

# Putah Creek Rainbows

*This drought-resistant waterway with its population of wild rainbow trout provides a challenging winter fishery for Bay Area anglers.*

by Don Vachini

All of our standby streams in the Sierra Nevada and Cascade ranges were heavily occupied with snow and ice, and our other favorite trout getaways had already been closed to fishing for the winter. Ah, you say, there are always a few lakes within a couple hours' drive to ply.

Alas, a wife's honey-do list wouldn't even afford that type of luxury, and my son, Chris, fared as poorly in trying to convince his wife of our need to fish 100 miles away as I did in convincing mine.

That left us with two choices: We could perform those nagging household chores between glimpses of Saturday-afternoon sports programming or find a quick, nearby remedy for our annual bout with cabin fever.

When our hasty decision was made, neither our wives nor we were particularly distraught with our choice of Putah Creek.

Stepping out of our car 12 miles north of Vacaville, we were greeted by a pleasant sonata of gurgling water and a series of kingfishers rattling harshly — encouraging signs for the winter-weary in search of piscatorial rewards. Slipping into the frigid, silty-green waters of Putah Creek, my spirits were rejuvenated not just by the mere feel of water once again collapsing waders taut against my legs, but by the knowledge that the water enveloping first my feet, then my knees and, finally my thighs has a reputation for yielding hefty trout. It was hard to convince myself I should be home repairing a sticky sliding door, while immersed in a potent flow of water deftly attempting to coerce reclusive rainbow trout. My "fever" was definitely dropping!

Less than an hours' drive from our doorstep and easily accessible, this incredibly trout-rich waterway tucked in the northwestern corner of Solano County is rapidly gaining a reputation as *the* San Francisco Bay Area's quality trout stream. Indeed, visitors can realistically expect to land trout in the 4- to 5-pound range with alarming regularity.

The stream headwaters form in the Cobb Mountain area near Middletown, gathering muscle from several tributaries in Lake and Napa counties as it flows easterly at first then bends south near Devil's Head Peak. Prior to 1956, the stream cut freely through a steep canyon before meandering into the open Central Valley to its ultimate

confluence with the Sacramento River just south of the state capital.

To the creek's rainbow trout, however, conditions were not necessarily optimum, according to Fred Meyer, a fisheries biologist with the Department of Fish and Game's (DFG) Region 2 office in Rancho Cordova. "In a typical season, the creek ran high during late winter rains, and low and warm by early fall. The native rainbows and small numbers of anadromous steelhead which temporarily used the stream, although hardy, were plagued with warm water temperatures, low flows and limited structure, especially in dry years," he said.

However, the construction of Monticello Dam in 1957 created sprawling Lake Berryessa and forever changed this creek's roller-coaster trait. While the isolated upper sections above the lake are still subject to the whims of nature, the 3 1/2-mile tailwater section below has been reborn with water intended for irrigation purposes.

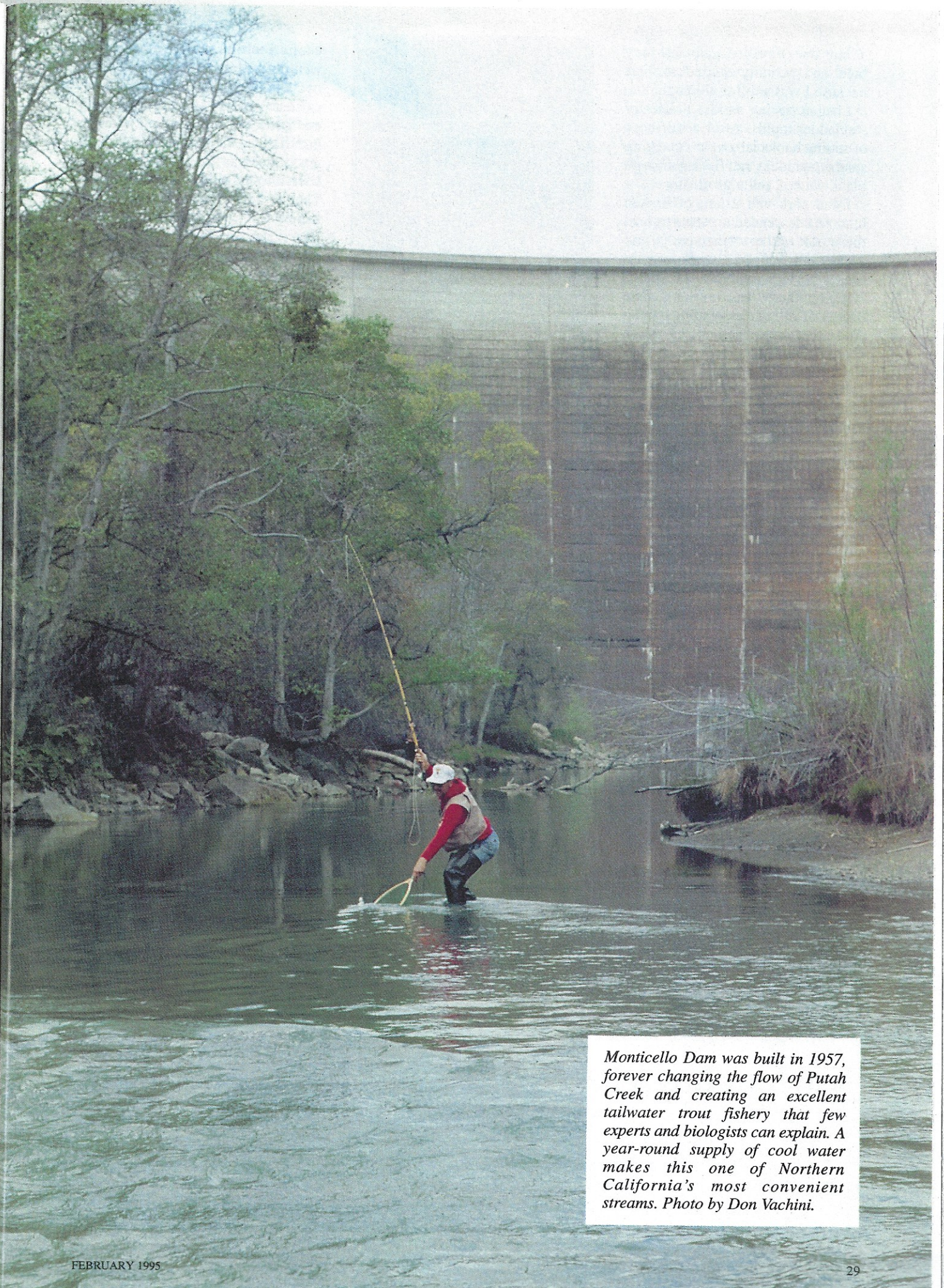
In a gently widening canyon laden with oak and bay woodlands, Putah Creek snakes beneath a thick canopy of willows and blackberries that cover many of its pools, pockets and rapids. Beyond this point, the creek broadens and slows a bit. The remaining few miles downstream to a diversion dam is referred to as Solano Lake, the stores of which help quench agricultural needs while providing exceptional angling.

Open to angling all year, the creek is currently managed for planted trout during summer and as a wild trout fishery during winter. During the general trout season (last Saturday in April through Nov. 15) anglers of varying skills try for limits of five fish per day by poking a variety of salmon eggs, worms and Power Baits through sections that are easily accessible to the planter truck. However, during the winter, hatchery implants cease and special regulations stipulate flicking barbless flies and releasing all fish in order to guard against depleting its wild stock. It is during this period that my sons and I become frequent visitors to Putah Creek.

Though subject to current weather patterns, optimum times to ply the creek for native 'bows are late November/early December just after flows are diminished, or right after rains have slightly warmed the water. During February/March, many of the hefty wild trout move upstream into the gravel bars near the dam to spawn.

## THE FISH

Roughly a mile below the dam, Chris and I had split up and I couldn't help but wonder whether his joy of immersion was as pronounced (Continued)



*Monticello Dam was built in 1957, forever changing the flow of Putah Creek and creating an excellent tailwater trout fishery that few experts and biologists can explain. A year-round supply of cool water makes this one of Northern California's most convenient streams. Photo by Don Vachini.*

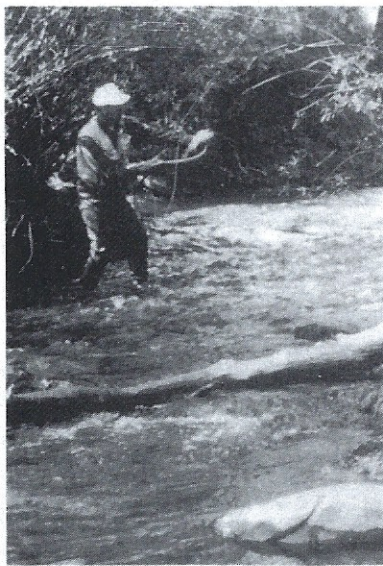
as my own unveiled giddiness; my face had actually started to hurt because I was smiling so much.

I began casting amidst a series of stepladder rapids. After a half-hour of setting hooks into roots, snagging submerged rocks and fishing through blank water, I felt a gentle tug.

Dead bark and a hail of broken branches descended upon me as I set the hook rather vehemently and accidentally rapped several dormant branches hanging low overhead. Happily, there was no immediate danger of any of them falling on me. And the hyper-active 14-incher charging my fly rod coerced me into forgetting about honey-do *anything*.

Reaching across the fast-moving chute, I placed the nymph on the opposite edge of the current, employing a high-stick maneuver to maintain slight tension on the line. First gradually lowering then pointing the rod, I rapidly fed more line out the tip, allowing the leader to be sucked under the willow tangle hovering no more than a foot above the swirling eddy.

Moments after a dynamic take, the bruiser violently shook its head from side to side and headed rootward. By



*Working a short line while wading amidst thick understory is highly effective for fooling Putah Creek rainbows. Photo by Don Vachini.*

submerging my rod tip and arcing it to increase pressure, I gradually diminished the pugnacity of its runs and was finally able to land nearly 3 pounds of rotund rainbow.

Cradled gently in my palm prior to release, the sleek, silvery rainbow was adorned with an array of finely

etched black spots and a well-defined fin structure, indicative of a wild trout with a healthy stream existence. While I had used cunning and guile to hook and land him, he had the final distinction of splashing my glasses as he haughtily bolted back into his well-guarded fortress. Though I have taken fish up to 18 inches from this lair over the past few years, it is the degree of difficulty of this lie that really stirs my juices.

During the two hours spent on this stretch, Chris and I each managed to release a brace of girthy fish of 12 to 15 inches. Trout of this magnitude are the reason in-the-know anglers religiously trek here.

While some facts are clear, it remains a mystery even to fisheries personnel as to how Putah's self-sustaining rainbow trout populations came to exist. A study conducted in 1988 by Dr. Peter Moyle, a professor of fisheries biology at U.C. Davis, was instrumental in convincing the DFG that the creek really does host wild fish. "In addition to healthy numbers of 1- to 4-pounders, we found lots of fingerling and juvenile fish, basically



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from five or six year-classes," he said, "all of which is odd, considering the DFG hasn't planted fingerling trout in over 20 years."

While the history of these special trout is equally unique and baffling, Meyer suggests several possibilities, although he is quick to point out there are no really well-defined answers. While a few residents wash down from Berryessa, a small percentage of the fish are planted trout which have successfully survived for several seasons. "Studies indicate that some of these survivors just grow to trophy size and sustain themselves while not attempting to spawn," Meyer offers. "Instead of put-and-take, these trout become put-and-grow."

The most fascinating specimens, however, are those believed to be either the progeny of pre-dam residents or of planted stocks from the late 1950s. Moyle believes some present-day fish are most likely descendants of indigenous trout. He also theorizes that since the DFG stocked the creek with trout of various strains into the early '60's, some of today's trout may be descendants of the holdover trout.



*Chris Vachini nailed this Putah Creek rainbow just after the water flow from Monticello Dam was cut to about 50 cfs. Photo by Don Vachini.*

"Scale samples of current trout reveal these fish to be quite similar to McCloud and Eagle Lake trout with some native steelhead mixed in their genes," Moyle points out.

Other Moyle postulates include fish being washed down from Berryessa or from Cold Water Creek and other Putah tributaries. "Whatever their origin, this wild-

trout strain is marvelously adapted to the creek, growing to trophy status rather quickly."

Lending some credence to the belief that these natives possibly originated from tributaries, winter rainbows will often congregate near a few of the incoming rivulets. One rainy afternoon a few years back, Chris worked a fluorescent orange and white streamer across the mouth of a swollen Cold Water Creek to perfection. The duet of gleaming 15-inchers he released were most likely intent on ascending the swollen feeder for reproductive rituals.

Though managing to keep an exceedingly low profile, small numbers of brown trout also exist throughout the creek's murky waters, according to Meyer. "While the bulk of these will range up to 4 pounds, specimens up to 8 pounds have been discovered in stream census surveys," he said.

In accordance with its statewide promise to produce larger catchables, the DFG has also developed and planted strains of trout here that will spawn virtually year 'round. The Hot Creek and Coleman rainbows are

*Continued on page 60*

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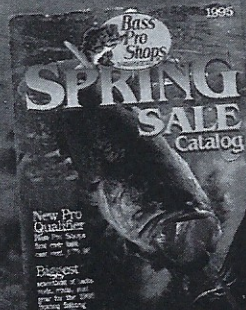
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**PUTAH CREEK ... Continued**

well adapted to coastal-type drainages because they spawn when water conditions are most suitable to them, which is usually late fall or winter. In fact, Meyer says that the Coleman strain in particular, which is a cross between steelhead and Kamloops trout, is most compatible with existing stream conditions.

Benefitting from near optimum conditions, a good portion of the trout here fall into the 12- to 15-inch range with plenty of fish in the 4- to 6-pound bracket; every year a few

specimens of 7 to 10 pounds are landed. "I am totally amazed by how many really big fish exist in this little piece of water," Moyle exclaims.

**THE HABITAT**

Thanks to releases funneled deep from the bowels of Berryessa, cold water is available year 'round. These nutrient-rich waters are amazingly fertile and productive, providing a healthy and abundant food base of caddis, mayflies and stoneflies. Dining heavily on nymphal stages of these insects, the growth rate for trout here is among the fastest anywhere, according to Meyer.

The tangled stands of bankside trees and brush along with their exposed root systems provide prime cover for the trout and account for angler frustrations. In fact, anglers opting to pursue the big rainbows will find Putah extremely challenging, since they will need to deftly probe the multitude of brush piles and root-hewn pools where the bigger trout take sanctuary. Though only 30 to 40 feet wide in most spots, dense shoreline thickets along most sections make wading practically mandatory.

While summer flows will sometimes approach 500 cubic feet per second (cfs), winter releases are cut back considerably, permitting in-creek wading, with flows nearer 50 cfs. Neoprene waders are a good bet for icy temperatures, whether soaking waist-deep in a pool or just moving from one locale to another through calf-deep riffles.

**THE TACTICS**

Working nymph imitations is a most successful tactic. Basic techniques for this ploy include getting the fly down quickly and keeping it there, using the dead-drift method and reacting quickly to strikes.

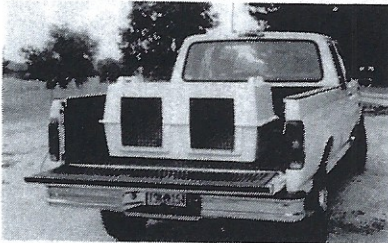
Reading the water is also a must to properly present an offering on this difficult water. It is up to the angler to probe, pry and discover where trout lie in each stretch of water. I search for seams along current lines, pockets behind submerged boulders and dropoffs. Trout will hold near bottom in the slack waters adjacent to the feeding lanes, where they can easily pick up a nymph.

While working these edges, I dab the fly into the faster water and then swing it downstream into the pool. While the fly must drift in a natural manner, twitching the nymph up and down, then letting it sit, and repeating the sequence throughout the retrieve accounts for many of my trout. They will usually take on the upswing motion of the offering.

I find a short line, worked from a wading position enables me to control drift placement and helps eliminate cross-current drag. For most nymphing situations, 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 proves annoying, roll casts enable me to keep brushy

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encounters to a minimum. When in tight quarters, I rarely make a full cast, instead opting to position the fly with more of a flip. In most cases, only the leader with one to two feet of fly line is out of the tip. I attempt to keep as much line off the water as possible, mending line if necessary.

Every effort should be made to present the nymph naturally and deep at Putah. The essential element in nymphing here is that weight, whether in the form of tiny split shot or lead strips, should be added to the leader anywhere from one to two feet above the fly.

Feeding line out of the rod tip is another trick that helps prolong a presentation. One of my favorite and most challenging Putah pools (near the creek's midpoint) terminates under dense, overhanging brush.

#### THE HARDWARE

Although 4- to 5-weight outfits will work, my favorite Putah nymph rod is a 7 1/2-footer with 6- or 7-weight line potential. This setup not only allows me to manipulate line across 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 is not really a factor. My leaders normally test out at 6 to 8 pounds. Since Putah Creek trout don't strike nymphs hard, a floating, fluorescent strike indicator is very helpful.

Trout here seem to prefer the small, larval stages of insects and rarely appear to devote attention to anything on the surface. Personally, I favor skinny, sparsely tied nymphs in sizes 14 to 18. While gold-ribbed Hare's Ear, Olive Caddis Larva, Caddis Pupa and other caddis replicas in varying hues of tan through dark brown are effective for me, Brassies, Bird's Nest, A.P., Prince and Pheasant Tail nymphs, and brown and orange scuds are also consistent patterns. It is not so much the pattern or color but how effectively it is presented.

#### FOR YOUR INFORMATION

Most Bay Area anglers will find Putah to be a relatively short haul for such prime stream angling. Despite its high degree of difficulty, it produces some large wild trout as an antidote for cabin fever!

Between Nov. 16 and the last

Friday in April, the stream is for catch-and-release fly-fishing only with single, barbless hooks. A valid '95 California fishing license is required and must be visibly worn above the angler's waist.

Putah's trout-rich waters are about an hour's drive from metropolitan Sacramento to the east and San Francisco to the south. From the state capital, proceed west along Hwy. 80. Take Hwy. 113 north to Winters, then follow Hwy. 128 to the creek. From San Francisco, follow Hwy. 80 past Fairfield. Take the Lagoon Valley/Cherry Glen exit,

following the latter north 12 miles to intersect Hwy. 128.

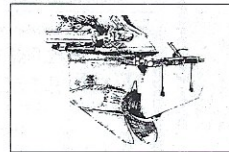
Day-use facilities and 67 campsites are available at Solano Lake Park. Overnight stays in the campground run \$15 per night with sites available on a first-come, first-served basis. For further information, call (916) 795-2990.

Up-to-the-minute angling conditions can be obtained from the Pardesha Store, (916) 795-3850.

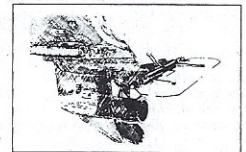
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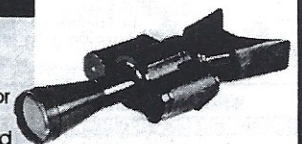
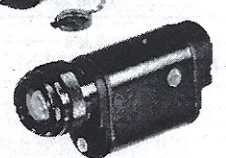
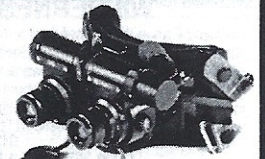
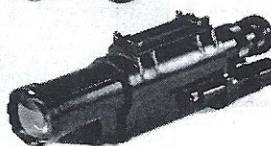
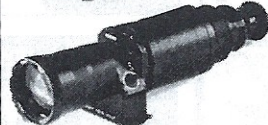
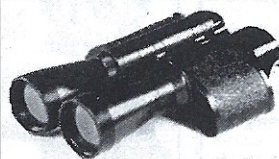
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