

Golden State Trout Forecast

When word was received that the six-year drought was officially declared over last year, trout enthusiasts statewide breathed a collective sigh of relief. And now, on the eve of the 1994 trout opener, anglers and fisheries personnel alike are eagerly anticipating what appears to be a second consecutive season of prime troutling.

First, and probably most important, is the existence of the single most important ingredient — water. Last year's heavy snowfall and resultant run-off not only filled reservoirs and lakes across the state but served to replenish subterranean reserves as well. Additionally, the remaining ice and glacial pack under this past winter's snowfall all but ensures steady flows through season's end.

This sudden abundance of water has fisheries biologists beaming, since it coincides with the fourth season of an improved planting program and creates conditions for what appears to be one of the best openers in quite some time. Making good on their promises to plant larger trout, Paul Wertz, information officer for the DFG's Region 1 office in Redding, feels this revamped program has implications for a bright future.

"Over the past five years," Wertz said, "hatchery techniques have become more refined and cost efficient. (DFG) biologists have not only developed faster-growing strains but are able to take eggs virtually all year long from trout which spawn at various intervals."

According to Wertz, most catchables consistently average 1/3 to 1/2 pound each and have anglers grinning in anticipation. "Fish up to 2 pounds are also included in most plants, primarily as a bonus to anglers," he happily adds.

With high fall water levels statewide, most DFG hatcheries were able to unload surplus broodstock

Trout managers throughout the state say the prognosis for this year's trout season is good, thanks to abundant water supplies and concerted efforts by the DFG.

by Don Vachini

rainbow, brown and brook trout before winter so that they could grow as holdovers. Wertz happily informs that most of these were in the 2- to 4-pound range!

While a decent snowpack, higher water levels and bigger trout add up to a potentially impressive opener, high roily waters can play havoc with April and May results. Unpredictable early-season weather, especially in the higher elevations, also makes for miserable conditions. Spring anglers should always dress warmly and carry foul-weather gear.

As part of the pre-trip ritual, anglers should give their gear the once-over. Besides inspecting rods and guides, check reels for operation, replace old line, check spinners for rust, reorganize your vest or tackle box and stock up on extra hooks, swivels, weights, lures, etc.

Following is a regional breakdown of some of the state's expected hotspots.

NORTHWESTERN REGION

The big story, of course, is the California Fish and Game Commission's reopening of the Upper Sacramento River for trout angling this year. Closed since July 1991 due to a toxic chemical spill after a Southern Pacific train derailed at the Cantara Loop bridge near Dunsmuir, the Upper Sacramento

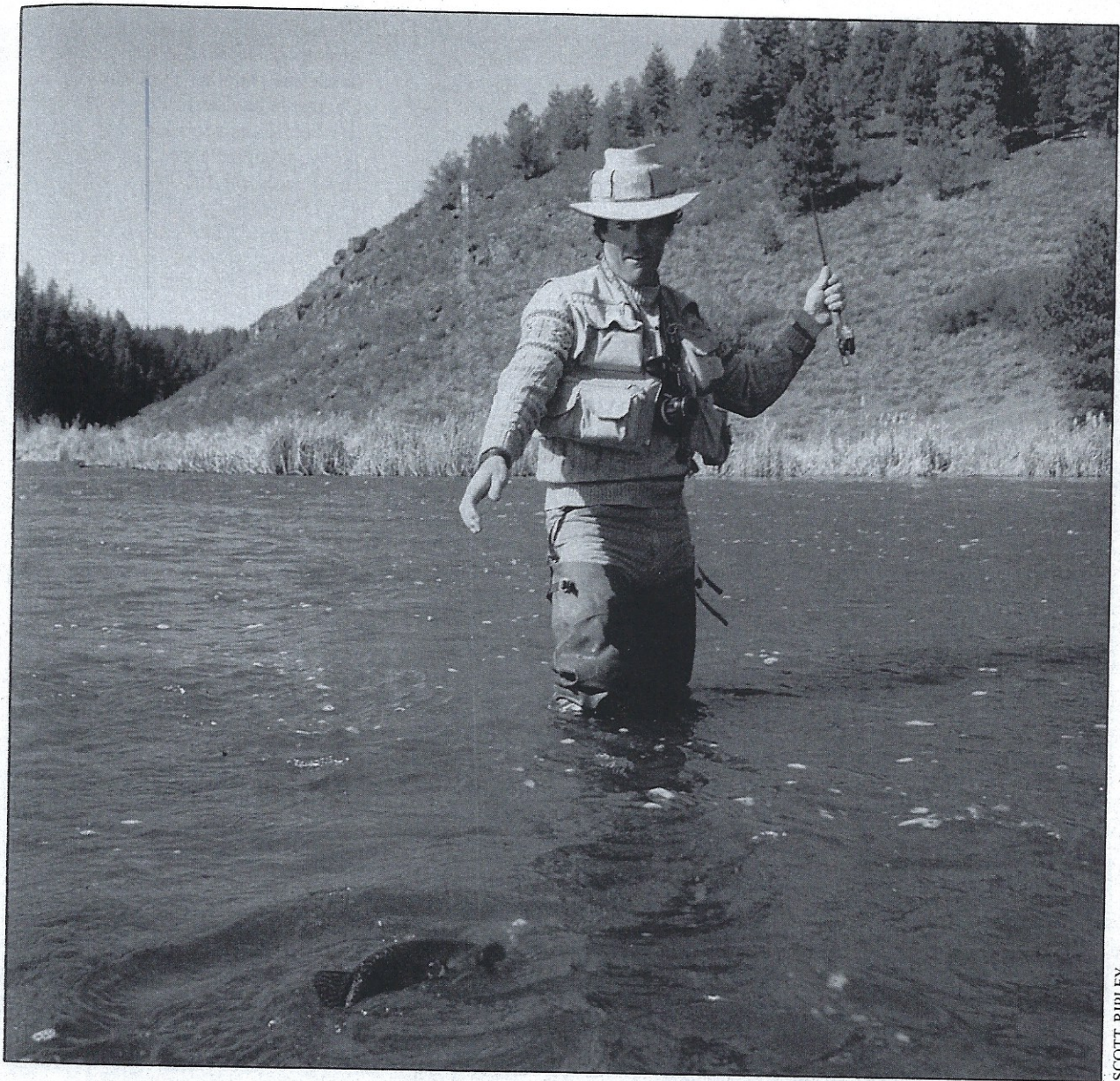
shows signs that its health is quickly returning, and the commissioners okayed sport fishing to resume there for the first time in three years.

Opening on the general trout opener April 30, the Upper Sacramento will be tightly regulated, at least for this season, under mostly wild fish catch-and-release angling, with the exception of a six-mile stretch from the Scarlett Way bridge north of Dunsmuir downstream to the river's confluence with Soda Creek. Within that area, the DFG will stock trout, five of which may be taken daily (with no more than 10 in possession after two days of fishing) with the use of bait on barbless hooks. The remainder of the river, from Box Canyon Dam (near Lake Siskiyou) to Shasta Lake, falls under catch-and-release regulations; barbless hooks and artificial lures only may be used.

Prior to this spring's trout planting in that six-mile stretch, the only DFG stocking since the spill has been an introduction of wild fish which were artificially spawned and raised from existing Sacramento River stock.

To compensate for the lack of a full hatchery-supported fishery on the Upper Sacramento, the DFG will continue to divide its allotment of trout among surrounding waters. This bonanza means additional numbers for Siskiyou, Castle and Tamarack lakes, Greenhorn and McCloud reservoirs plus the Railroad Park ponds near Dunsmuir.

Gathering muscle from its Middle and North branches, the South Fork Sacramento above Lake Siskiyou remains one of my favorites. A classic flood plain-type water gurgling over a freestone base with moderate gradient, its pockets, pools and riffles always seem to hold rainbows which average 6 to 12 inches. Early morning and late afternoon appear to be the best times to dab either weighted nymphs or salmon eggs behind boulders for solid takes.



SCOTT RIPLEY

Other early-season bets include Siskiyou-feeder Wagon Creek and the Upper and Lower McCloud rivers along Highway 89.

Thanks to the dense snowpack in the Shasta and Cascade mountains, water temperatures should be cold on top at Lakes Shasta, Clair Engle (Trinity), and its forebay, Lewiston. This means prime conditions at all three for surface trolling for native, planted and holdover rainbows and browns. Towing rainbow-imitating plugs or lures in the top 15 feet of water will produce trout up to 24 inches. Jointed Rebels, Rapalas, Crippures, Pro Secrets and Rainbow Runners in silver or gold are excellent choices.

Open from the last Saturday in April through Sept. 15, the "Fly Stretch" of the Trinity River,

extending from a point directly below Lewiston Dam to the Old Lewiston Bridge, is also appealing due to the number of fish present. Wading the riffles and flicking either dry or subsurface patterns seems to be equally productive. Regulations stipulate a two-trout limit, with artificial flies and barbless hooks as the method of take.

Whiskeytown Reservoir and tributaries Clear and Brandy creeks are well-noted for early-season hatchery rainbows, as are the Stuart Fork and Upper Trinity rivers plus Coffee Creek.

While the Upper Sac is staggering, the fast-moving section below Shasta from Redding to Red Bluff remains one of the finest tailwater fisheries in the West, according to Wertz. "The typical rainbow here runs 1 to 2

pounds with many up to 5 pounds."

Some of my greatest days have come in either power or drift boats bouncing Glo Bugs along bottom structure, although popular back-trolled plugs such as Wee Warts and Hot Shots, worked tantalizingly through holes, also take their share of these feisty 'bows. While it is legal to keep three trout per day, most anglers release their catches, especially since the DFG warns that they contain high levels of dioxins — a potential threat to human health.

Early-season anglers are always looking for cooperative trout in uncrowded conditions. A pair of my favorite spots are the upper riffles entering both Iron Gate and Copco lakes on the Upper Klamath River. Husky rainbows in the 2- to 5-pound class congregate in these sections

thanks to cold flows and plenty of food. These migrating lake dwellers prefer an assortment of spinners, spoons, weighted flies or night crawlers drifted along the bottom.

NORTHEASTERN REGION

Encompassing both the heavily forested intermountain area between Mt. Shasta and Mt. Lassen, fertile bottomland and high desert sage, this region possesses a wide range of diversified waters. While benefiting from spring-fed seeps, nutrient-rich flows percolating over igneous bases and cloud-like insect hatches, it is the amazing abundance of both native and planted species in varying sizes that has dubbed this the Trout Capitol of Northern California.

Although run-off will affect some mountain locales, local angling guru Steve Vaughn feels it is safe to assume that most streams will be fishable by opening day, the last Saturday in April. Criss-crossed by Highways 89 and 299, this region is the beneficiary of numerous plants from nearby Crystal Lake Fish Hatchery. "Virtually every stream accessible by road should be planted by the DFG prior to opening day," Vaughn said.

In eastern Shasta County, Vaughn suggests Upper Hat Creek in the Highway 89 stretch between Honn Camp and Old Station, Lower Hat in the Cassel Forebay region, Upper and Lower Burney plus Hatchett and Clark creeks for a mixed bag of rainbows, browns and brookies, and Baum Lake reputedly houses some impressive-sized browns. "A few years back, a DFG shocking excursion turned up a 20-pound-plus brown. Since it was released, it is probably still there," he happily adds.

While some anglers enjoy dunking night crawlers for chunky browns in the Pit River near Pit 1 Powerhouse, others enjoy the challenge of Fall River's leader-shy rainbows. Access to the Fall is limited by private property while Pit access below Lake Britton is restricted by steep, canyonous terrain.

Though easily accessed and thus heavily pressured, the specially regulated wild trout section of Lower Hat Creek is Vaughn's personal favorite. "Anglers who can match the hatch in the correct size and at the correct time, will enjoy some fantastic action."

Seepage from the southern shoulders of Mt. Lassen produce Mill,

Deer, Battle, Guernsey and Warner creeks along with the North Fork and Hamilton Branch of the Feather River, plus the reluctant Lake Almanor. While some pleasant rainbow action takes place in the submerged river channel of this mountain jewel, springtime boaters might also tangle with some lake-reared king salmon in the 3- to 5-pound range.



Tom Gieser's mounted brook trout came from Kirman Lake near Sonora Pass. Photo by Don Vachini.

Quincy-area waters Spanish Creek and Bucks Lake (if the road is open) should be good early-season producers. Some gargantuan-sized rainbows can be taken where Bucks Creek enters the lake.

Heavily planted along Highway 70/89, the middle Fork Feather enters a rugged canyon past Nelson Creek. Hikers into this area will find both the trout and terrain to be wild. Tributary Jamison Creek, a cascading stream with plenty of structure, is a great bet for solitude and wary, pan-sized rainbows.

Infused with 150,000 Eagle Lake-strain rainbows, highly alkaline Eagle Lake is expected to maintain its prolific normalcy this season, according to DFG biologist Paul Chappelle. "Normal" in this case means trout in the 17- to 20-inch, 2- to 3-pound category, although he predicts a fair share will run close to 4 pounds.

When the mercury dips low, the big trout can be found just outside the tule beds at the north end of the lake. While in-the-know anglers often cast inflated night crawlers and wait for

cruising trout, trolling Woolly Buggers or Jay Fair Specials with fly tackle is another popular tactic. Chappelle advises fishing early in the day before the winds arise. (For your safety, Chappelle recommends that anglers get off the water when the wind blows.)

The Eagle Lake season runs from the Saturday preceding Memorial Day through Dec. 31 with a two-fish limit.

SIERRA NEVADA (North & West Slope)

Running nearly two-thirds the length of the state, the western Sierra Nevada, a sky-scraping, fault-block range, is synonymous with quality trout waters. Some of the deepest, moisture-laden snowpack in years should rejuvenate the headwater sections of the Middle and North Forks Yuba, the Truckee between Tahoe City and Truckee and Little Truckee between Stampede and Boca reservoirs.

Some North Sierra stillwater fisheries expected to excel this season include Jackson Meadows, Stampede, Boca and Prosser reservoirs, plus Donner Lake. The massive inland sea known as Tahoe should consistently yield 4- to 12-pound mackinaw for boaters who are adept with sonar and downriggers. Specially regulated Milton has a slot limit in place to protect a small population of 12- to 16-inch browns, while Martis Lake's weed-infested waters produce rainbows and browns in the 3- to 4-pound, albeit under catch-and-release regulations.

West slope waters seldom produce large trout. While the quality of their angling is often directly related to the hatchery truck's last visit, their vibrant, cascading flows recite a pleasant sonata to anglers' ears.

Gamblers headed to South Lake Tahoe casinos along Highway 50 will find both the South Fork and the Silver Fork American rivers offering good piscatorial odds. Granite-encircled Ice House, Loon and Union Valley reservoirs, plus Caples and Silver lakes, should again be steady performers for planted and holdover rainbows and browns.

The South Stanislaus along Highway 108, the main Tuolumne along Highway 120 and its Middle Fork just outside the Yosemite National Park boundary, the Merced

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near El Portal (check the regs), the Kings just outside Kings Canyon National Park and the Kern just north of Lake Isabella are all easy-to-reach rivers offering a good chance at catching a few trout for dinner.

EASTERN SIERRA NEVADA

A snow-enshrouded chain of mountains rising abruptly above high desert and the lush Owens Valley, the Eastern Sierra towers over Highway 395 from Lake Tahoe to Lone Pine. Some mighty impressive trout exist in the shadows of this ice-carved escarpment.

According to Darrell Wong, a fisheries biologist from the DFG office in Bishop, the minerals that erode off these weathered, granitic edifices drain into numerous watersheds below, enriching plant and aquatic life. "Some of the richest waters in the state occur in the Eastern Sierra," he said.

Wong warns that melt-off from a gigantic snowpack could wreak havoc with streams by mid-May. "On the other hand, Eastern Sierra streams tend to get a lot of high water that is not necessarily muddy, so they are usually fishable."

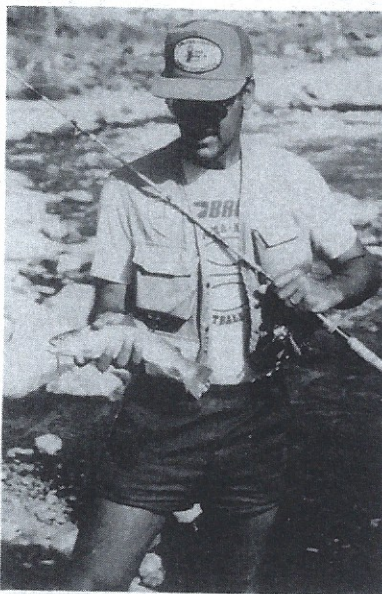
Run-off won't adversely affect streams with controlled flows or below dams. Hot Creek, Owens River, Rush Creek and the East Walker River are a few such possibilities.

Wong also revealed that well over 100,000 catchable-sized rainbows will be awaiting anglers along roadside stretches of Lee Vining, Convict, Swanger, Robinson, Mammoth, Rush, Reverse, Mill, Virginia, Buckeye, Bishop and Rock creeks, plus the East and West Carson, West Walker and Owens rivers.

A typical east slope stream, Lee Vining Creek has never disappointed me. Secluded just off Highway 120, it has close to five miles of pools, pockets, riffles and flat sections shaded by a cottonwood and pine canopy. A kid with a jar of salmon eggs can often achieve the same results as an accomplished fly angler on its highly gullible implants.

To many a Los Angeles-based angler, the true opener occurs on Lake Crowley where tens of thousands of trout have been planted in anticipation of this annual event.

Wong feels that the lake's nutrient-rich waters are capable of sustaining huge numbers of trout. Fifteen thousands small browns, 87,000 small Kamloops trout and 275,000 small rainbows were deposited to grow over the winter. In addition to this, it is anticipated that the DFG will plant 75,000 rainbows in the half-pound range and nearly 2,500 broodstock rainbows ranging from 3 to 5 pounds before the opener.



Author Don Vachini admires a typical East Walker River brown trout. Photo courtesy of Don Vachini.

Mono County offers the best chance at catching trophy-sized specimens of four different species. In addition to Crowley, huge rainbows in the 2- to 8-pound category are available in several area lakes, including those at Bridgeport, June Loop and Mammoth. These lunkers, usually paid for by county administrators as an added incentive for tourists, are supplied by a private hatchery at Alpers Ranch. Augmenting both native and DFG stocks, these "Alpers Trout" will not only test tackle but nerves as well!

Anglers pursuing hefty browns can opt for a trio of locations. Besides the deep waters of Convict, the Twin Lakes at Bridgeport have enjoyed rousing success over the past five years. While the Upper Twin produced the current state record 26 1/2-pounder, all three waters house specimens estimated between 20 and 30 pounds, so the next state record could be set at any of these.

Many record-seekers rapidly (5 to

7 mph) tow size 13 to 18 Rapalas, Rebels or hand-painted plugs near the surface while constantly keeping the rod forward and letting it troll back.

Opening Saturday is also the chance for fly-rodgers to test Kirman Lake, the noted trophy brook trout lake near Sonora Pass. While anglers must hike three miles (possibly through snow drifts) and carry their own float tubes, brookies between 2 and 6 pounds can be taken mainly on scud and leech patterns.

Nicknamed "Air-brushed footballs," these char maintain their prodigious pigskin proportions by dining on an abundant shrimp population in this extremely nutrient-rich water at 7,000 feet. Special regulations include barbless hooks, no bait and two-fish limits with a 16-inch minimum size.

The Laurels, a pair of non-consumptive lakes nestled near 9,000 feet just south of Mammoth Lakes, offer a rare look at California's gaudy state fish. Adventuresome anglers traversing the horrendous 4wd road/trail will have a chance at kaleidoscopic goldens up to 15 inches!

Planning to visit a certain area in California but not sure what area has been stocked? All but one DFG office has recorded messages informing of recent plants. Messages are updated weekly.

Region 1, Redding, (916) 225-2146.

Region 2, Sacramento, (916) 351-0832.

Region 4, Fresno, (209) 222-5761.

Region 5, Long Beach, (310) 590-5020.

For up-to-the-minute information by region, contact the following:

Shasta Cascade Wonderland Association, Redding and surrounding North State counties, (800) 326-6944.

The Fly Shop, Redding, (916) 222-3555

Steve Vaughn, Burney, (916) 335-2381.

Alan Bruzza, Quincy, (916) 283-2735.

Russ Wickwire, North Sierra, (916) 583-6824.

Rick Rockel, Bridgeport, (619) 932-7707.

DFG Bishop, (619) 872-1171.

DFG Fresno, (209) 222-3761. □