

# The Bay Area's Giant Trout

*Big trout near San Francisco? You bet! Thanks to the Urban Trophy Trout Program, three Bay Area impoundments offer anglers an opportunity to catch — and keep — rainbows that are weighed by the pound, not inches.*

by Don Vachini

The freshness of rain-cleansed air pleasantly filled my nostrils as I removed a 17-inch rainbow from my net. It was hard to convince myself I was not in some faraway wilderness on this particular February morning. My son, Chris, and I were working a small, productive cove on San Pablo Reservoir, one of three San Francisco Bay Area lakes notorious for producing gargantuan trout. Before the sun extinguished winter's chill that day, we had boated six trout between us. True to form, half of them exceeded 3 pounds!

Since the inauguration of the Urban Trophy Trout Program (UTTP) in 1984, San Pablo and Del Valle reservoirs and Lake Merced, all scenic waters tucked among bustling metropolitan areas, regularly produce trout averaging 1 to 3 pounds. Additionally, the trio houses more noteworthy prizes. Ken Aasen, a fisheries biologist with the Department of Fish and Game's Region 3 office in Yountville, said season's-best rainbows of 17 1/2, 15 and 12 pounds have been netted at this trophy trifecta! "Add to that hundreds of trout in the 5- to 10-pound range and you certainly have some remarkable fisheries in place," Aasen noted.

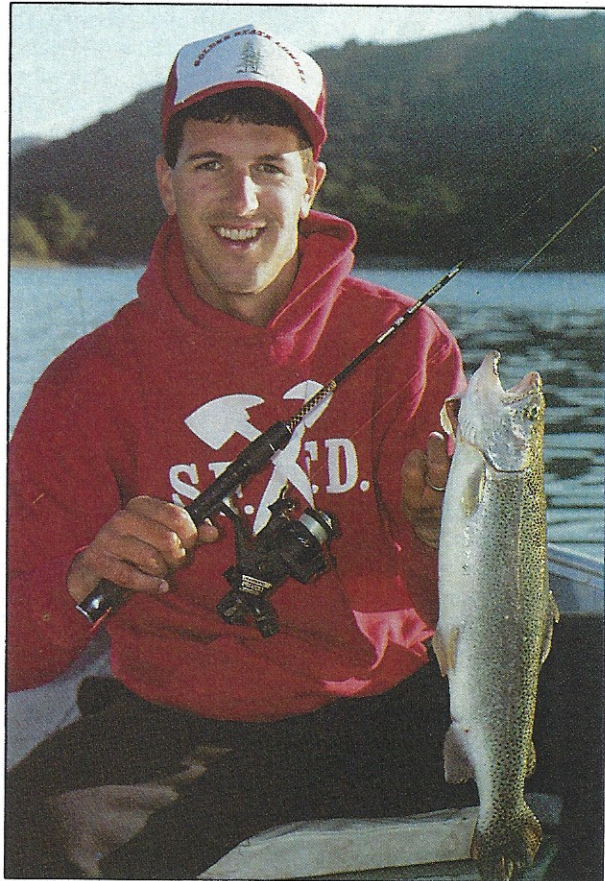
While the DFG maintains bi-weekly plants, these city lakes are also recipients of an ambitious private stocking program. According to Aasen, hatchery techniques have become more refined and cost efficient, especially in the private sector which currently produces about 90 percent of the state's urban trout. "Utilizing eggs from imported Australian stocks, faster-growing strains, and varied strains that spawn all year, they can readily produce larger specimens at a faster rate than our hatcheries," said Aasen.

While the DFG infuses trout in the 1/3- to 1/2-pound range, private contracts stipulate fish of at least 1 pound. However, larger brood fish are constantly being culled and included in the thrice-weekly deliveries. "This translates to limited categories of 2 to 4, 5 to 6 and, on occasion, a few over 10 pounds. In addition, holdover trout throughout these weight ranges continually provide pleasant surprises," he added. "It is fairly evident that the UTTP provides anglers what they really want — big fish."

Initiation of a permit program, whereby a fee is charged to anglers and that money goes directly toward the purchase of additional trout, has taken this trophy trout fishery to unprecedented success.

## SAN PABLO RESERVOIR

Located in the rolling Oakland Hills between Orinda and El Sobrante, this 866-acre impoundment apparently receives more stocked trout than any lake in California (200,000-plus annually). The unique combination of beauty, excellent fishing, good access for boats and a protected area for waterfowl (which closes the lake from mid-November *(Continued)*



*Del Valle Reservoir produced this 3 1/2-pound rainbow for Chris Vachini, the author's son. Try the south end of this 1,000-acre impoundment early in the season. Photo by Don Vachini.*

through mid-February), makes this the Bay Area's top-rated facility. Most productive early-season hotspots include Scow Canyon, the Berkely Tower and Rocky Point near the dam.

Boat rentals, a public launch, handicapped access and senior citizen docks are available. An access fee of \$4.50 is charged plus \$2.50 for a fishing permit. Launching a boat runs an additional \$5.

Can be reached from either Hwy. 80 or Hwy. 24 via San Pablo Dam Road.

For up-to-the-minute information, contact That Dam Company, (510) 223-1661.

### MERCED LAKE

Nestled amid 700,000 San Francisco residents, Merced North, the smallest of the civic trophy lakes, has the potential to produce 10-pounders regularly. Indeed, the Bay Area's biggest — a 17-pound, 8-ounce rainbow — was caught here last November. Anglers' top locations appear to be the 18th hole astride Harding Park Golf Course, the docks and the tule-ringed shoreline opposite the docks.

While boat rentals and public launch facilities are available, no gas motors are allowed. The tackle shop provides a free tip sheet, rod and reel rentals, pre-tied leaders and boats with electric motors. A \$3 access fee includes a fishing permit while an additional \$4 is charged to launch a private boat.

Merced North can be reached by taking John Daly Boulevard off Hwy. 280 and turning north on Skyline Boulevard to the lake entrance.

For current information, contact Urban Concessionaires, (415) 753-1101.

### DEL VALLE RESERVOIR

Pine forests and thick woodlands enshroud the ridgelines above this 1,000-acre impoundment south of Livermore. A 100-site campground plus adjacent park for hikes and picnics add to the diversity of this East Bay facility. While the south portion produces some heavy early-season catches, dropoffs along the Narrows are always productive.

A public boat launch is available with excellent boating access throughout the lake. Access fee runs \$4 (\$5 on major holidays), \$2.50 for a fishing permit and \$3 to launch a trailered boat; \$2.50 for car-top craft.

From Hwy. 580 East, take Vasco

Road south about 3 miles to its end. Turn right on Tesla Road, then left on Miles Road and follow it to the lake.

For further information, contact Urban Concessionaires, (510) 449-5201.

The company that manages these lakes, Urban Park Concessionaires, is a first-class organization that keeps its properties clean, boats in good operating condition and have plenty of friendly and helpful personnel to go along with the abundance of big fish. In addition to permit and access fees, all anglers 16 years old and older need a valid California fishing license. In accordance with statewide regulations, a five-fish per day limit is in effect.

While these metro lakes are loaded with planted trout, catching these city-slickers is not always easy. According to Niel Nielson, manager of That Dam Company, understanding trout temperature preferences is step one in cornering these schooling trout. "Look for temperatures between 64-66 degrees," he advises.

As is common in most lakes, the majority of the trout are located in the littoral zone, the area from shore to about 40 feet out. Work this area with bait, especially during cloudy water periods. Although anglers here successfully dunk worms, night crawlers, salmon eggs, cheese and marshmallows, by far the most effective baits are scented fish attractants. Zeke's and Berkley Power Bait, especially green and yellow shades, are most preferred by citified trout.

When pursuing rainbows with odiferous concoctions, it is important that the offering not sit directly on the bottom, but a few feet above so as to avoid weed growth. Floating baits are extremely advantageous. Moving the bait slowly for a few feet, then letting it rest not only creates a scent trail but the movement itself sometimes commands a cruising trout's attention.

To rig, slide a small egg-shaped sliding sinker over the main line and tie on a No. 12 black snap swivel to prevent it from coming off. Terminal leaders consist of 2 to 3 feet of 2- to 4-pound mono and are paired with size 14 to 18 brass-plated treble hooks. Mold the soft bait to cover the hooks.

Anglers should hold their rods and pay close attention to where the line enters the water to help detect even the faintest bump. When a bite is detected, point the rod tip at the fish

and wait for the line to tighten.

Because trout school, especially hatchery trout, when one is landed, there are more. I pre-rig several terminal setups and imbed them in styrofoam. When a trout is landed I simply unsnap the fish-monopolized leader and clip on another.

To keep my bait in place for long periods of time, I use two anchors to immobilize my boat; a stable platform is also a safe platform.

Since late-January, February and early-March surface temperatures approach ideal conditions, trolling is popular in all three of these trout waters. Nielsen suggests first locating the depth at which trout are holding. Sonar or electronics aids immensely in this endeavor.

When trailing lures, he favors rigging with the lightest possible line (usually 4- to 6-pound-test). "The smaller-diameter line causes very little drag as it moves through the water, and it can be adjusted easily."

Though many anglers prefer to wing flasher/crawler combinations, Triple Teasers, Rainbow Runners and the increasingly popular Sep's Pro Secrets are also hot lures. Besides these, I have also found rainbow-finished Rapalas, Rebels and the new line of Bingo Bugs, zig-zagged parallel to shore and at varying speeds, to be very productive.

While depths will vary, early-season water temperatures are usually optimal anywhere from 5 to 15 feet deep. However, Nielsen cautions that successful trolling for these bragging-sized giants involves more than just dragging a set of flashers behind a boat: "Be prepared to troll shallow or deep, switch offerings and vary boat speeds while trying to establish a pattern for that particular day."

Whether trolling or soaking bait, look for productive points, dropoffs or sloping shorelines with cover.

An ultra-light spinning rod and reel loaded with 4-pound line and worked with a light drag setting is ideal. A landing net is also a must, especially when attempting to finesse hefty trout into a boat.

While bank anglers will score, a floating craft allows anglers to find productive locales more easily, or just present the bait or offering in a great number of locations. These waters are great for introducing youngsters to the thrill of playing trophy trout. □

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