

Toiyabe's Trophy Trout Triangle

BY DON VACHINI

FISH IN THE THREE-TO-FIVE-pound class — Schwarzenegger trout — are not uncommon," beams Brad Beckering, a guide who works in the Toiyabe National Forest's Trophy Trout Triangle. The triangle, composed of Poore, Roosevelt, Lane, Secret, and Kirman Lakes, five extremely productive destinations situated in the West Walker drainage north of Bridgeport, California, is nestled roughly around the 7,000-foot elevation amid extensive stands of Jeffrey, lodgepole, and white pine, plus a bountiful blanket of rolling, high-desert sage. This quintet of lakes continues to gain a reputation for larger-than-average rainbow, cutthroat, and brook trout. While a significant proportion of the fish fall between 13 and 15 inches and average close to a pound, a healthy share, sporting broad shoulders and massive girth, approach the two-pound category.

Bordered by Yosemite National Park and the Hoover Wilderness, this specific sector of the Toiyabe National Forest contains 30 lakes and over 100 miles of stream. Ice and snowmelt from the area, which produces most of the water for the West Walker River system, drains through Leavitt Meadows en route toward Highways 108 and 395 before coursing into Nevada. It's a fine place to seek trout that can be compared to the Governor.

The Lakes

Poore Lake, a 100-acre impoundment, sits in an open, windswept canyon. Relatively shallow in its upper reaches Poore's most productive structure is located in the lower third of the reservoir, where it narrows and approaches depths of 85 feet near the dam. My son and I have had very good action along the eastern shore, which can come alive during the

evening with cruising trout splashing and slurping amid prolific insect hatches.

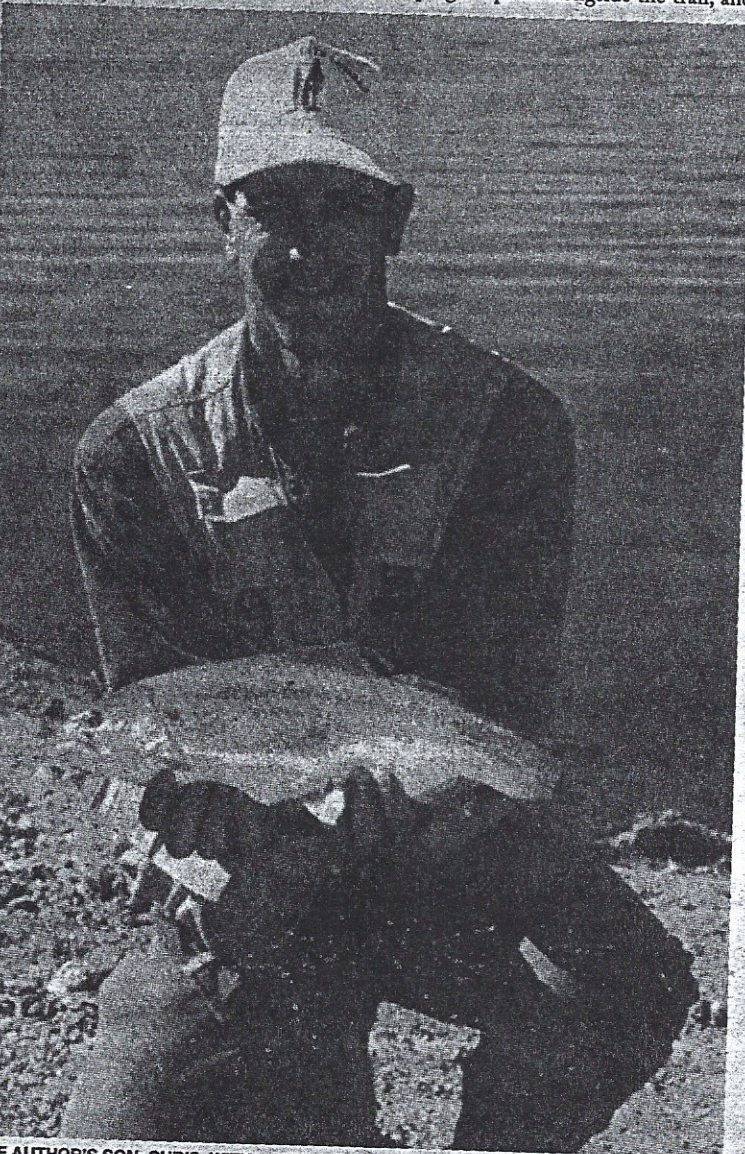
After camping at Poore, we'll set out for the upper lakes. The gently sloping, forested ridgelines of the surrounding granitic batholith belie the harshness of this vast drainage, and both eight-acre

twins, Roosevelt Lake and neighboring Lane Lake, appear in an emerald ring of trees at the 7,300-foot elevation. On our visits, the two lakes have been dotted with the concentric rings of rising trout. For us, Roosevelt hotspots included the inlet, the sloping drop-off alongside the trail, and

the logjammed outlet. Connected with Roosevelt by a narrow creek, Lane Lake is more rockbound than its neighbor, but its most productive area was the western shoreline, which features a deep, rock-laden channel and a gouged-out hole near the outlet. Both of these tiny lakes approach depths of nearly 30 feet at their centers, but also have notable shoreline structure. On a recent trip, we worked the shallow, shaded fringes of each with dry flies and floating lines, which produced a half-dozen eager-to-rise brookies between 11 and 12 inches.

There is a lot of fun poked at the many so-called "secret lakes," but the one located astride the trail a few hundred yards above Poore Lake really is Secret. Covering slightly over seven acres, this circular natural body of water contains a moderate density of wary cutthroats. The weed beds on two sides create an aquatic food base, but restrict shoreline access. We've found the best action is in the central part of the lake, which is also its deepest at 25 feet. On one visit, we released a pair of 14-inch cutts in less than 20 minutes, then the next day spent over two frustrating hours to land just one trout. Beckering hints that the fish in the Trophy Triangle tend to be educated in even the most sophisticated angling efforts, and he says that "a catch rate of one fish every two to three hours would be considered very good."

While Poore, Secret, Roosevelt and Lane surrender their trout somewhat grudgingly, Beckering feels it is Kirman, the fifth lake in the neighborhood, that "separates the men from the boys." Sitting in a bowl-like depression and surrounded by open, sage-covered hills, this 70-acre, reed-enclosed lake located a little over two miles northeast of Poore is probably the



THE AUTHOR'S SON, CHRIS, WITH A ROTUND RAINBOW CAUGHT AT POORE LAKE.

state's quintessential brookie water. Governed by special regulations (barbless hooks, no bait, and a 16-inch minimum size), it benefits from an impressive *Gammarus* scud population. Brookies here consistently fall into the 14-to-16-inch, three-to-six-pound range, with fish up to eight pounds showing on occasion. In fact, their growth rate is so phenomenal that girth is commonly proportional to length, explaining why some anglers refer to these particular trout as "air-brushed footballs."

According to Beckering, Kirman fish swim through thick concentrations of scuds, consuming all in their path. He notes that despite their voracious eating habits, they are exceedingly difficult to fool, primarily because there is so much food. Since the tiny crustaceans are so plentiful, their imitations are not always effective because they blend in with the naturals. "While some anglers find using larger scud patterns is sizes 8 to 10 to be more effective, others feel brightly colored attractor patterns are more noticeable," Beckering says.

Although a float tube seems the only feasible way to consistently score on this lake, exceptions occur during early May, when the metabolism of the trout perks up after ice-out, and again in late October, when the fish attempt to spawn in structure near shore.

Why So Hefty?

The residents in these lakes are undoubtedly exceptional for the normally harsh eastern Sierra escarpment, which commonly produces only pan-sized trout. Unlike most high-elevation backcountry lakes, where growing seasons are short, where food productivity is low, and where fish tend to overpopulate and stunt, the growing conditions in Poore, Roosevelt, Lane, and Secret Lakes are conducive to producing hefty trout. "Simply put, Trophy Triangle waters enjoy a richer-than-usual mix of nutrients," Beckering says.

The higher lakes in the region are granitic-rimmed, pothole types with limited fertility, but in these four, a variety of minerals erode into the lakes, supporting aquatic growth and, consequently, a solid base of insect food for the fish. In addition to the resident caddisflies, mayflies, and midges, several other airborne or terrestrial insects such as beetles, flying ants, and grasshoppers are blown into the waters from the nearby woods.

Although trout can live on a smorgasbord that includes the various life stages of

fish waters are found in the Sierra — Kirman Lake is a good example — they are usually loaded with scuds, and Poore, Roosevelt, Lane, and Secret Lakes are no exceptions. Trophy Triangle trout can easily dine on the photophobic forms pretty much all day long, whether in the shallows or on the fringes of the depths.

The presence of baitfish too, is a good indicator of rapid growth. These lakes all contain fair to large numbers of Lahontan reddsuckers, which serve as an additional forage base for contributing heft.

All five lakes contain brook trout, but each one has additional surprises in store. Walking a green Woolly Bugger along the bottom of Roosevelt's trout-looking inlet, I gingerly tightened the line with a rapid wrist twist as something gently nudged it. Although the thumping sensation was weighty, the trout shook its head methodically, seemingly fighting in slow motion. It proved to be a Lahontan cutthroat, the only trout indigenous to this drainage. Long renowned for possessing the greatest growth potential of any cutthroat, the subspecies has recently been reintroduced to this locale by the California Department of Fish and Game, adding yet another pleasant angling dimension.

Maintaining a proper balance of food, numbers, and sizes, these lakes are obviously well suited for trophy trout management. Although trout densities remain stable, Beckering confides that "a nonconsumptive mentality goes a long way toward helping to protect potentially fragile populations." So: please catch and then release.

Finding the Fish

Beckering, who fishes these lakes regularly, firmly believes that trout can be found wherever you can find proper temperatures, sufficient oxygen, and abundant food supplies. Since most trout actively feed and grow most quickly in water between 58 and 64 degrees Fahrenheit, Beckering advises finding the thermal belt closest to the 60-degree mark. "The best fishing in Toiyabe waters routinely occurs around this magic temperature," he says.

Identifying proper structure is another key to locating a particular lake's trout. Certain areas are more likely to hold fish than others. Underwater points, rock piles, steep banks, shoals or gravel bars, springs, and submerged weed beds are primary structural hotspots. Here, protected by deeper water, trout patrol in and out of the shallows in search of easy pickings and are somewhat susceptible to deep-running,

most feasible place to fish in these lakes, and the shoals descending from the littoral zone to deeper water are also prime locales. Fish often cruise from one feeding zone to another, depending on the time of day, moving to deep or shallow water as needed. "It is common to find the seemingly fishless shallows of midday explode with rise forms or signs of baitfish being surrounded at dusk or early morning," Beckering notes. Big bruisers can also be found in or near inlets and tributary feeders, where the moving current not only provides food, but oxygen.

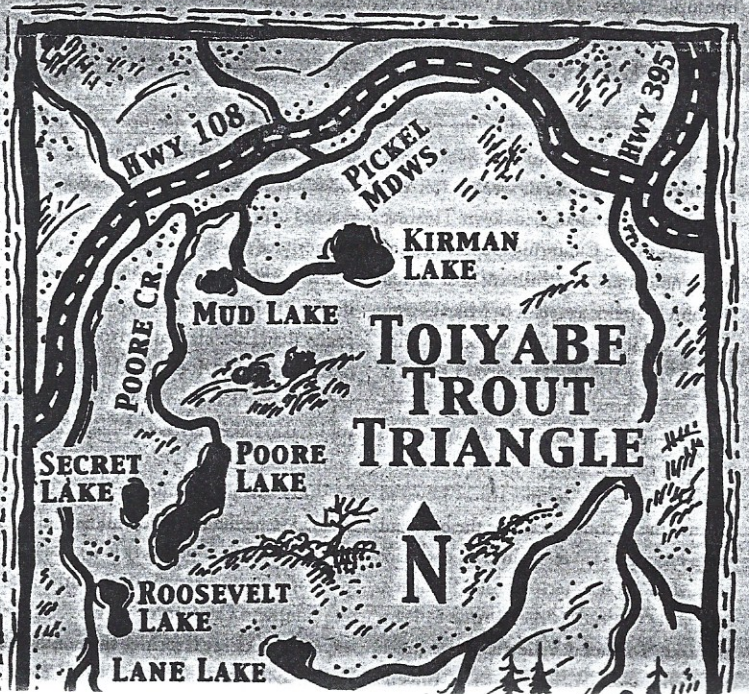
Techniques and Tactics

Because Lahontan reddsides are a main food source at Poore Lake, I have found tiny, minnow-imitating flies to be very effective, especially when retrieved parallel to the shoreline. Yellow and olive/yellow Woolly Buggers are my consistent favorites there. On numerous occasions, the slashing ambush comes from deep water. According to Beckering, pudgy trout commonly feed on these suckers early and late in the day, when they chase them away from the shelves and corral them in the

Continued on page 61



A FLOAT TUBE OBVIOUSLY GIVES AN ANGLER ACCESS TO MUCH MORE WATER (AND MANY MORE FISH) THAN IF FISHING FROM THE SHORE.



Toiyabe Trout

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shallows. Anglers working the shallow edge of the lake during these times have the best chance to hook up. A float tube is an ideal way to sample the varied structure from a more advantageous angle.

Imitating leeches and even trout fry likewise meets with success. Imitations for the latter should be white or shiny, although browns and yellows have proven effective too. Tying Muddler-type patterns with wool instead of deer hair allows them to soak up water and sink faster. Long hooks in sizes 8 to 10 are about right, and a high-density sinking line is advisable.

Polarized glasses come in handy, not only for locating fish, but for identifying structure. When operating along drop-offs, I let the fly settle, counting 5 to 10 seconds before twitching it. I try not to strike a fish by rearing back hard on the rod, instead lightly flicking my wrist swiftly. If I happen to miss the fish, the short movement of the fly doesn't alarm it and increases the chances of another take as it settles.

Other Flies and Gear

Equipped with a 5-weight or 6-weight outfit, flyrodders will find nymphs such as the Prince, Bird's Nest, A.P., Pheasant Tail, Gold-Ribbed Hare's Ear, Beadhead, Zug Bug and leech patterns (sizes 12 to 16) to be effective when twitched deep and slowly in all five lakes at various times. Dry caddis, Cahill, Cal-

16) are often successful at dusk, when hatch activity is at its height, while Marabou Muddlers with red-and-gold dressings, white Woolly Buggers, Matukas, Zonkers, Johnson's Minnows, and Pond Smelt (sizes 4 to 8), stripped in foot-long jerks, perform their magic as baitfish imitations. Hopper, flying ant, and ladybug patterns work well for terrestrials, while orange, olive, or green scud patterns can serve as effective *Gammarus* imposters. Thus equipped, adventuresome anglers willing either to strap on a day pack and hike a short distance or shoulder a backpack with sleeping bag for an extended visit will find that Toiyabe's trout can provide exciting backcountry angling.

Wind Casting

Backcountry weather can be fickle — one moment sunny and calm, the next cool and windy. It seems that wherever trophy trout exist, they are protected in part by winds whipping across the open waters. Many anglers shun fishing on a windy day, but if you're already at one of these lakes, you can usually find a way to cope and succeed. In some instances, just finding a section of protected water will suffice, while on other occasions, casting across, rather than into the teeth of the wind, is the best solution. Roll casts, too, tend to keep the line low and less affected by gusts.

Most modern graphite rods possess the necessary backbone to beat the wind, especially when matched with a weight-forward line, shortened leader, and streamlined fly. To deal with the wind, I also car-

Bear Facts

THE TIMBERED AREAS IN AND AROUND YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK, including the Hoover Wilderness and the Toiyabe National Forest, contain a thriving black bear population. As more and more people encroach upon the bears' territory, the chances for meetings increase.

Bears become more aggressive once they recognize the physical frailties of humans and their inability to defend their food. They have a great sense of smell and also can identify food by sight. Problem bears rarely attack people, but they can become dangerous nuisances, destroying or damaging gear in their effort to obtain easy nourishment. At one time, hanging or balancing food bags from a tree limb was enough to frustrate their efforts, but "educated bears" have pretty much rendered this ploy useless. Current methods focus on bear-resistant canisters, cylinders made of PVC pipe with a specially designed lid resembling a child-proof medicine-bottle cap. There are no corners on these containers, and since bears lack opposable thumbs, they often get frustrated trying to open them, then leave. Simply fill the canister with food, close the lid, and relax. The only real drawback is that even empty, the canister weighs three-plus pounds, but the security it provides is worth it.

When confronted by a black bear, be assertive and try to scare the bear off. Stand tall, wave your arms, and shout. However, when push comes to shove, be prepared to give up your food for safety's sake.

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at least two sets of lines. I have found that in extremely strong gusts, a sink-tip line or shooting head works even better than a weight-forward line because the extra weight at the end of the line helps gain the needed distance and gets the fly to turn over.

In certain situations, anglers can actually benefit from howling winds. Tailwinds can add distance to many casts. Whether making a high back cast or a roll cast, simply let the jet stream catch your line and carry it out for you.

More Backcountry Options

The West Walker Trail from Leavitt Meadows includes the loop to Poore, Secret, Roosevelt, and Lane Lakes, but the path continues climbing toward the river's headwaters approximately eight miles distant. Although considered an easy-to-moderate ascent, the longer hike is time-consuming. The trail passes near Fremont Lake, the Chain of Lakes, and the Long Lakes to meet the Pacific Crest Trail along the West Fork. An alternate route follows the main river, skirts Cascade Creek, and intersects the PCT in the vicinity of a series of "ladies' names" lakes that include Bonnie, Stella, Harriet, Cora, Ruth, and Helen. Just over Dorothy Pass sits Dorothy Lake (reputed to harbor goldens), as well as Yosemite National Park.

Yet another option is to head toward upper Paiute Meadows and ascend to Tower Lake and Tower Creek. Goldens are found here and in Mary Lake, just over the unmarked way between the Saurian Crest and Tower Peak. Also containing golden trout, Anna Lake sits along a remote ridgeline above Burt Canyon.

The Hoover Wilderness, which bisects the northern sector of Toiyabe National Forest and acts as an eastern boundary to Yosemite National Park in its southern sections, offers an array of backcountry angling options, many of which fall into the day-hike category. There are nine jumping-off points to areas of interest. The most commonly used are at the Virginia Lakes, Twin Lakes-Bridgeport, Lundy Lake, and Saddlebag Lake, near Tioga Pass.

Remote interior lakes such as Frog, Bergona, Cascade, Cooney, Gilman, Glacier, Hoover, O'Dell, Steelhead, Shamrock, Summit, and West Lakes not only sit amid splendor reminiscent of the Swiss Alps, but offer early season angling for rainbows and brook trout in the 6-to-12-inch range. With better than average conditions, Green, East, Barney, Crown, and Peeler Lakes hold populations of notable brookies (occasionally up to three pounds) and are well worth the effort required to reach them.

If You Go...

POORE, SECRET, ROOSEVELT, AND LANE LAKES are reached via an easy three-mile hike from the Leavitt Meadows Campground trailhead along Highway 108, and Kirman Lake is reached via another easy three-mile hike from Highway 108 near the Highway 395 intersection. A top-notch map of the Bridgeport area is the U.S. Geological Survey's *Bridgeport, California-Nevada*, available from the U.S. Geological Survey Distribution Center, Denver Federal Center, Building 810, Box 25286, Denver CO 80225, telephone (303) 202-4700. *DeLorme's Northern California Atlas & Gazetteer* is also useful for showing the location of the lakes, and a U.S. Forest Service map of the Toiyabe national forest can be purchased at the Forest Service office near the south end of Bridgeport.

Public campgrounds are plentiful throughout the Bridgeport area. Most are available on a first-come, first-served basis. For anglers desiring a motel, choices include: Best Western Ruby Inn, (760) 932-7241; Bridgeport Inn, (760) 932-7380; Silver Maple, (760) 932-7383; Walker River Lodge, (760) 932-7021; Virginia Creek Settlement, (760) 932-7780; and Willow Springs, (760) 932-7725.

For a quick burger or meal for the road, the Jolly Kone, (760) 932-7555, or the Burger Bam, (760) 932-7775, are hard to beat, while the Virginia Creek Settlement and the Sportsman's Inn, (760) 932-7020, are among the better sit-down establishments in the area.

The following horse packers service much of the Toiyabe and Hoover backcountry: Leavitt Meadows Pack Station, (760) 495-2257; Little Antelope Pack Station, (760) 495-2443; and Virginia Creek Pack Station, (760) 937-0326.

For current area map information on the Toiyabe Trophy Triangle, contact either:

U.S. Forest Service, Toiyabe National Forest, (760) 932-7700

DeLorme's Northern California Atlas & Gazetteer, (760) 932-7700

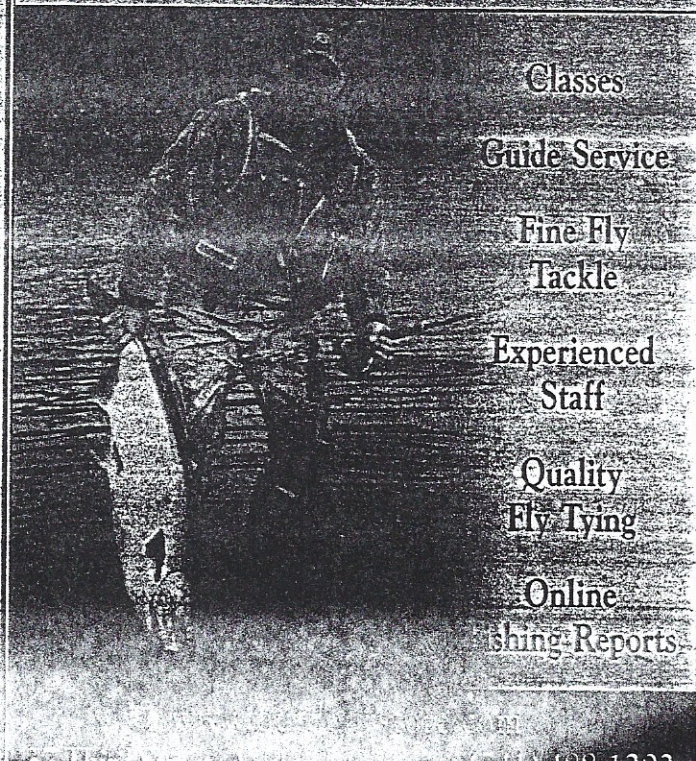
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