

# THE EASTERN SIERRA'S

## Exotic Trophy Slam

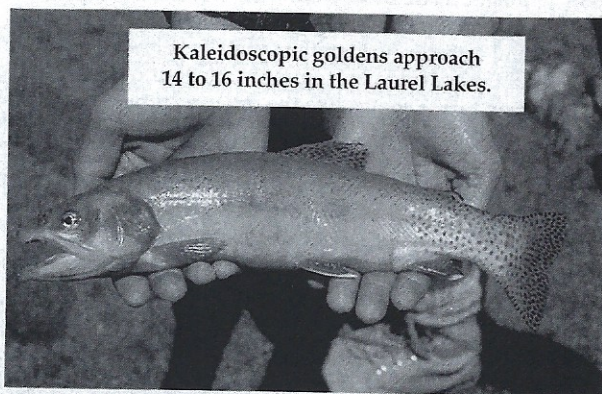
"NO LESS THAN SIX TROPHY TROUT SPECIES CAN BEST BE TAKEN DURING THE FALL SEASON WHEN MOST TOURISTS DEPART FOR THE WINTER."

Don Vachini

Spashed in vivid indigos and yellows, the aspens on the nearby slopes painted a splendorous swath across the gray, high desert sage surrounding the 129-acre lake. Temporarily shattering the silence a brace of raptors, framed along a feathery cirrus, yelped a rhythmic greeting as I methodically stalked the shoreline. Despite these pleasant diversions, I finally spotted what I had been diligently seeking. Parting the slightly murky surface along an outer weedbed possibly 20 feet from shore was a large dorsal. Breathing the invigorating fall air a little more rapidly, I whipped my scud imitation a few yards ahead and waited for the tug which came momentarily. Waging a forceful subsurface battle, the leviathan appeared content to use its sheer weight while performing lazy figure-8s parallel to shore. Applying a good deal of pressure on my six-pound tippet, I deftly persuaded the hefty battler through a weedy obstacle.

Recovering in my hands prior to release, the slender, bronze-caste beauty measured an incredible 24 inches! While removing the fly, flaming orange slashes not only added to the autumnal splendor but left little doubt as to its cutthroat ancestry! This October '93 scene re-played itself three more times before sundown ceased angling.

Sitting adjacent to Hwy. 89 near Monitor Pass, California's Heenan Lake indeed offers a remarkable fishery for the Lahontan cutthroat. Once appearing on the endangered list, this rare subspecies seems to flourish in this Alpine county impoundment where they are the beneficiaries of an extremely rich and healthy aquatic environment. From a management point of view this water has been an ideal broodstock refugium for over a half century. Since the lake and its tributary is isolated from the Carson River drainage, cross-breeding with rainbows has been naturally



Kaleidoscopic goldens approach 14 to 16 inches in the Laurel Lakes.

prevented. Probably of more concern to anglers is the fact that this strain has the well known reputation for rapid growth, especially where conditions are favorable. According to DFG statistics, cuts here average an incredible 18 to 23 inches with individuals up to 27 inches. This translates to fish in the three- to five-pound category with a few possibly approaching eight pounds!! Small wonder that explorer John C. Fremont labeled them "Salmon-Trout" while describing them in his 1844 journal.

According to Darrel Wong, a fisheries biologist in the DFG's Bishop office, the cutthroat is but one of a half-dozen trout species available to anglers along a 100 mile swath of the Eastern Sierra. In addition to the abundant rainbow which dominates much of this territory, brown, brook, golden and grayling are also present in specifically managed waters. In order to sample the best of these species, he suggests a fall visit. "During mid to late October, the crowds are gone, the colors are unsurpassed and fish are either gearing up to spawn or feeding voraciously in preparation for winter."

Over the past several seasons, my sons and I have taken his advice and undertaken annual pilgrimages here, often trying for three or more species at a time. For the past two years, we have gone an extra step in an attempt to spice up an already hot angling menu. We not only devise our itinerary to pursue a predetermined selection of trout but trophy sized specimens as well—a so-called "exotic tro-

phy grand slam," so to speak. For purposes of definition, a trophy fish would be 14 inches or better or, in general, between one and two pounds (with the exception of grayling).

Such was the case this past October when son, Chris, joined me. On this particular three day venture, our trophy-quest called for cutthroat, rainbow, brown and

brook. While driving to Heenan for our first species, its Lahontan leviathans were definitely on my mind! Leaving Markleeville at dawn, we skirted along the East Carson canyon, foregoing its special wild trout section due to drastically low flows, and took a left turn toward our target water. Each bend in the curvaceous ascent brought vivid visions of "Salmon-Trout." However, as we arrived at the parking area, we knew something was amiss. The gate was locked and a notice indicated an emergency closure. Seems that lower than normal water levels had combined with a vigorous algae bloom to create a serious, oxygen-depleting condition. Numerous fish had perished and others were showing signs of undue stress. Stepping to the aid of these enormous trout, the DFG not only terminated angling but prudently installed a pair of life-saving aerators, a decision which probably saved most of the lakes remaining population.

Before pushing onward, I nostalgically glanced across the calm waters, quietly reflecting on several of my highly successful past visits. Made to order for the fast growing cuffs, the meadow forming the man-made impoundment is extremely fertile, presenting a veritable smorgasbord of caddisflies, mayflies, damselflies, dragonflies, midges, scuds plus an occasional terrestrial.

According to Rick Rockel of Ken's Alpine Sporting Goods in Bridgeport and the local angling guru, the bountiful scud



is probably the most sought after meal. While he feels that patient shore anglers can often sight cruisers near the bank, the best scenario is to be positioned in a float tube just outside the weedbeds and casting toward shore. "Let the offering sink and then perform a slow, twitching retrieve parallel to the aquatic growth," he advises. "Appropriate colors for scud patterns range from brown, tan, green and pink."

Besides shrimp imitations other productive patterns for me include black or purple leeches, Pheasant Tail and Bead Head nymphs. Black, purple and olive Matuka streamers up to size eight worked just outside the weed bloom have also proved highly effective. From my past experience on the lake, full sinking lines and sink-tip fly lines best get the offering into the strike zone.

Rockel feels the deepest part of the lake by the dam offers the best late-season bet. Even though algae is heavy this time of year, the far bank opposite the parking area is often productive, especially for those without a floating craft. While float tubes, canoes, prams or other small boats enable anglers to avoid most weedy problems, no gas motors are allowed.

Since these brood stock trout are highly gullible, the lake is managed under zero-limit, artificials with single, barbless hook regulations to prevent depletion. It is open to angling only during September-October weekends, specifically from sunrise to sunset Friday, Saturday and Sunday.

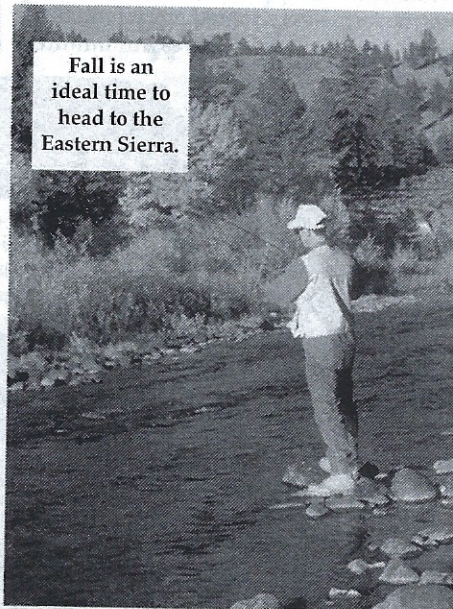
Regrettably, we scratched cutts from this trip's slam-quest. Proceeding over Monitor Pass and intersecting with Hwy. 395, we proceeded south eventually descending Devil's Gate Summit to view the vast meadows surrounding the town of Bridgeport. Serving as the county seat of Mono County, this trout mecca would be our headquarters for the next few days.

Since trophy browns were on our agenda, we headed for the East Walker River below Bridgeport Reservoir. A product of dedicated work and special regulations, this river received notoriety as one of the west's best wild brown trout streams during the 1980s. Trout here commonly fell into the five to ten pound range with plenty of fish in between. In 1988, however, the river's fish population was virtually wiped out from silty drawdowns—the result of a sticky battle over water rights. Down but not out was the key, as five years later the water is currently on the road to recovery from the devastating fish kill, according to Rockel. The strong flows so necessary to vital fish life are now guaranteed by a Cal Trout-championed court judgement against agriculture interests which used to manipulate the flows. In fact, Rockel feels the fertile lake waters also have a stirring effect on the East Walker. "There are no screening filters, so nutrient-rich waters get swept right into the river below.

Besides flushing away silt and rejuvenating spawning gravel, the vital aquatic growth necessary to maintain the food chain is also being replenished.

Even though we each caught a pair of nine inchers on this mid-day junket, we saw definite indications that browns are making a stirring comeback from the wipeout. While Chris was fighting a diminutive trout, a much larger resident made a swipe at it right along the bank and on two heart-stopping occasions I had sizable fish, one possibly pushing four pounds, slash at my marabou streamer before hurriedly vanishing!

Rockel ascertains that the biggest East Walker browns will probably run no larger



Fall is an ideal time to head to the Eastern Sierra.

than seven pounds currently but there are scores of one to three pounders. "While this year's batch will probably peak out in the three to four pound range, a few years from now you will undoubtedly be looking at double-digit fish again," he happily exclaims. "Remember, he continues. "The brown is a competitor. Given the chance, they will not just survive, they will thrive!"

Although East Walker currents are plenty strong and dense willow growth chokes much of the bank, the water color tends to be on the cloudy side. This allows for the use of heavier than normal tippets or mono, which is often necessary to turn the heavier specimens. I often get away with using eight-pound line or tippets on this section, while operating with a medium action rod and reel. The new selection of braided lines offer flexibility coupled with strength—always a sought-after ingredient.

To me, the brown epitomizes predatory sophistication. If fly fishing, the most productive offerings seem to be meaty-looking, size 2 to 8 olive Matuka, Sculpin, Deceiver, Muddler Minnow, Clouser Minnow and Woolly Buggers in black and yellow shades. I have also had some success

with size 12 to 14 Bead Head nymphs where shallow riffles tumble into larger pools. For the spin fisher, small Panther Martin spinners in yellow and orange shades, brassy Needlefish, Kastmaster, Phoebe and Wob-L-Rite spoons will work but my top producers continue to be yellow size 8 Bingo Bugs and size 3 to 5 rainbow or brown-finished Rapala plugs. Flies or lures here are best maneuvered erratically where river seams meet.

In either case, wading directly in the river with an upstream approach seems to provide best results. This way, anglers can stalk or sneak up on the more preferable lies, which usually include undercut banks, deep eddies, partially submerged brush or other well-guarded cover such as log jams. Since their feeding lane is often no more than a few inches, this is also the most challenging water to properly fish.

The river is still managed under barbless hooked flies or lures with a two fish limit, 14 inch minimum in effect.

For unforgettable, monster-sized browns, however, the Bridgeport Twin Lakes, home to the current state record brown of 28 lbs, 8 oz., dominate the Eastern Sierra. Anglers headed for these hotspots will not only need a boat but plenty of perseverance as well. One of the prime keys to locating these late-season lunkers is slow trolling and imparting different speeds and actions to the lures being used. Pumping, a popular technique which imparts a lifelike burst of movement to a plug, is an effective ploy.

Since boaters also need to troll large rainbow-imitating plugs (such as the custom painted-trout pattern CD Magnum Rapala) 50 to 100 yards behind their craft, they need a rod with plenty of backbone and a reel with an abundance of holding capacity. Since these trout are fall spawners, boaters often operate around the inlet channel of Robinson Creek on either lake. On many occasions, dedicated anglers troll for weeks at a time in hopes of tempting 10 pounders or better. According to Rockel, fish in the neighborhood of 30 to 40 pounds have been graphed! Of course, getting them on the end of your line is another matter.

Mid-afternoon of day one found us scrambling along the rocky dam forming Bridgeport Reservoir. Benefiting from two major tributaries plus a few smaller ones, this lake floods a vast, fertile meadow and provides about as much variety as possible in a body of water. In wet years, the flooded flats provide a dynamic spring and early summer fishery. In dry years, especially during the fall season, the lake resembles a two mile-long "puddle" which concentrates great numbers of large fish in a fairly deep area known as the bathtub.

The latter situation was the case when Chris and I began working purple Matuka



streamers deep along the jumbled facade. Presenting our flies at about a 45-degree angle from shore and letting them sink, we rapidly twitched them along the steep incline. About 30 minutes into the session, I watched Chris respond to a slight nudge by wristing his rod skyward. While probably expecting something smaller, he began grinning like an overconfident gunfighter suddenly prodded into action as his rod nearly doubled and fly line rapidly peeled off his screeching reel. After a 15 minute duel he claimed his bounty, a bulbous, mint-bright 18-inch rainbow which gleamed in the late-October rays.

Rockel confided that this was a typical Bridgeport trout for this time of the year. Probably one of the most fertile waters in the Sierra, trout here respond by gorging profusely on the aquatic insect selection offered them. "One-year fish normally average well over a pound while holdovers will run anywhere from two to four pounds," he informs. "This is tremendous growth for just a few seasons."

For best late season results, a boat is best to pursue cruising trout. Trolling blades or flashers with lead core line seems to be a common preference but a downrigger is my favorite since it allows a sporting battle once the trout is hooked and free of cumbersome weights. Best lures include Sep's Pro Secrets, Humdingers, Cripplures, Needlefish, and Rainbow Runners among others. Shore anglers too, will also enjoy some red hot action. While many anglers prefer soaking nightcrawlers or deadly Power Baits, casting a wide selection of lures from the bank can be likewise productive, especially if intercepting a school of patrolling 'bows. Whether trolling or on shore, ultra-light spin tackle is a sporting choice to baffle these hefty trout.

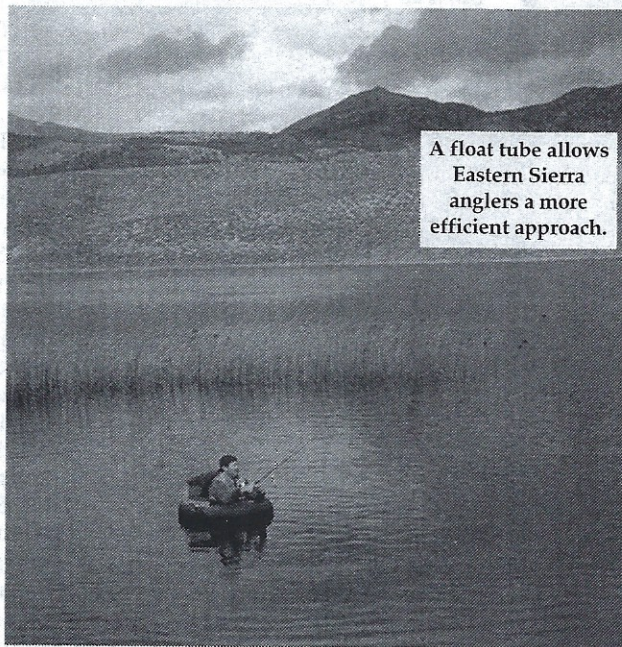
Best spots are right along the dam, the north shore opposite the highway and near the funneled bottleneck along the narrowing canyon walls. Boat rental and launching facilities are available.

While Bridgeport Reservoir is the prime water to pursue trophy 'bows, it isn't the only area water where memorable trout can be taken. The East Walker River above the reservoir along with Virginia, Green and Robinson creek tributaries often contain some startling lake-run residents.

*Salvelinus fontinalis* became our next focus species. A brisk and invigorating one hour hike from Hwy. 108 brought us to the crest of a knoll where we overlooked Kirman Lake, our next target water. While mixed stands of cottonwoods and aspens gave definition to the southern slope, a thick snow dusted the higher peaks as an indicator of the impending winter. Saffron-

hued reeds encircled the edge of this treeless, azure lake near 7,000', framing it like a jewel in a ring of dull-gray sage.

We briefly separated, each heading for an opening in the vegetative barriers. After an hour of unanswered retrieves, Chris came over to join me in a snack break. While munching on candy bars, however, we simultaneously bolted to attention. A concentration of maybe 30 or more fish had materialized out of nowhere and were unhurriedly finning back and forth between the shoreline channel and the reeds, no more than five to ten feet from us!! Using ultra-light spinning rods and reels, we took turns casting an assortment of spinners through the narrow opening. While the fish appeared oblivious to us, they nevertheless shunted our offerings for over 40 excruciatingly-stressful minutes.



A float tube allows Eastern Sierra anglers a more efficient approach.

On at least four occasions, fish bumped our lures from the side, adding to the mounting tension. Then Chris moved several yards downshore and whipped a lengthy cast parallel to the school. Almost immediately he was into a fish and, shortly after that, another. "C'mon dad," he exhorted after releasing the second fish. "It's your turn now."

The frustration, however, continued for nearly another half hour until just before the sun dropped below the ridge-line. Magically, ripples headed toward my fluttering spoon and a savage, albeit welcome, strike ensued. "Fish on!" I belted while pumping my fist at no one in particular.

A monstrous surface splash preceded a drag-sizzling burst toward deep water as the fun began in earnest. The 17 incher, a clone to my sons duet, not only filled my hands with over three pounds of rotund trout, but its oversized proportions actually resembled a football in dimension!

Although commonly nicknamed "air-brushed footballs" due to their incredible girth, Rockel jokingly refers to them as "bon-bon trout," mentioning that they generally tend to just eat themselves to death. "Thanks to an ultra-rich diet of aquatic insects, snails and the ever-present scud, these trout tend to max out between 4 to 4 1/2 pounds even though they only attain about four years in age. While one to three pounders are typical, four to five pounders are common and fish to seven pounds are not unheard of," he imparts.

Though many trout are taken here on red-garnished spoons, spinners and fire-tiger Rapalas or Scud, Woolly Worm and small Matuka patterns, the lake is open to any kind of artificials with barbless hooks. A 16 inch minimum size, two-fish limit is imposed. Float tubes, practically a requirement to counter the profuse shoreline growth, must be carried in on the three-mile trail.

There are a handful of places where anglers can find gold at the end of the road. The Laurels, just south of Mammoth Lakes, is one such locale, although a reliable 4-wheel-drive vehicle is handy. From Sherwin Campground, proceed onto the rough roadway and follow it up Laurel Canyon. The last mile can be very rugged and many timid, white-knuckle drivers opt to park in the meadow and follow the stream up the steep hillside to the lakes on foot. Sitting amid talus slopes and scattered conifers, the two tandem lake's collect ice and snow melt from surrounding Laurel and Bloody mountains. The lower Laurel is three acres and sits right at 10,000 feet while upper Laurel covers eight acres and is located a few feet above. Both waters are 30 to 40 feet deep.

Although wielding a wary reputation, goldens here will often approach the 14 to 16 inch range. According to Wong, freshwater gammarus, or shrimp account for the bulk of their rapid growth. Though populations remain somewhat fragile because spawning habitat is limited, they are protected by barbless hook regulations. In addition, fish under 14 inches must be released.

On our last visit here, Matt enjoyed especially productive results. Crawling on all fours to keep a low profile and benefiting from a gathering nimbus cloud cover, he skillfully plied the moving water of the inlets and outlets for a brace of kaleidoscopic, near-identical 12 inchers. On the other hand, I prefer to work the shelflines between shallow and deep water. Polaroid glasses also aid in spotting the quarry which often

darts from the depths like a gilded arrow. Since much of this structure is just



out of reach of shorebound anglers, a belly boat or canoe comes in handy. Light to dark-bodied nymphs allowed to sink and twitched parallel to these ledges often produce jolting strikes, especially when used in partnership with high density lines and a five- to seven-weight setup. Again, the key ingredient in the food chain appears to be the bountiful scud, although the prolific caddis is also a highly relished food source. Yellow Rooster tails, yellow-orange Panther Martins and bronze spoons are productive lures.

Located a few miles uphill from Kirman near Sonora Pass sits Koenig Lake, reached by an easy one mile hike from the parking area. A rocky, bowl-shaped water surrounded by sparse timber and guarded by sentinel-like Leavitt Peak (11,570'), this 15-acre water possesses a fairly rich food chain and, reportedly, goldens up to 13 inches!

Frank Helms, Rob Brown and I managed to explore it, albeit briefly, in early October. Shortly after releasing an 11 incher, however, wind whistled through the peaks, ebony storm clouds rapidly enveloped us and the lake was whipped into frothing whitecaps by mid-morning. Back in the sanctuary of Helm's Dodge Ridge Ski Resort, we saluted our golden efforts while the season's first snowflakes quietly settled outside.

The last of the real "secret spot" waters in the Eastern Sierra is noted for its remnant grayling population, although definitely not their size. Formed by an earthen dam which catches the waters of both Deep and Desert creeks, Lobdell Lake is located on a high desert saddle in the Sweetwater Mountains north of Bridgeport and is the only place in the state where this species is available. Prior to the drought of the late '80s, this reservoir teemed with specimens in the eight to nine inch category, with a few ranging up to 11 inches but since then numbers have dwindled greatly. Low water, an improved road and overharvesting most likely collaborated against this fragile population. Even though the DFG has determined that a few grayling remain, Wong encourages anglers to release all fish in hopes that their numbers will again rebuild. "Since the snowpack has been slightly better than average during the past three seasons, this is a fair possibility."

On the morning of our third day, Mother Nature threw us an unexpected curve. Intent on crossing Sonora Pass before it was closed, we were forced home earlier than anticipated by a fast-moving snow storm—a subtle reminder that we were stretching the season to its limit. Although our three day rampage along the eastern scarp found us fulfilling only half our slam, neither of us were complaining. Indeed, with this trip's ledger revealing four trout, each over three

pounds, we were more than satisfied! Admiring the white-dusted backcountry while descending the west slope, we immediately began mapping out next fall's agenda in earnest—one which will definitely include salmon-trout, 24-karat steelhead and air-brushed footballs!

Actually, there is little doubt that some mighty impressive trout exist in the shadows of this snow-enshrouded chain of mountains between Mammoth Lakes and Monitor Pass. While human-induced seasonal closures and special regulations are definite factors in maintaining hefty trout, Wong indicates that they benefit immensely from ideal growing conditions. "Minerals eroding from high elevation peaks

naturally drain into numerous watersheds, ultimately enhancing plant and aquatic life," he informs. "Understandably, this section of the Eastern Sierra contains some of the richest waters in the state."

At a time when nature paints the landscape in vivid yellows, the air takes on a crisp tingle and large gatherings have returned to their citified lifestyles, this wonderland appears to reach its zenith. To me, its myriad lakes and streams offer just the right amount of solitude where adventuresome anglers can wash their souls while catching trout of trophy stature. Whether enjoying the challenge of an exotic slam or merely targeting one species, my sons and I find this region to be a land of *absolute extremes—and big trout!*

## Who's Going to Win the \$5,000 Grand Prize in the 18th Annual Niagara County "Fall Classic" Fishing Derby September 16-24, 1995?

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