



350 Miles of Trout Fishing

From beginning to end, California's Highway 89 runs through a wealth of drive-up fishing spots — an avenue of trout from Mt. Shasta to Lake Tahoe

While the morning had yielded a limit of pan-sized rainbows from a nearby stream, the higher elevation lake provided a more isolated scenario. Something raptorial circled above, and silence enveloped the surrounding hardwoods and sparse evergreens.

My whippy, 4 weight fly rod, however, hinted of a hefty trout on the payoff end. Flaring its species-identifying orange mandibles, the thick, two-pound cutthroat offered a stark contrast to the 12-inch planters caught during the morning. While releasing my third clone within the hour, the solitude was briefly shattered by the revving whine of a car upshifting before disappearing around a bend, a reminder that I was less than 100 yards from a well-traveled roadway and not in some faraway wilderness Valhala.

Although extraordinary angling for wild mountain trout exists away from civilization, there is no reason to overlook the plentiful drive-up fishing available along some of California's more notable roads. In fact, when it comes to planning a "trouty" destination with plenty of variety, I find that Golden State's Highway 89 outshines all of the others.

Imagine, if you will, a 350-mile-long strip of macadam which courses a pair of mountain ranges, an active volcano, a half-dozen state parks, a plethora of U.S. Forest Service campgrounds and a national park, in addition to paralleling two wilderness areas. Indeed, from the time the highway leaves majestic Mt. Shasta and the southern Cascade Range until it terminates at U.S. 395 on the eastern slope of the Sierra

BY DON VACHINI

Nevada near Topaz, significant trout waters magically seem to appear around each bend.

While rainbows are the dominant trout, brown, brook, cutthroat and golden trout, plus king and kokanee salmon, can be sought among the more than two dozen streams, lakes and primitive areas astride this secondary two-laner.

Centuries ago, Shasta and Lassen were mighty volcanoes, belching sulfur, hissing steam and spewing molten rock. Today their hulking prominences dominate the 100-mile-wide Intermountain Area in a different manner.

Eternal snow and ice melt trickles deep into the bowels of these slumbering giants, percolating forth as springs and seeps which nurture ever-expanding rivulets gurgling along igneous beds. Adding muscle from these icy flows, the McCloud River along with Burney, Hat and appropriately-named Lost creeks babble a reassuring sonata as they maintain a near-constant 44 to 49 degrees of water temperature.

In my opinion, Hat Creek, named for an 1860 surveyor's lost Stetson, best typifies this land of fire and ice. Grapevining the highway for nearly 20 miles while offering a splendid rainbow, brown and brookie habitat, Hat rarely disappoints anglers.

Enhancing its roadside reputation while connecting the waters of the North and Middle forks of the Feather River, Little Truckee, Truckee, Upper Truckee and the East and West Carson rivers, the "avenue of trout" swings through the northern Sierra mountain communities of Greenville, Quincy, Graeagle, Sattley, Sierraville,

Truckee, Tahoe City and Markleeville.

In stark contrast to the Burney Basin's virtually unwavering, springfed flows, these rivers are totally dependent on some of the deepest snowpack in the state and fluctuate greatly from the beginning to the end of the season. Recruiting life-blood flows from an extensive, densely forested backcountry, they gush over freestone bases and course flood-plain channels from 70 to 100 feet wide.

Some seemingly obscure "cricks" also fall under highway jurisdiction. As a self-proclaimed "creek freak," I have found Guernsey, Greenhorn, Wolf, Indian, Cold Stream, Prosser and Alder creeks, plus a few unnamed, to be proportionately productive, and often seek them out for a rewarding change of pace.

Crawling up on a pool, poking bait through brush or under a logjam, or drifting a worm along an undercut bank while keeping shadows off the water, are mandatory skills. Though six to eight-inch native rainbows are the most common fare on these glorified rivulets, I once watched one of my teen-aged sons pry a two-pound brown from beneath a brushpile on a creeklet no wider than four feet.

Most of these high-profile streams would soon be depleted of trout, at least in the easy-to-drive-to places, were it not for an extensive stocking program. The California Department of Fish and Game (DFG) has five regional offices, a pair of which service the waters along Highway 89. The Region 1 branch located in Redding governs Shasta, Lassen and Plumas national forests, while the Region 2 office out of Rancho Cordova handles Tahoe, El Dorado and Toiyabe national forests. ►



Anglers often enjoy great trout fishing within sight of their cars along California's Highway 89. While small rainbows dominate in most areas, larger surprises are sometimes in store.

(Don Yachini photos)



Nearly a quarter-million catchable trout are stocked annually in roadside waters. In addition to easing camper-applied pressure, these infused trout account for some hefty stringers as well, says Paul Wertz, the Region 1 information officer, "Most stockers will average a third to a half-pound, but fish up to two pounds are occasionally included in the weekly plants," Wertz says. "In fast-moving water, fish of this stature are a real surprise for unsuspecting anglers."

Since abundant plants usually occur next to roadside turnouts, along public spur roads, under bridges or in campgrounds, knowledgeable anglers simply drive to a likely spot, park and begin fishing. For this type of angling, I lean heavily toward spinning gear such as a four-piece, ultra-light 6½-foot rod and reel loaded with two or four-pound-test line, an ideal setup for storing in the car's trunk or leaving rigged up in the back seat for instant action.

Bait fishermen will find that hatchery-reared trout are uninhibited in their craving for red salmon eggs or prepared baits in various colors and scents.

To pursue these willing "highway trout", I often resort to "hole hopping," a feasible tactic since the planters often gravitate to the broader, slower moving pools or holes. I initially begin flipping bait into the head of the pool, keep light tension on the line as it dredges the bottom, and finally swing it through the tail of the pool. Since movement of the bait is the key, I use just enough weight to keep the offering near bottom, yet allow it to be moved with the current.

If I experience 10 or so unsuccessful casts, I proceed to the next riffle or pool and follow the same procedure. Unselective stockers will gently mouth the offering several times along a drift, so "feel" your line and be prepared to set the hook on the second or third "tap."

Native trout, on the other hand, often require a combination of physical and cerebral efforts. Preferring to work more isolated sections, I usually don waders and fish with a fly rod, mostly for feisty 'bows. While each river along this blacktop avenue has its own distinctive angling atmosphere, there is usually no problem discerning similar productive pockets, back eddies or seams on any of these.

Aggressive wading, reading water fluently and fly penetration are key ingredients toward corraling these cautious trout. On briskly moving waters, trout seek the path of least resistance, often holding in the subdued currents behind large boulders. There, expending minimal energy, they dine on subsurface invertebrates which are constantly washed into their domain.

Using a seven or eight-foot, 3 to 4 weight fly rod with floating line, I dab a weighted nymph in sheltered backwaters, holding the rod high to keep most of the line off the water while intently watching the strike indicator. Size 10 to 14 Hare's Ear, Caddis, Black Ant and Pheasant Tail nymphs worked deep on a dead-drift, are sound,



Some pleasant surprises come from dinky creeks along California's Highway 89, as author Don Vachini happily demonstrates.

basic patterns for Highway 89 fishing.

More reminiscent of inland seas rimmed by coniferous mountains, lakes Almanor and Tahoe are a pair of expansive, high altitude jewels bordered in some part by the mountain motorway. While shore anglers casting the usual assortment of baits and lures will occasionally score, both waters demand the use of a boat equipped with electronics to be fished effectively. Even with these, a reliable guide greatly increases odds for success, especially among first-time visitors.

Trolling minnow-imitating lures or flasher/worm combinations through submerged channels or along the dam while scoping a fish-finder is the best technique for locating Almanor's lake-reared king salmon or rainbows. Spring is the red-hot season for the three to five-pound lacustrine salmon, also taken from the Hamilton Arm by drifting cut anchovies on the bottom. Also, six or nine-inch Rapalas and Rebels in rainbow finish manage to dupe hefty brown trout. Rainbows seem to prefer Needlefish lures in bikini, frog and rainbow patterns.

Equally famous for its shoreline casinos as it is for its specialized form of angling, Lake Tahoe is well over 1600 feet deep and possesses the 10th cleanest water in the world. While rainbows, browns and kokanee salmon are present, it is the Mackinaw, or lake trout, which commonly brings out the anglers' itch.

While downriggers, leadcore line and fishing in depths of 100 to 300 feet are common practices for mining these deep-dwelling char, my preference involves graphing productive shelves and vertical jigging over large concentrations with light tackle. Once pinpointed, they seem to have an appetite for flashy Diamond or Apex jigs worked up and down among them. While lakers over 20 pounds are taken annually, most boated run between four and 12 pounds.

Have you ever dreamed of dropping a line in a fish hatchery? Enveloped by autumn pastorals, gullible trout and very little guilt, I have enjoyed that very opportunity.

(Continued on page 70)

Off-Highway Options

While more than two dozen fishable waters are touched by California's Highway 89, plenty of nearby options exist, usually fewer than 20 miles away from the main route.

Often overlooked, McCloud Reservoir is the last known location of Dolly Varden in California. The lake also holds wild rainbows up to five pounds, while the Ah-Di-Nah section of the McCloud River below the dam is also a special fishery.

In the Burney area, Fall and Pit rivers, plus tiny Baum Lake, hold impressive, albeit leader-shy rainbows and browns. Clark Creek, a cascading Lake Britton tributary, is a lightly pressured, early season producer for planters.

Both the North Fork Feather River and Hamilton Branch provide mixed bags in addition to feeding Lake Almanor, and the steep canyon section below the dam provides some excellent hike-to browns.

Trout-rich Jackson Meadows and Milton reservoirs can be reached by taking the Henness Pass Road, and Boca, Prosser and Stampede reservoirs are located north of Truckee on short spur roads.

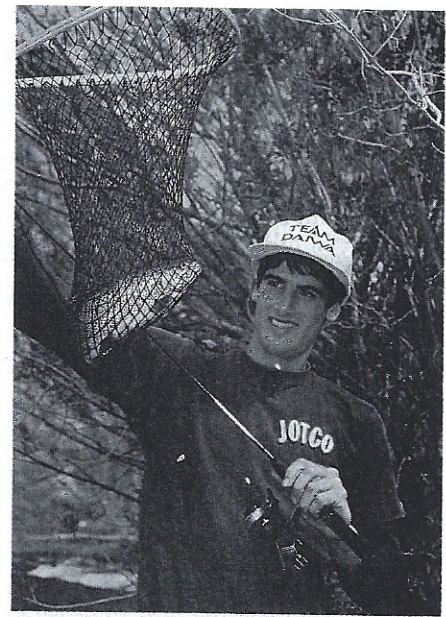
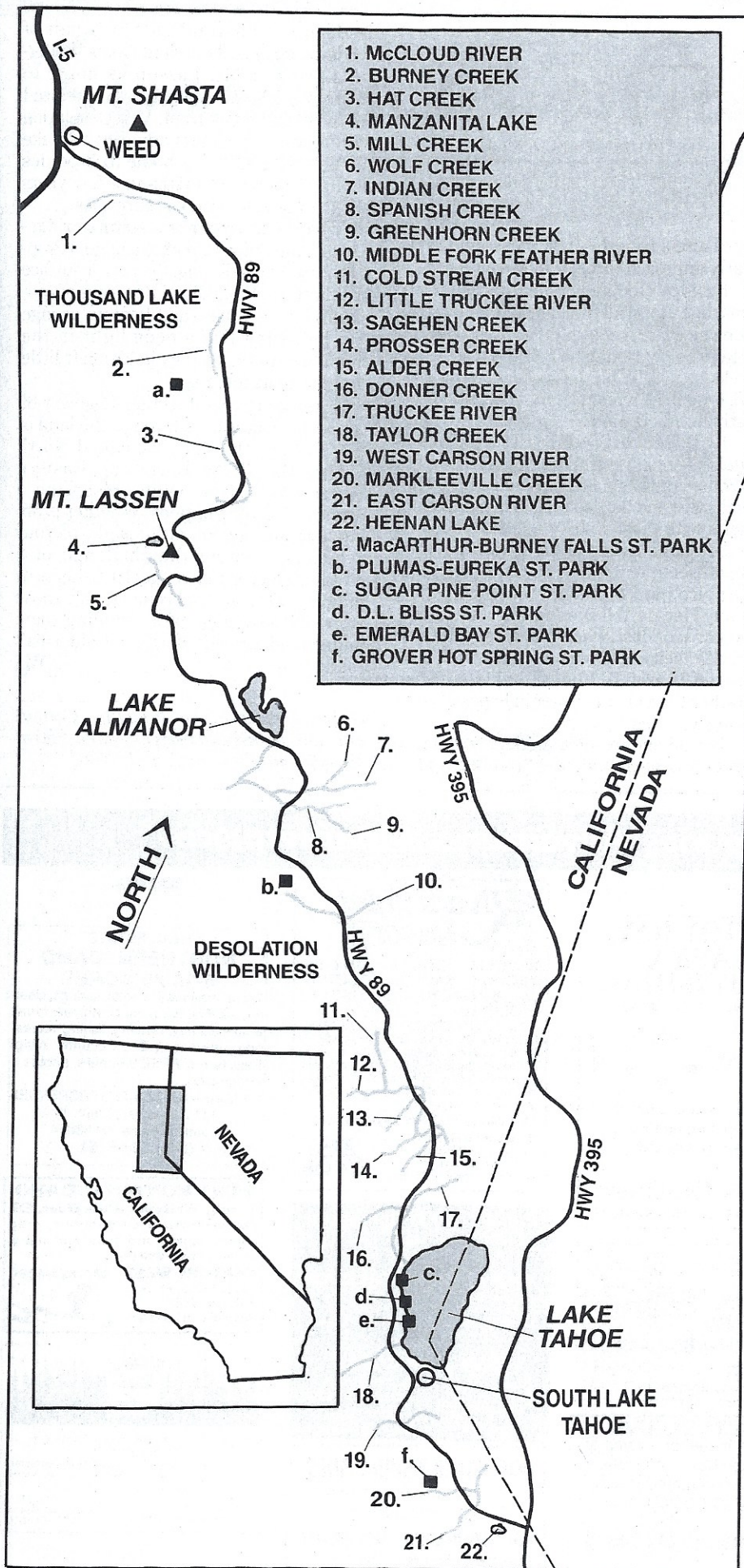
Four miles east of Truckee rests tiny, 70-acre Martis Lake, currently a trophy brown and rainbow lake under special no-kill regulations.

Just past Woodford's Junction, an eight-mile road leads to Indian Creek Reservoir, a productive early season water for portly brood-stock rainbows. Turning off Hot Springs Road two miles out of Markleeville and following the dirt road over the ridge brings one to Pleasant Valley Creek, a flies-only waterway with bountiful rainbows and a scattering of brookies.

While 129-foot Burney Falls is a sight to behold, Tahoe tributary Taylor Creek is also a noteworthy stop, not just for its planted rainbows but to observe a well-laid out, working stream profile. Although Highway 89 skirts South Shore casinos, travelers can briefly divert onto Highway 50 to try their gambling luck or continue south on 89 another 30 miles to soak travel-weary muscles in Grover Hot Springs' 110-degree baths.

For reliable sources of information by area, contact: McCloud Area-Shasta Cascade Wonderland Association, (800) 4-SHASTA; Burney Basin, Steve Vaughn, (916) 335-2381; Lake Almanor, Lassen View Resort, (916) 596-3437; Quincy, Alan Bruzza, (916) 283-2733; Truckee, Randy Johnson, (916) 525-6575; Lake Tahoe, North Shore, Mickey Daniels, (916) 583-4602; Lake Tahoe, South Shore, The Outdoorsman, (916) 541-1660; Hope Valley, Bruno Huff, (209) 258-7304; and Markleeville, John Sparks, (916) 694-2201.

Don Vachini



Planted trout average less than a half pound each, but here Jason Vachini admires a chunky rainbow that's well over a pound. (Don Vachini photo)

Highway Angler's Fishing Kit

When traveling by car and following pavement in pursuit of trout, hit and run tactics are a common *modus operandi*. Tackle needs to be essential, yet simple and clutter-free, to facilitate easy in-and-out of the car passage. In fact, a small carrying bag, daypack, simple vest or even a paper bag can hold all the necessary gear to efficiently pursue these roadside fish.

My personal trout bag, which easily fits on a car seat, consists of a selection of small weights and sliding sinkers, single and treble hooks in sizes 10 to 18, spools of two and four-pound monofilament, a few jars of salmon eggs, and a sampling of scented floating baits such as Berkley's Power Bait and Zeke's, plus a small plastic container holding a limited selection of lures and flies. Black Panther Martins with yellow spots, yellow Rooster Tails and bronze Vibrax in sizes 0 to 2, plus a half-dozen dark bodied nymphs, round out the kit.

Since most fishing locales are next to the road, no large amount of gear is necessary. If working a lake, simply pick up the bag and carry it to the chosen spot; if working a stream, select the most necessary gear (hooks, weights, baits and lures) and place them in pockets or a vest. A 1 x 3 x 5-inch plastic box also comes in handy as a mini-tackle box while easily fitting into a shirt or pants pocket. An egg lug worn around the waist also helps to keep hands free, and allows more efficient angling.

A valid California fishing license must also accompany the kit.

Don Vachini

Tucked in the high desert sage, piñon and aspen country near Monitor Pass, Heenan Lake serves as a 130-acre refugium for the Lahontan cutthroat, providing the DFG with 2½ million eggs annually. However, in order to protect the fast-growing, long-living subspecies referred to as "salmon-trout" in explorer John C. Fremont's journal, the lake's angling window is only opened on weekends during September. Benefitting from a nutrient-rich smorgasbord that includes zooplankton, scuds, leeches and predictable caddis hatches, these well-nourished broodstock

THESE WELL-NOURISHED
CUTTHROATS MEASURE A
SOLID 17 TO 24 INCHES...

measure a solid 17 to 24 inches and regularly approach three or four pounds.

Besides Heenan, special fisheries are managed for wild trout at Manzanita Lake, Lower Hat Creek and the East Carson River below Hangman's Bridge. Catch and release regulations help maintain their big fish quality, while single, barbless hooks are the rule of take.

By their heritage, the wary residents of these specially regulated waters along the trout causeway often prove extremely selective and hard to fool. When matching wits with these finicky feeders, choosing the right patterns along with the right time to present them is crucial. Carefully plying dry size 14 or 16 Adams, Mosquito, Cahill, Gray Hackle Yellows and Elk Hair Caddis at dawn or dusk when they feed will sometimes illicit a favorable response, but I have found it wise to "hunt" individual fish rather than fan the water in hopes of coercing a feeder.

For adventuresome anglers wishing to get away from it all, the "trout turnpike"

leads directly to trailheads for a pair of wilderness areas. Thousand Lakes Wilderness, west of Mt. Lassen, is home to numerous lakelets loaded with pan-sized rainbows and brook trout. Vast Desolation Wilderness, which sits adjacent to Lake Tahoe's west shore, is home to brookies and, as I found out firsthand a few years back, other kaleidoscopic surprises.

Cross-countrying over a serrated ridge-line into the Phipps Creek drainage, I dropped a size 14 caddis onto the mirror surface of a tiny tarn. Exploding into arrays of cadmium, lemon yellow and flaming orange and pulsating like a neon light in the crystalline water, a gaudy golden left little doubt as to its identity.

Traveled in either direction, Highway 89 connects trout waters through the land of fire and ice, the thickly-cloaked North Sierra, the Tahoe Basin and Eastern Sierra's high sage while presenting a myriad of angling options. Whether probing a sapphire pool within sight of your vehicle, accepting the challenge of a diminutive creek or a special fishery, or jumping off to the backcountry, only those who take advantage of its winding route understand why it is Northern California's roadway to trout.

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Author Don Vachini of Petaluma, California, has fished extensively in the Sierra Nevada and other ranges of the West.

Check Out State Parks

Strategically located next to or very close to outstanding angling prospects, state-operated campgrounds add an economical aspect to a fishing trip along Highway 89. Amenities include hot and cold running water and showers.

To inquire about reservations, facilities and other information, contact the following park headquarters:

MacArthur-Burney Falls, (916) 335-2777; Plumas-Eureka, (916) 836-2380; Sugar Pine Point, (916) 525-7982; D.L. Bliss Park, (916) 525-7277; Emerald Bay, (916) 541-3030; and Grover Hot Springs, (916) 694-2248.

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