes the reward for visitors to the desolate, high desert scenario in and around the South Warner Wilderness.

What is the probable cause of fish gaining immensity in a few select lakes and not others? While pointing out that all lakes are different, Wong contends that the size of brook trout in a lake is directly proportional to the spawning habitat available. “Waters with optimal spawning sites nearly always possesses high numbers of stunted fish, while those with a paucity of conditions consistently produce low density populations with large specimens,” he informs.

In addition to reduced populations, the lake's food source becomes a factor. Wong goes on to explain that the profuse weed growth, found only in certain eutrophic lakes, creates an explosion in the food chain and the big trout find a niche among these smor-

gasbords. "Since minimal energy is expended gathering food forms, they grow fat rather quickly."

Besides a plethora of insect life, lakes with overgrown fish all harbor large quantities of mysis shrimp, a high caloric freshwater crustacean. With less competition for the more than ample food, the smaller numbers usually do quite well, Wong informs. "When matched with a bountiful food supply, low density populations will normally achieve sizable proportions," he happily informs.

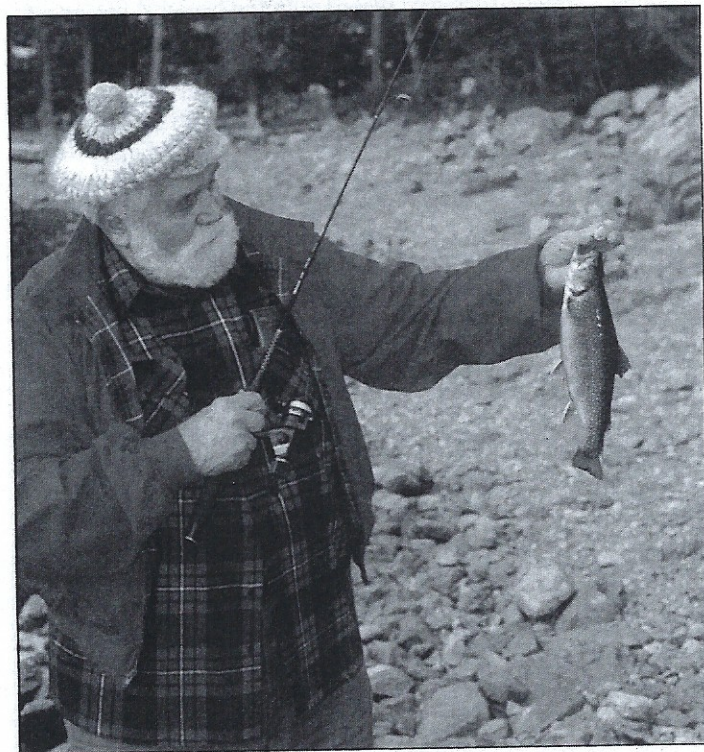
While smaller fish are not too difficult to fool, the larger ones often frustrate anglers by refusing to cooperate. "Brookie" Brad Beckering, a guide at Wildyrie Lodge in Mammoth Lakes, has studied this species' habits for nearly 20 years over which time he has not only earned the namesake moniker but has developed certain methods to efficiently pursue the biggies. Initially, he searches for outlets, points of land or deep, gouged out holes as most likely locales. From here, he favors lengthy casts combined with slow retrieves, often varying his presentation both parallel and perpendicular to shore. When in heavy weeds, he prefers working the deep water just outside the weedbeds from a float tube. "Again, deep and slow are the keys," he implores.

Since freshwater shrimp appear to be a favorite, imitations of these, usually in orange or green shades worked tediously over shelves or gently sloping shorelines with a sink and draw technique are often irresistible. Nymphal stages of caddis and Calibaetis mayfly, also important food sources, are best imitated by Adams, Zug Bug and Hare's Ear nymph patterns in sizes 12 to 18. Lakes choked in late-season aquatic growth can be worked with damselfly nymphs and olive Woolly Buggers while size 8 to 18 streamers laced with red and towed behind a belly boat are very effective early in the season.

Beckering hints that since most naturals hiding among California's submerged plants are minuscule, matching the size of the food form is crucial. "If what these trout are used to eating is tiny, that is the size they will readily pursue," he advises.

For subsurface imitations he suggests size 14 to 18 Muskrat, Herl, Pheasant Tail and Hare's Ear nymph patterns. Squirrel Nymphs also resemble a wide selection of vicinity insects and crustaceans. A full sinking or sink-tip line matched with a four to five weight outfit is best suited to get the above offering to the bottom-huggers.

Ultra-light spinning rods are a sporting way to work slow, deep-running lures.



How To Reach Big Brookie Waters

Depending on an angler's preference of effort, California's lunker char can be accessed by car, horseback or bipedal locomotion.

From the town of Mammoth Lakes, Twin Lakes can be reached by following the Lake Mary Road directly to the lake, while Gull and Silver lakes are found adjacent to Hwy. 158 (the June Lake Loop Road).

Kirman Lake combines a drive and walk approach. Take Hwy. 395 north out of Bridgeport 17 miles to the Sonora Junction, then go west on Hwy. 108 about a mile to the poorly marked parking area on the south end of the road. Cross the stile and follow the trail to the road (closed to public vehicles) which leads three miles to the lake. Some anglers opt to mountain bike this section. Poore and East lakes are also located from this route.

Since not every wilderness area contains trophy brook trout, anglers should consult local fisheries biologists not only to aid in pre-trip selection and planning but for current, accurate updates. Some designated wildernesses containing lakes that do offer brawny brookies include: Salmon-Trinity Alps (Boulder Lakes), Caribou (Long Lake), John Muir (Mesa, Tomahawk lakes) and South Warner.

For information on the Trinity Alps, contact the Shasta-Cascade Wonderland Association (800) 326-6944 or Paul Wertz, DFG-Redding (916) 225-2362.

For information on the Salmon/Scott Mountains, contact Dennis Maria, DFG-Yreka (916) 842-3249.

For North Sierra information, contact Russ Wickwire, DFG-Tahoe region (916) 583-6824.

Kirman Lake: Rick Rockel, Ken's Sporting Goods (619) 932-7707.

Mammoth region: Brad Beckering, Wildyrie Lodge (619) 934-2444.

Eastern Sierra: Darrel Wong, DFG-Bishop (619) 872-1171.

For the spinfisher, an ultra-light graphite rod and reel loaded with four- to five-pound line is a very sporting setup to probe slow moving, deep running lures, which are often the difference between success and failure. While shiny, size zero to two Mepps, Rooster Tail, Vibrax and Panther Martin are worthwhile, Beckering personally favors leech-imitating crappie jigs in yellow, white or tan with red dressing. "Irregardless of lure choice or size, a tiny bit of red always seems to illicit some kind of response," he smilingly confides.

Though ravenous right after ice-out, big fish are probably more vulnerable later in the fall when they feed voraciously in anticipation of reproductive duties. Hiking into the rugged Boulder Creek drainage a week before the season closure, I had targeted a 12-acre body of water nestled just above 6,000 feet. Multiple hues of yellow, orange and bronze splashed the Salmon-Trinity Alps Wilderness hardwood while a light snow dusted the landscape. A cavorting commotion in the shallow outlet quickly drew my attention. Initially assuming they were involved in a premating ritual, a pod of rambunctious squaretails were actually nudging the weeds and gorging on the dislodged insect larva. Paying little attention to me as I followed them along the shoreline, four pot-bellied specimens hungrily dined on my size 12 red Woolly Bugger methodically flicked among them. Each over a pound and vividly matching the autumnal array on the nearby slopes, all matter-of-factly joined back in the feeding shortly after release!

Although the presence of two to five pounders continues to pervade the wild and remote provinces of Labrador and Quebec, this gaudy char is gaining global recognition 3,000 miles to the southwest. It certainly appears to me that a handful of pristine California lakes are exonerating the myth of the diminutive brook trout with Canadian-type fisheries! □