

*This drought  
resistant water  
provides a  
challenging winter  
trout fishery for  
Bay Area anglers*

Proper fly presentation  
is essential for success.

long tailwater section, coursing a gently-sloping, oak and bay woodlands landscape while snaking beneath a thickly woven willow and blackberry infested cover, has been reborn with water intended for irrigational purposes. The rapids, pools and pockets of this wonderfully diverse stream have become a haven for trout. Beyond the first three miles, the banks widen and swift flows subside as Lake Solano is formed, its diverted water serving to slate the palate of thirsty valley agricultural needs.

Due to year-round angling, the creek is heavily planted with rainbow catchables by the Department of Fish and Game (DFG) from March through mid-November. Anglers of varying skills poke a variety of worms, salmon eggs and Power Baits through several deep pools, most of which are easily accessible to the planter truck via paved turnouts. However, during the special "winter regulations," hatchery implants cease and anglers are faced with pursuing trout with fly tackle only. Flies with single barbless hooks and zero-limit restrictions also serve to reduce pressure immensely.

Indeed, my sons and I often visit here during this period and find very few, if any, competing anglers. Typical was the winter day Chris and I entered the water about a mile below the dam on one of our favorite (and more demanding) stretches. During a two hour span of working a series of stepladder rapids while negotiating thickly-woven brush, we virtually had the water to ourselves. Despite setting our hooks into roots, beneath rocks and through blank water, we had each released a pair of 'bows before emerging. While Chris' 15 incher was the largest, all four were sleek, silvery and of firm girth, symbolic of a healthy stream life!

Although a sparse population of chunky browns exist here, native and



## Putah Creek's Tailwater Trout

Don Oachini

**T**hough it was mid-January, parched, tawny-brown hillsides revealed the severity of California's five year drought. Yet, ten paces from the dusty roadside turnout, I was greeted by the vibrant gurgle of a healthy flow rushing beneath a canopy of prickly brambles, dormant alders and willows. Stepping into the frigid, silty-green waters, I hunched low to avoid the overhanging tangle while tediously probing my Hare's Ear nymph into a likely pocket.

Moments after a raucous family of acorn woodpeckers distracted me, a gentle tug refocused my priorities. Dead bark and twigs hailed on me as my fly rod whacked a lifeless branch while vigorously driving home the fly. It was certainly difficult lamenting the paucity of rainfall while immersed thigh deep in cool, gushing water, engaging a hyperactive 14-inch rainbow!

On this particular occasion, son Chris and I were visiting Putah Creek, a San Francisco Bay Area water not only noted for stable, year-long flows but its challenging winter-time trouting as well. Tucked in the northwestern corner of Solano County, this trout-rich stream is situated virtually equidistant from metropolitan Sacramento to the east and San Francisco to the south.

Historically, this stream heads in the Cobb Mountain area near Middletown, gathering muscle from several Lake and Napa county tributaries as it flows nearly 25 miles in a southeasterly direction. Prior to 1956, it cut freely through a steep coastal mountain canyon before meandering through the open central valley to its ultimate merge with the Sacramento River just south of the state capitol.

The construction of Monticello Dam in 1957 not only created sprawling Lake Berryessa but forever altered the creek below the dam. The resultant six-mile



planted rainbows are the main fare. According to Jim Ryan, a fisheries biologist with the DFG's Region 2 office, several types of rainbows are found in Putah, with the popular Coleman strain dominating the list. "A cross between Kamloops and steelhead, they are most noted for their fighting qualities," he informed. "Since they are winter spawners," he adds, "they are practically made to order for coastal type drainages like this."

Benefitting from near optimum conditions, Ryan reveals most residents here fall into the 12 to 15 inch range, with plenty of fish approaching four pounds.

Siphoned deep from within the bowels of Berryessa, cold flows are available all year long. "Water temperatures in the creek rarely climb above 50 degrees," informed Ryan. "Also, due to established irrigational quotas, there are no great fluctuations from year to year."

Stone, caddis and mayflies, present throughout the drainage, provide a healthy, nutrient-rich food base for the trout. Their diet is also supplemented with sculpin and various minnow-like forage species.

Besides food and water, Ryan feels it is the tangled stands of bankside trees and brambles along with their exposed root systems that provide prime cover for the trout and account for angler frustrations. Though some spawning takes place, most winter trout are holdover plants, some older than one season. "The high survival ratio of the planters is largely attributed to the brushy nature of this stream," Ryan is quick to point out.

The open stretch between the dam and the Highway 128 Bridge offers both easy access and excellent structure, permitting a more traditional approach to fly casting. Working the swift riffles here with well placed offerings will produce feisty, seven- to ten-inch rainbows more readily than the jungled sections beyond.

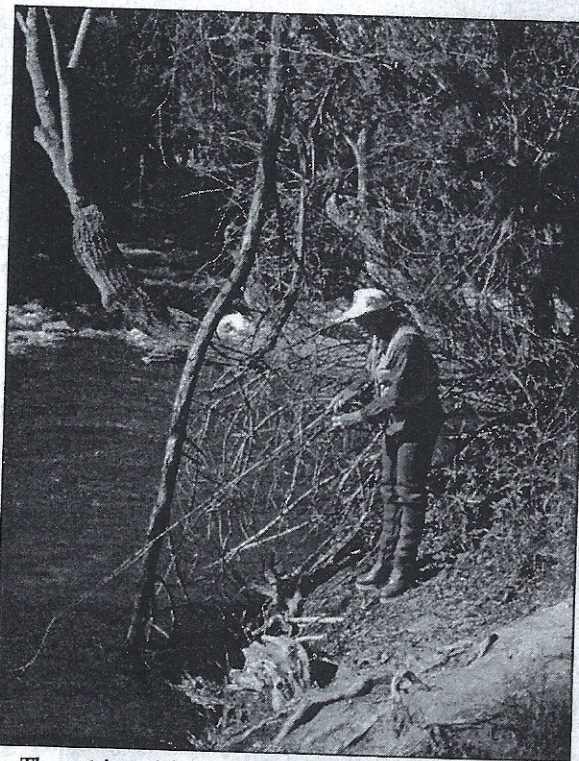
Anglers opting to pursue the bigger fish, however, will find Putah extremely demanding since they will need to explore the multitude of brushpiles and root-infested structure found further downstream. Though only 30 to 40 feet wide in most places, dense thickets along most sections makes wading practically mandatory. I find the best procedure is to enter the stream and stay in it to avoid nearly impassible shoreline brush. While summer flows often exceed 400 cfs, winter releases are cut back consider-



All winter trout must be released on Putah.

ably, permitting in-creek progress. Neoprene waders are a good bet, whether stationed waist deep in a pool or moving from one locale to another through ankle-deep riffles.

Though a good number of sturdy fish reside here, they are not easily duped. Gratifying piscatorial rewards, however, are only available to those who can successfully unlock Putah's late-season secrets. During the winter session, I normally forget about dry flies and rely solely on dark shaded nymph patterns. Since residents feed on a veritable smorgasbord of these immature underwater insects, working imitations of this aquatic phase is a most successful endeavor.



The nutrient-rich food base is evident in the silty-green flows.

Reading water is a necessary prerequisite to properly present a fly on this water. I constantly search for the seams along current lines, drop offs and pockets behind submerged boulders. Inhabitants here will choose the path of least resistance, often holding in the slack current adjacent to the feeding lanes where they can easily dart to pick up a hapless morsel.

While the ability to identify underwater structure and aggressive wading will increase payoff possibilities, fly penetration is the real key to success. To reach this end, I point the fly rod high to keep as much line off

the water while allowing the fly to stay deep. My favorite technique involves dabbing the weighted imitation into the faster water and then swinging it downstream into the pool while keeping as much tension on the line as possible.

Decreased metabolisms are often a characteristic of winter trout, making them appear lethargic. Twitching the nymph up and down and then letting it sit and repeating this sequence through the drift will frequently prod them into action. Since they will commonly take on the upswing motion of the fly, riveting attention on the strike indicator will help detect even the slightest hit.

A short line worked from a wading position enables me to control drift placement as well as eliminate cross-current drag. On most nymphing situations here, I try to place the fly in a quartering position, then bring it across and downstream before drag takes place. Since tightly-knitted, overhanging growth often makes for tight quarters, I can rarely make a full cast, instead positioning the fly with more of a flip. Short roll casts also enable me to keep brushy encounters to a minimum. In most cases only the leader with one to two feet of fly line is out the tip.

One of my most satisfying Putah Creek trout came from a formidable lie directly beneath a succession of low hanging branches, a fortress which almost defied logic. To reach the well protected, swirling eddy, I had to maneuver mid-creek above it, pendulum line cross stream and then hastily feed line out the rod to keep it on the opposite edge of a fast moving chute. When the fly was finally sucked deep into the trough, the take was both instantaneous and dynamic. Then the skirmish began in



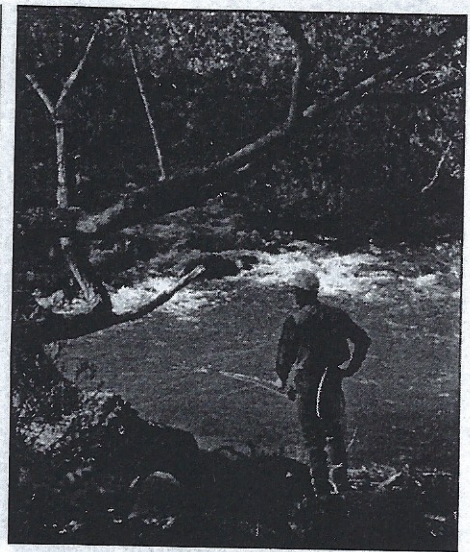
earnest. As the bruiser indignantly shook his head and headed rootward, I instinctively submerged my rod tip, arcing it upstream to apply plenty of pressure in an attempt to turn him. Three times I horsed him towards me and three times he haughtily finned away. However, the fourth run significantly diminished his pugnacity and soon nearly two pounds of rotund rainbow was recovering in my hand. Mint-bright with a deep pink lateral, he cast a baleful stare in my direction as his sturdy torso began rippling with regained vigor. Though I had the distinction of hooking and landing him under adverse conditions, he had the final satisfaction of

splashing my glasses as he defiantly bolted back to his well guarded domain!

My favorite Putah nymph rod is a 7 1/2 footer capable of handling six- to seven-weight line. This setup not only allows me to manipulate line over tricky currents but to strike quickly as well. I favor a floating line matched with a medium length leader for drag free drifts. Since the water always has a consistent murky-green tint, tippet size becomes a non-factor. Personally, I favor eight-pound tippets in the 18 to 24 inch range.

Small, size 10 to 14 nymphs are my standbys. Besides Caddis Pupa, Olive Caddis Larva, Gold Ribbed Hare's Ear and other tan through dark brown caddis replicas, Brassies, Bird's Nests, A.P. and Pheasant Tail nymphs plus brown or black Woolly Worms and Woolly Buggers have proven reliable patterns for me. As is the case on most other streams or rivers as well, it is not so much the pattern or color but how well the offering is presented.

The best times to fish the creek seem to be right after its flows are cut (usually by early December) or later in the season when rains have warmed the water slightly and the trout become more active. Probably exhibiting the steelhead traits in their genes, the larger Coleman rainbows tend to congregate near the two incoming rivulets, often attempting to ascend them



It is the tangled strands of bankside trees and brambles that provide prime cover for trout.

when they become swollen with runoff. A few years back, Chris took a brace of mint bright 'bows while working a white streamer along the mouth of one of these tiny feeders.

Though managing to keep a low profile, a tiny population of sizeable browns inhabit Putah. Introduced by the DFG nearly three decades ago, shortly after steady flows were established, they have found conditions to their liking. According to Ryan, the bulk of these hardy trout commonly range up to four pounds. "Though extremely wary, specimens up to eight pounds have been discovered in stream census surveys," he beams.

Proving to be worthy adversaries, very few of these trout find their way into angler's creels. However, Ryan feels that those who persist can achieve success. He explains that threadfin shad, an extremely prodigious Berryessa baitfish, commonly get washed down from the lake and become easy prey for the big browns. Winter anglers can take advantage of their propensity for fishy meals by working silvery size six to eight streamers on the bottom along undercut banks or near the base of large boulders. A high density sinking line is necessary for this maneuver.

Since they are fall spawners, late-October and early-November are prime times to try for them, although during spring and summer seasons, whole night-crawlers allowed to settle on the bottom of deep, languid pools will occasionally illicit a response.

Despite the high degree of difficulty associated with this stream, my sons and I will continue to visit it regularly during winter seasons. Only 50 minutes from our doorstep, it has not only become our "ace in the hole" during low water or drought situations but the quality trout found among its tangled living quarters helps us keep our nymphing skills well honed! □

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