

# Project Kokanee

Don Vachini



The average California kokanee measures between 10 and 16 inches.

The sun was but a dull orange glow along the Sierra foothills to the east as we patrolled a deep channel near the lake's dam. While my guide fluctuated between eyeballing the depth finder and fine tuning the downrigger, I snuggled deeper into my jacket as the early morning chill was still very evident. Just as I felt some semblance of comfort, I detected a noticeable dip in my rod and scrambled accordingly. A gentle sweep of my ultra-light and a pulsating resistance on the pay-off end signified I in fact had a hookup. For the first 60 vertical feet, retrieval went relatively uneventful but within five feet of the boat, the flashing streak made a half-dozen drag-taking runs, each seemingly stronger than the previous. On its final pass, however, a large net scooped the mint-bright battler into the boat where it haughtily spewed us with chilly water droplets as it wriggled defiantly. Shimmering like a shiny silver coin while displaying a slightly forked tail and minuscule mouth, the thick 13-inch kokanee easily pushed a pound. Miraculously, the day suddenly warmed!

On this particular early April 1994 morning, Jay Neilan of the Fishin' Not Wishin' Guide Service and I were plying California's Lake Pardee in search of this popular gamefish. Like 30 or so other statewide waters, this lower elevation impoundment tucked near Lodi once

“Several California waters stand to benefit from this organization which provides funding to assist the DFG in hatchery and planting endeavors for the state's landlocked salmon.”

again supports a viable population of landlocked salmon. Thanks to some red hot action, we were on the dock showing off our limits by 10:30 a.m. While all fish caught were between 12 and 14 inches, in robust condition and waged a worthy battle, we were elated for other reasons as well. Indeed, after two years of concern and uncertainty, it was good to know for a fact that the state's kokanee fishery was truly back in operation!

For anglers accustomed to fishing for trout, *Oncorhynchus nerka* may seem like a strange breed. A small, landlocked relative of the sockeye salmon, this fish apparently evolved in freshwater thousands of years ago. Originally discovered in freshwater lakes of the Pacific Coast drainages, they apparently lived out their life cycles without a taste of salt. Like all other Pacific salmon, they complete their life cycle and spawn when they are between two and seven years old, then die. Spawning,

two pounds, they will, on occasion, range up to 22 inches and four pounds where ideal habitat occurs.

First introduced into California in 1941 when 67,000 fingerlings were planted in Salt Springs Reservoir in Amador County, kokanee have been stocked in many statewide waters and are currently found in more than 30 lakes. While some of these waters were managed for self-sustaining populations, over two-thirds were augmented with hatchery-reared fish. Up until the late 1980s, nearly three million fry were stocked annually as the fishery was a one of the brighter spots in the state's coldwater fisheries plan.

Over the last half-dozen years, however, populations began dwindling, seriously in some instances, to dangerously low numbers. According to “Sep” Hendrickson of Sep's Pro Fishing, Inc., the state's kokanee problems initially began with the passage of Proposition 13 in 1977

which can be accomplished in streams or on suitable shoreline gravels in lakes themselves, takes place in the late fall or early winter depending on water temperature. In fact, this salmon's adaptability to spawning has led to both overpopulation and stunting. However, in many lakes with self-sustaining populations, numbers are more balanced and there are fish of different sizes. While the average California specimens will measure anywhere from 10 to 16 inches and weigh up to



and its impending array of statewide budget cuts. A dozen years down the line, serious budget constraints, mismanaged monies and program eliminations, including the one accounting for supplemental planting of kokanee, greatly hampered DFG efforts at maintaining the once ambitious kokanee salmon raising and stocking program. Although 1990 offered an indication, by 1991 only 75,000 total fish were planted statewide and those were divided among Bullards Bar and Stampede reservoirs. The all-time low came in 1992 which was the last year supplemental DFG plants were made since there were no eggs available from any source, including out of state. Because their life operates on a seven year cycle most populations faced the risk of being greatly devastated or lost completely. Things definitely looked bleak for *nerka* in California.

However, it became evident right from the start that concerned sportsmen were not about to take this recent budgetary setback lying down. To the immediate rescue came the California Inland Fisheries Foundation, Inc, quickly founded in January of '92. Made up of private citizens, businesses related to the recreational sportfishing industry and individuals within the DFG's Inland Fisheries and Hatcheries Division, the group made the kokanee its first project, developing a non-profit, tax-deductible organization to take up the monetary slack. DFG employees lending input were Forrest Reynolds, Assistant Chief and Program Manager with the Inland Fisheries Division; Harvey Reading, Anadromous Fisheries Program Coordinator; and Mas Yamashita, Region 2 Hatchery Manager. Joining them were Dan Bacher, Senior Managing Editor of *The Fish Sniffer* and *Gamefishing West*; Hal Bonslett, Publisher of *The Fish Sniffer*; Claude Worden of Scotty Downriggers and vice-president of the United Anglers of California (UAC) and Joe "Sep" Hendrickson, also a UAC board member.

Informally known as Project Kokanee, this partnership is dedicated to the enhancement of kokanee fisheries throughout the state. Its main objectives are to provide funding for DFG programs and to marshal any volunteer assistance the DFG might need to carry out these programs. Under agreement with the DFG, this organization provides a tax-free depository for donations and the dispersal of money to the department for salmon research, hatchery utilization and stocking. "Funds collected pay for egg collection, hatchery rearing, seasonal aides, plus hatchery improvements," Hendrickson informs. "With no official funding existing for the continuation of the supplemental egg gathering, hatching and planting of kokanee in the state, Project Kokanee remains the key for keeping that program in operation," he happily adds.



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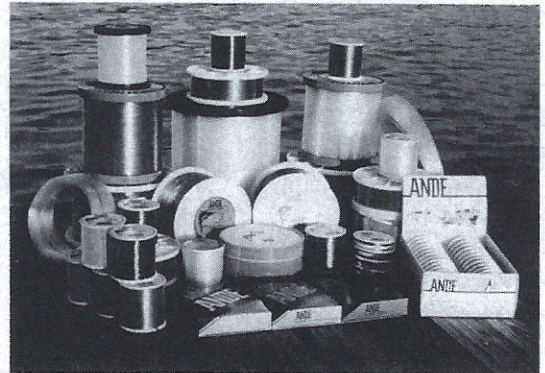
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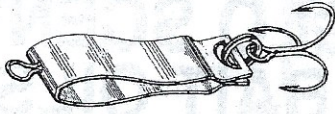
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During the past two years, this project has progressed in leaps and bounds. Membership fees and donations have helped offset travel and salaries of DFG hatchery personnel in procuring, processing and hatching kokanee eggs and in providing improvements and equipment necessary to enhance hatchery capacity. The initial kickoff fundraiser in July of '92 raised \$7,000 and got the program off to a rousing start while subsequent incoming monies continue to provide a healthy optimism. Additionally, other organizations continue to chip in according to Hendrickson. Thanks to a near \$5,000 donation from PG&E's Land Division, a valuable egg sorter was presented to the DFG. "This item has already saved hundreds of man-hours at their Silverado Hatchery facility," he beams.

The project is currently raising funds for a water chiller which would regulate temperature conditions which are crucial for hatchery rearing purposes. "While DFG budget constraints will not allow funds for this equipment, we can solicit private funding. In the long run, this piece of equipment alone will benefit a multitude of fish species, not just salmon," he contends.

Overall, Hendrickson is very pleased with the progress of this organization as it heads into its third year. Not only has the project funded dollars to cover the salmon rearing program, new hatchery equipment and air droppings but it managed to plant over 1.3 million kokanee fry into 15 lakes in 1994. At a recent joint meeting with 11 key officials from the DFG and Project Kokanee board members, decisions were made to continue to work in partnership and cooperation to expand the state's program. Potential locations continue to be reviewed for the establishment of yet new populations, additional sources of eggs are being sought from out of state agencies, funding for other critical equipment and future fundraising activities are on the current agenda. "In addition to the issues of solid future funding and achieving and maintaining annual hatchings of between 2 1/2 to 2 3/4 million, topics like mega-plants for Lake Tahoe and king salmon fry for Spaulding Reservoir are on the current agenda."

Besides providing excellent sport on light tackle and being unsurpassed as table fare, kokanee are also a bargain as sportfish. Not only are they able to establish some degree of natural reproduction in most waters where they're stocked, but since they can be planted as fingerlings, usually by air, they take up less space, time and man-hours in hatchery production. According to statistics released by

the Hendrickson, they are 600 times cheaper to raise than hatchery rainbows! Broken down budget-wise, one dollar can pay for the gathering, hatching, raising and planting of 300 kokanee. "On a comparable plane, one catchable-sized hatchery rainbow trout, usually raised to about 1/2 pound before stocking, also represents one dollar."

While the ultimate goal of the project is to eventually reach and maintain an annual planting of nearly three million fingerlings statewide (the approximate figure planted prior to budgetary woes), Hendrickson feels the project will achieve even greater goals. To date there has been a tremendous cooperation and support from DFG hatchery personnel and biologists at both the Regional and Divisional level. Currently, three separate hatcheries throughout the state are directly involved in the effort. The National Forest Service also has input into locales planted in both current and future choices. "By working with several organizations, listening to

**"Kokanee are a bargain as sportfish."**

their needs, getting solid information, and acting as a liaison and in a non-threatening manner, we feel the project can actually

make a difference, not just with kokanee but for all inland fisheries managed in California."

Actually, successful kokanee fishing is really a specialized art form according to Gary Miralles of Shasta Sportfishing (916) 275-2278. To be a successful in this realm he feels that an understanding of their life cycles, feeding habits, preference for specific water temperatures, and sophisticated fishing methods are necessary in order to obtain consistent results.

Above all, Miralles feels that it is important to do your homework before even putting your boat in the water. By studying charts and maps of the specific water, reading local fishing reports and conferring with local anglers and marina operators, much information can be obtained prior to the trip, narrowing down productive locales or even pinpointing concentrations. Once in the water, depth sounders help locate fish concentrations or individual fish. "A good quality depth finder and flasher unit are probably the most important accessories. These devices provide accurate levels at which fish are holding and thus allow you to work your lure through them without a lot of guesswork," he adds.

Unlike trout which can be caught from shore, kokanee are pretty much open water fish preferring water temperatures of 50 degrees or colder. In fact, high concentrations can often be found located in a narrow band of cold water, especially during the summer. If an entire lake is warmer



than 50 degrees, they will congregate close to the bottom or where the coldest water is available, such as underwater springs or creek channels. "Once you've located the right water temperature layer and a school of fish within that layer, kokes can be taken fairly consistently," he said.

Their feeding habits differ somewhat from those of trout, thereby adding to the mystery of catching them. Rather than feeding on insects or other fish, sockeye dine primarily on microscopic zooplankton with an occasional nymph or insect larva. Trolling is by far the most consistently productive technique for catching kokanee, since it enables an angler to cover a large area in a short period. Especially effective in medium to deep water or on particularly overcast days, Miralles believes that towing a series of flashing blades appeals to several fish dining instincts. "The flashers most likely resemble other kokanee feeding and serves to attract them. They follow the sound of the blades, notice the source of the flash, spot the trailing lure and hit it, possibly triggered by territorial irritation or natural instinct."

A common trolling rig consists of a rudder at the front end which prevents line twist, a series of free-swinging blades on a wire cable or shaft and a swivel on which to tie a leader. From here, a four- to eight-pound test leader should extend 18 to 36 inches back to the chosen lure. Experienced anglers like Miralles opt for a single, three-inch dodger attached 12 to 18 inches ahead of a small lure. Some extremely productive lures include spinners like the Wedding Ring or small spoons like Kokanee King, Needlefish, Pro Secret, Cripples and the newly-developed Hum Dinger. "Color selection seems to be just as important as the fish show a definite preference for particular shades at different times. The most popular lure shades appear to be nickel red, fire pearl, rainbow and red pearl."

While it has long been a custom to impale a kernel of white corn on the hook barb, a recent ploy has been the use of color-dyed corn. Blue and red shades seem to be most popular. A firm believer in these color schemes, Miralles also believes sharp hooks provide an important edge especially when it comes to dramatically driving home the hook. Toward this end, he uses a small file to hone a needle sharp point, even on brand new hooks. "This is often an overlooked aspect of angling but is just as important to the final outcome," he warns.

Miralles contends that depth control is probably the most important facet in corraling this tasty salmon. It is of prime importance to be sure the lure is at the depth the fish are holding. The use of a downrigger controls the depth of the lure to the depth showing on his radar. "A few feet will often make all the difference," he implies. "Since kokanee will seek out the



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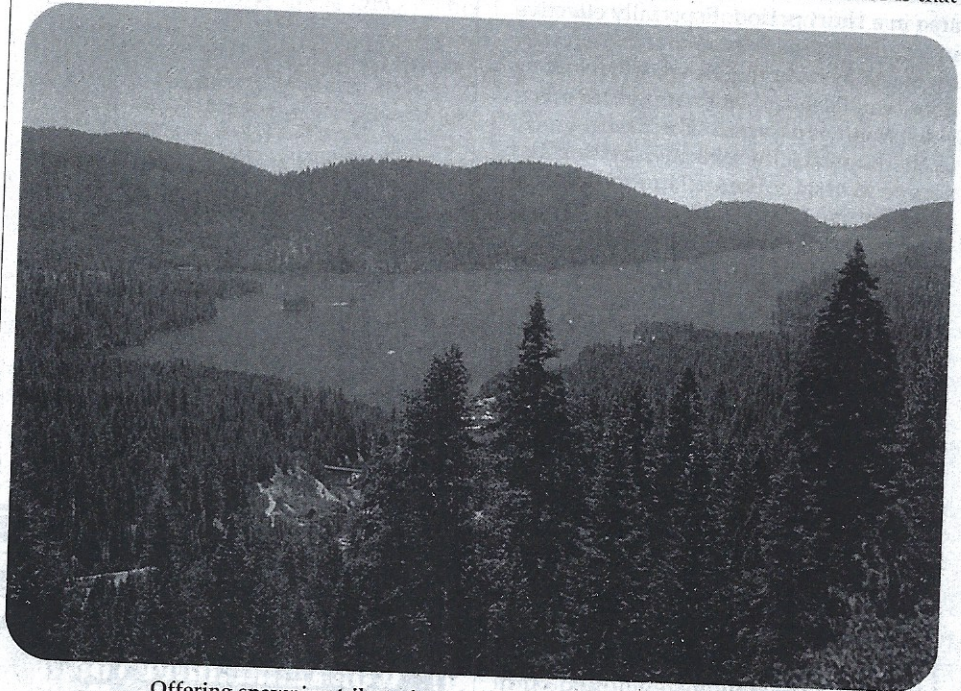
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50 to 54 degree water most of the time, find that temperature and you'll usually find the fish," he advises.

Since these land-locked salmon are historically on the diminutive size, ultra-light tackle is both a preferred and sporting option. I favor a five-foot graphite rod with a sensitive tip section and a matching reel set on low drag and loaded with 2-pound mono. A downrigger is made to order for this setup for once the line is released from the torpedo-weight, which occurs on the strike, kokanee will wage a pugnacious battle which is greatly enhanced by ultra-light equipment. Since they have very delicate and tender mouths, some

feeder streams or their channels in preparation for reproductive chores. This event can occur anytime from mid to late September on through late fall. While these fish will commonly resemble salmon in their advance stages with darker-hued bodies and hooked kypes, they will still put up a monumental skirmish when hooked.

While on a June '93 trip to Whiskeytown Reservoir, nestled in the Trinity Mountains west of Redding, Miralles parted with a few of his "top secrets," tips that frequently turn the tide in the angler's favor. He feels that one of the biggest mistakes made by trollers after kokanee is that



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anglers use a small length of surgical tubing on the line to absorb the force of the initial strike and prevent the hook from tearing out. This piece of equipment is more crucial if the fish are running in the 14 to 20 inch size than if they are smaller. Anglers should also utilize care and finesse while playing this unique salmon, especially during its final bursts which commonly occur when it spots the boat. A long-handled landing net is also an absolute must.

Miralles further points out that kokanee aren't just found anywhere in a lake. Since they tend to congregate and move about quite a bit, he feels a lot of searching has to be done." Besides being armed with good radar, it often takes a cluster of boats to clue you in on a hot locale," he imparts. "A radio aids greatly in location but not all anglers are going to cooperate. So, be prepared to do a lot of searching!"

On lakes which provide access to spawning habitat, this fish can sometimes be located as they gather en masse near

they work a lure too fast. Since this diminutive salmon will rarely hit a fast moving lure, the slower the better seems to be the most feasible procedure. "Apparently lures proceeding at a crawl serve to either tantalize or annoy the fish into hitting."

While pacing snails is the passport to successful trolling, varying a lures speed, which changes its vibration pattern, often pays dividends. To achieve this purpose, Miralles suggests trolling in large or small S curves. We had a chance to put this ploy to work for us at Whiskeytown. Frustratingly, we had located a large pod of fish but failed to score any hookups for well over a half an hour. It wasn't until Miralles changed tactics and started a series of tight and sweeping turns, erratically zigzagging directly through them that action magically picked up and we landed our five fish limits within the hour. Most of our fish vigorously attacked as the lure swept through its outer turn. "Everytime a lure is on the outside of a curve, it will speed up and



rise," he informs. With each turn of the boat, you will produce a different speed and lure action. This uneven acceleration-deceleration seemingly triggers their attack mode."

The sleek, 14-inch salmon resting in my palm not only completed my day's limit but also served as a tangible reminder that the prognosis for future kokanee operations in California appears to be headed toward healthy ground. At a time when most fishing opportunities are under pressure, Project Kokanee actually envisions to expand them. Besides their long range goals of maintaining the levels of support needed to keep the program funded for upcoming years, plans to escalate stocks and designs to establish populations in several additional waters, they are actually boosting morale and uniting the personnel of various agencies. For obvious reasons this organization, which is expected to provide thousands of quality angler hours annually, has the potential to bring a positive stroke to our fisheries resource at a time when so much is focused on the negative!

### California's Top Five Kokanee Waters

Of the 30 plus statewide lakes with kokanee, the following quintet meets with ideal conditions and are considered among the tops in the state:

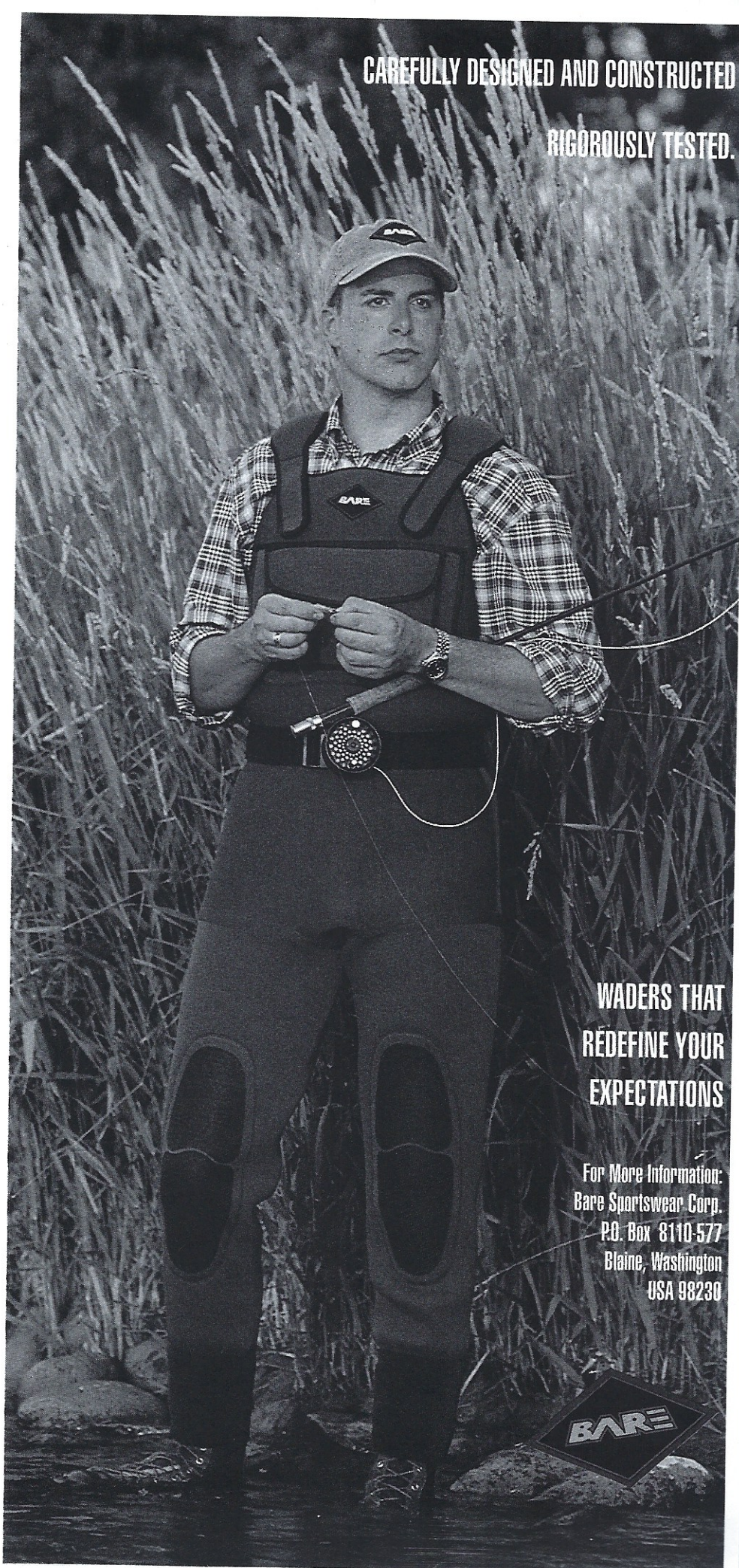
**Bullards Bar Reservoir:** Located 45 minutes northeast of Marysville, this is the heaviest planted kokanee lake in California. An extremely prolific fishery, its cool, deep waters are home to hundreds of thousands of fish ranging from 12 to 14 inches. Accurate, up to the minute information can be obtained from Emerald Cove Marina (916) 692-2166.

**Trinity Lake:** Located approximately 45 miles west of Redding on Highway 3, this self-sustaining, underfished water is known for its rather large quantity of fish ranging up to 14 inches. For this reason, fisheries biologists suggest that harvesting its huge population would do the fishery a favor. Since fish will often be suspended off the numerous steep points, anglers will commonly need to troll in 60 to 70 feet of water. For current fishing information contact either the Wyntoon Resort (916) 266-3337 or the Shasta Cascade Wonderland Association at either (800) 474-2782 or (800) 326-6944.

**Stampede Reservoir:** Because of its vast, nutrient rich waters this lake, located along Highway 89 north of Truckee, is a heavily stocked lake with a reputation for sizeable fish in the 14 to 19 inch range. Up until a few years ago, fish here approached state record size. While that has changed somewhat, it still holds the potential for reestablishing the state mark of 4 pounds, 13 ounces! Anglers trolling such areas as the dam, the Island, and the Sage Hen and Truckee arms will

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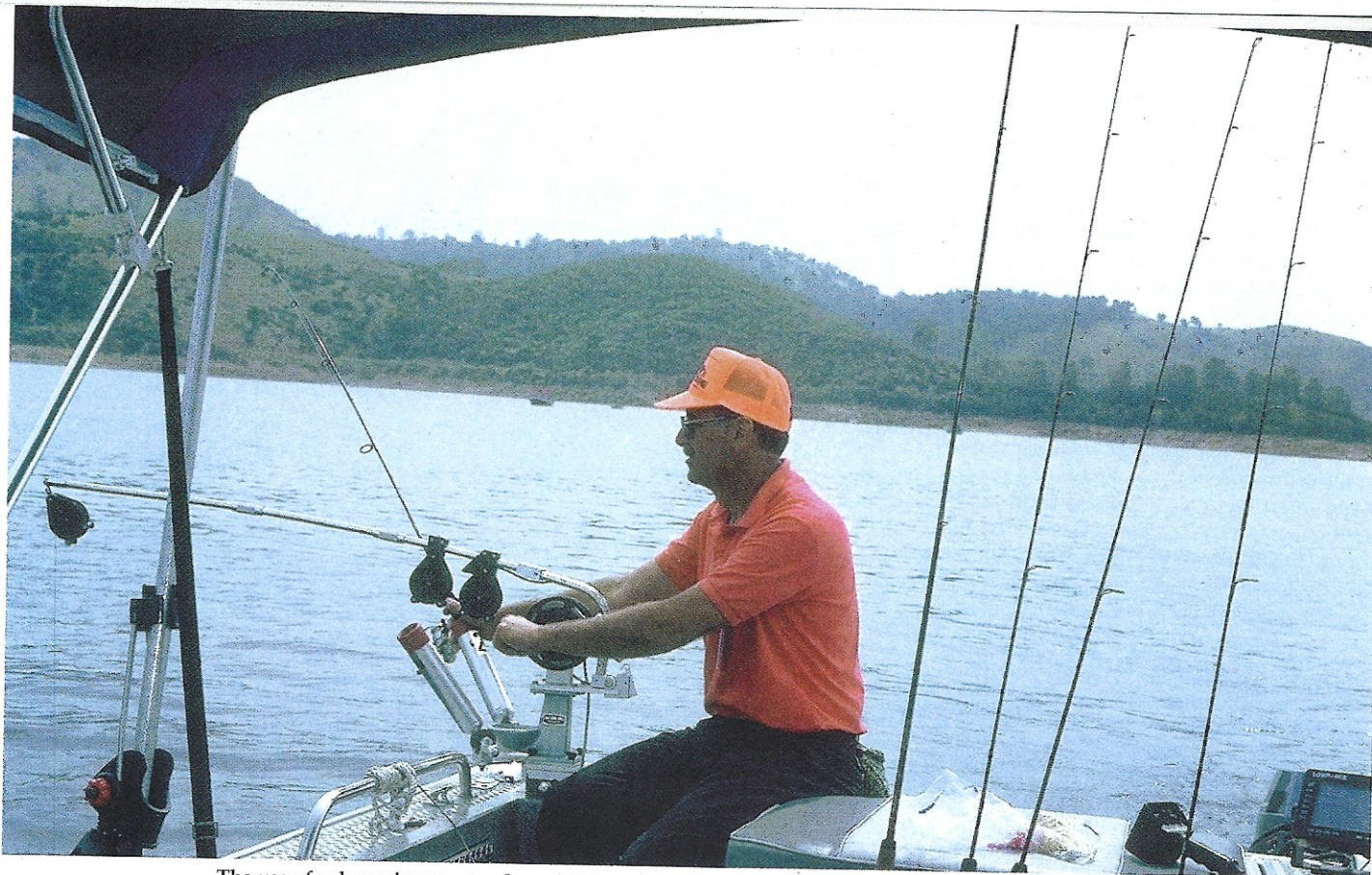


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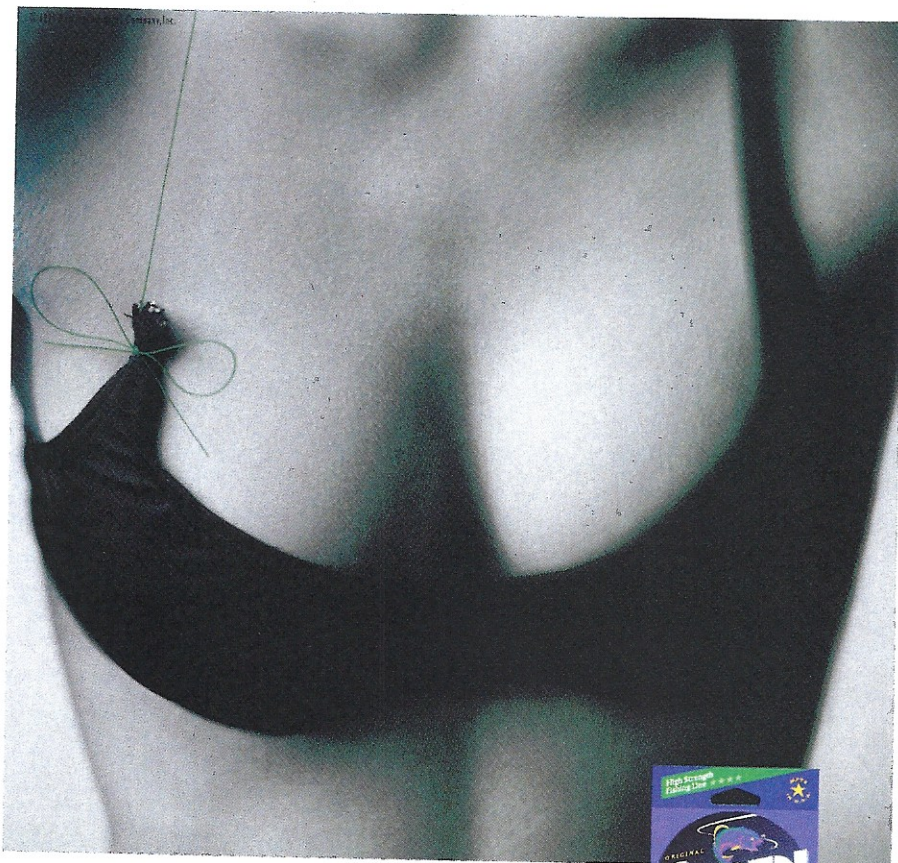
**Boca Reservoir:** Located five miles

east of Truckee and just below Stampede, anglers are often surprised at the size of its fish, which range up to two pounds! Trolling flashers and lures through the channel at varying depths is very productive. This windswept lake experienced a huge draw-down in 1994 but should be full by late spring. Again, no services are available.

**Shaver Lake:** Located one hour northeast of Fresno on Highway 168, this pine and cedar lined lake sifting at the 5,500 foot elevation annually produces some of the largest kokoes in the state. Popular trolling techniques, often at depths of 25 to 70 feet, commonly produce mature fish in the 19 to 22 inch category—certainly among the largest in the state and very noteworthy specimens! Sierra Marina (209) 841-3324 is a full service facility which provides accurate, up to the minute fishing information.

Other prime kokanee waters worthy of investigation include Huntington Lake in Fresno county, Lake Pardee in Amador County, Bass Lake in Madera County, Little Grass Valley Reservoir in Plumas County, Folsom Reservoir in Sacramento County, Hell Hole Reservoir and Donner Lake in Placer County and Union Valley and Fallen Leaf Reservoirs in El Dorado County.

For additional information on Project Kokanee, contact the California Inland Fisheries Foundation, Inc. (800) 748-6599, Marilyn Hendrickson (707) 449-8413 or (916) 456-8753.



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