


Brook trout can be smarter, stronger and tougher to catch than most anglers believe.

This record-holder's tips should lead you to trophy-size fish

Techniques for World-Class BROOKIES

STORY AND PHOTOS BY DON VACHINI



Representing more than a picture of flashing burnt ocher and rose-pocked blue halos, the High Sierra fish, caught from a lake below 13,986-foot Mt. Humphrey, weighed 1 pound, 8 ounces and filled the vacant Unlimited Tippet class record of the National Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame.

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This 17-inch brookie, taken by my son, Jason Vachini, was joined by two more world record "specks" on a high-country trip that proved California's mightiest mountain range can produce legendary brook trout.

Although many California waters teem with mini-clones of these fish, only two dozen or so widely scattered lakes meet conditions conducive to producing trophy size brookies. Tomahawk, Mesa, Marie, Crater, East, Kirman, Poore and Roosevelt are better than average lakes dotting the harsh east and west escarpment of the southern Sierra between Bishop and Bridgeport.

Tucked within the thickly forested Cascade Range and its Trinity, Salmon and Scott subranges, Red Cap, Middle Boulder, Dobkins, Telephone, Babs and Little Crater lakes are situated much lower than their Sierra counterparts and benefit from warmer weather and a longer growing season. Containing some impressive fish, they are guarded by rugged terrain.

Fisheries biologists deem these remote lakes ideal for producing trophy fish since all are deep, possess abundant food supplies and are lightly pressured. Over the past six seasons, my sons and I have zeroed in on a few of these waters with encouraging results. In particular, Tomahawk Lake has yielded five tippet class records for my family.

Although pan-size brookies carry a reputation for gullibility, anglers must be prepared to meet granddaddy fish



■ Fly fishing is the technique of choice at high-altitude lakes, where author Don Vachini admires a fat brook trout before its release. At left: brookies thrive in the clearest of waters.



on their own terms — which is not always easy. Once a promising body of water is selected, a careful plan of attack should be implemented before wetting a line. I always attempt to scout the water from a higher vantage point, making both mental and written notes for immediate and future use.

Since larger fish tend to be deep dwellers, I search for a telltale light area deepening to dark water, which indicates a submerged shelf or dropoff. Underwater springs, sometimes tipped off by minute surface bubbles or light areas on a dark bottom, are also prime locales since they provide cold, oxygenated water. On occasion, fish can be pinpointed, leading to a direct stalking approach. Polarized glasses and binoculars are great visual aids for this endeavor.

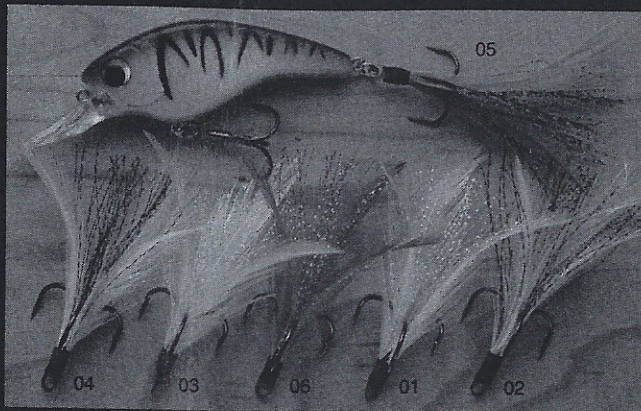
However, simply locating these fish offers no guarantee of success. Using shoreline rocks or brush as cover, crawling stalks and demanding presentations from contorted positions are some Rambo-like skills necessary to keep the angler's silhouette out of the window of vision of the targeted fish. Until I learned otherwise, I used to blunder up to the shoreline and begin casting. However, visions of large V-wakes streaking away were common during my early years.

I have found that the fish's caution is somewhat relaxed during early morning and late afternoon, and in periods preceding thunderstorms when brook trout often enter the shallows. One midday after our flies were spurned for two hours, our luck changed moments after a large cumulo-nimbus blocked out the bright sky. Amid soft rain and grumbings of thunder, we enjoyed a pair of double hookups plus several solid hits. Action subsided when the sun poked through the cloud cover.

Team fishing, whereby one angler spots and directs casts for another, sometimes provides a valuable edge on these lonesome waters. A sharp-eyed buddy can notify the angler of an impending strike.

While the clear waters of these lakes theoretically call for one or two-pound tippets, knife-edged granite reefs, submerged logs or thick weed growth dictate four to six-pound line or 1X to 6X tippets. ➤

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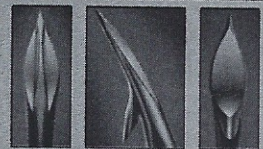


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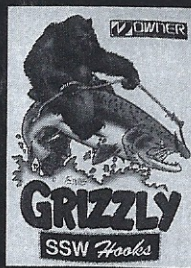
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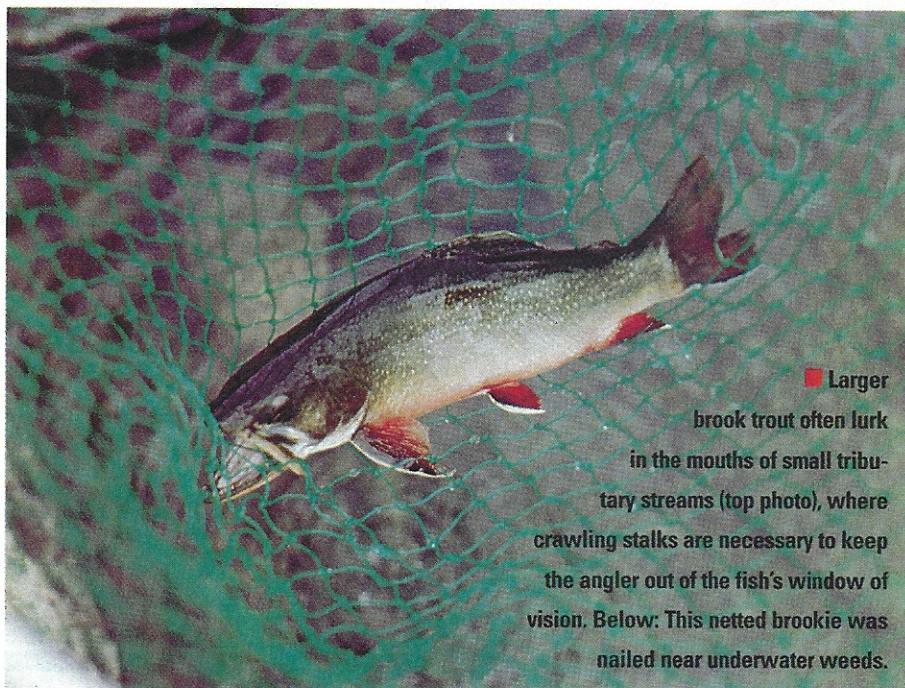
COLOR	SIZE	QTY	FISHING TEAM CAPS	T-SHIRT	SIZES (QTY)	T-SHIRT	SIZES (QTY)
_____	_____	_____	_____	GRIZZLY	L () XL () XXL ()	HAWG	L () XL () XXL ()
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■ Larger brook trout often lurk in the mouths of small tributary streams (top photo), where crawling stalks are necessary to keep the angler out of the fish's window of vision. Below: This netted brookie was nailed near underwater weeds.

SPECIAL TRICKS FOR BIGGER FISH

While small brook trout are not difficult to catch, Rick Rockel of Ken's Alpine Sporting Goods in Bridgeport, California, acknowledges that fooling the larger specimens sometimes can prove exasperating since they tend to stay in deep water. A recognized angling expert having prowled much of the Eastern Sierra for 18 years, Rockel says the best times to try for big brookies is early May right after ice-out and again in fall, when the fish let down their guard in anticipation of spawning and the coming winter.

Also, an understanding of their eating habits is beneficial. "Since freshwater shrimp appear to be a favorite food, scud, matuka and shrimp patterns in orange, red, green and olive best duplicate the most common phases of this tiny morsel," Rockel advises.

A 6 or 7 weight fly rod matched with a sinking line is ideal for twitching varied nymph offerings just off the bottom. Since most naturals will be hiding in or near weed growth, Rockel suggests heavier tippets to help prevent breakoffs.

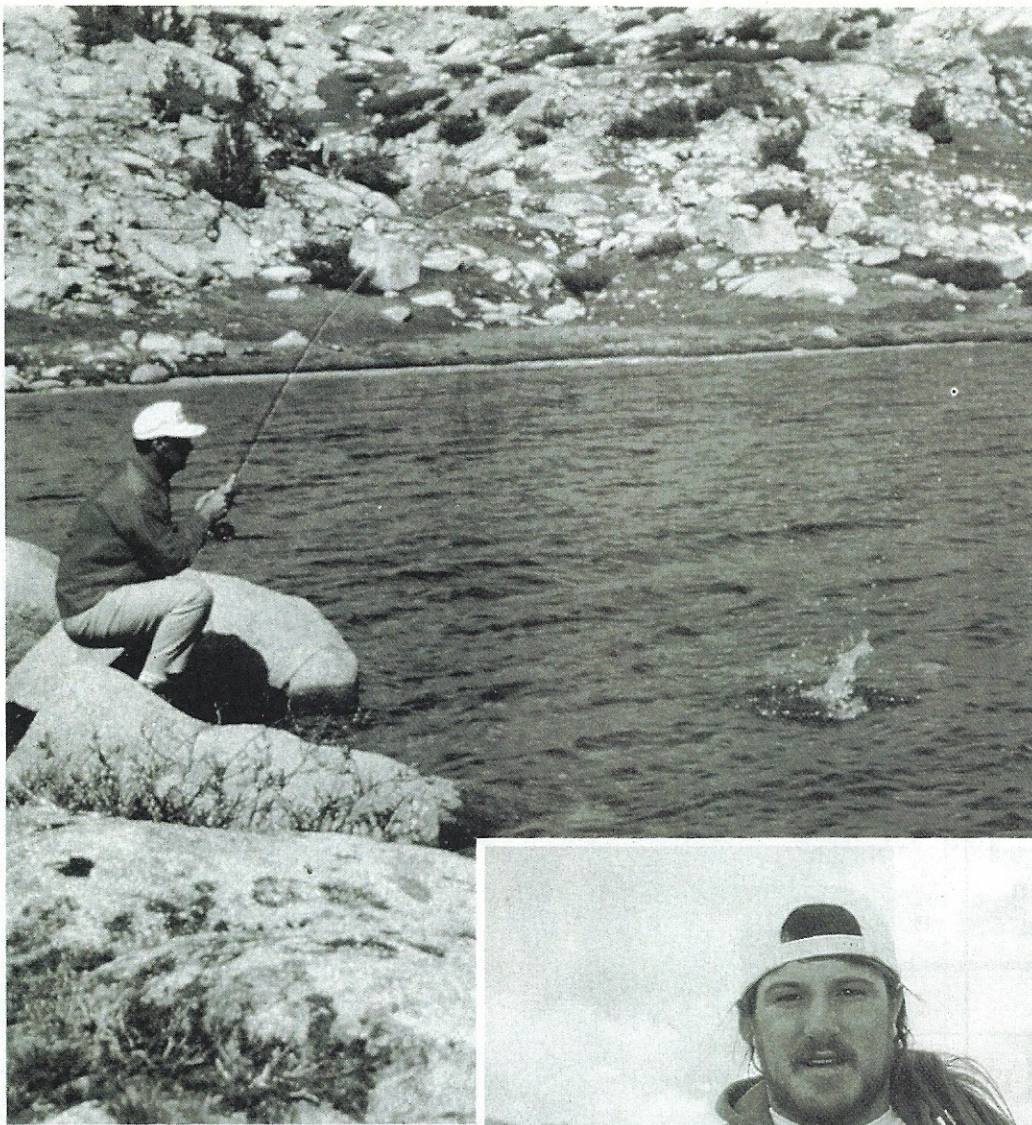
For the spinfishing angler, an ultralight graphite rod and reel will efficiently operate tiny Rapalas, Z-Rays, Bingo Bugs, Dardevles, Rooster Tails and micro crappie jigs slowly across the bottom. However, whether spin or fly angling, Rockel hints that offerings worked deep and slow are the key essentials to hookups.

Whenever possible, use a float tube, which allows anglers to probe the deeper, productive water just outside weedbeds or dropoffs. While a floating craft is more feasible on some of the larger lakes nearer civilization, more subtle tactics work better on remote waters. Rockel suggests scouting from above to locate underwater structure and fish. Once found, he believes most schooling brookies are fairly susceptible. "However," he warns, "they also are easily spooked. Crawling on hands and knees helps anglers to avoid detection."

Don Vachini

One of the main keys to catching bulky brookies is understanding their diet. While mosquitos, mayflies, damselflies, midges, leeches and snails are present, it is the prolific caddis

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set. The take is often quite noticeable.

Spin fishermen using a wide assortment of hardware also seem to enjoy much success. Bronze Mepps, brown Rooster Tails, yellow/gold Panther Martins, green or orange Bingo Bug and small rainbow or fire tiger Rapalas probably resemble bite-sized juveniles to these big trout. Let the lure sink deep, and retrieve in herky-jerky motions. Scent applied to a

■ Brookies in clear mountain lakes are easily spooked, and anglers should crouch low to avoid being seen. Inset: Jason Vachini, the author's son, holds his record-setting 1-pound, 8-ounce brook trout.

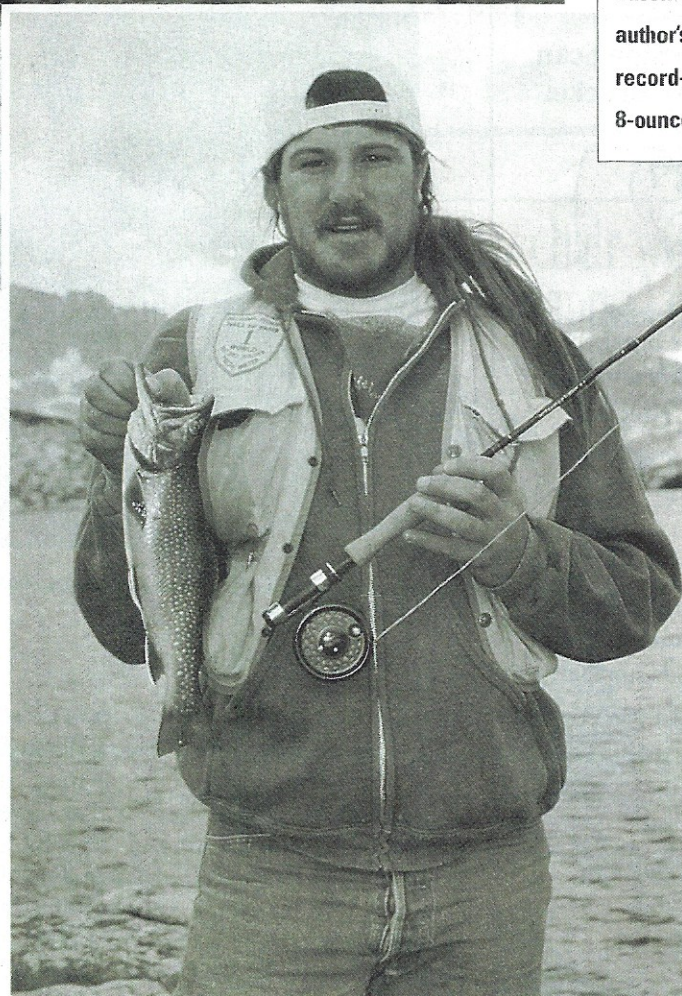
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freshwater shrimp that seems to make up a good portion of the fish's menu. Size 10 to 14 Caddis Pupa, Hare's Ear, Pheasant Tail, A.P. and Bird's Nest nymph patterns have proven their worth, and flying ant, woolly buggers and leech are realistic backup choices. Phases of light tan, brown, green and olive best duplicate the range of colors.

In some waters, the big brookies subsist almost entirely on freshwater shrimp. Try weighted scud, matuka, chromomid and Serendipity patterns, especially in brown and olive shades.

Presenting imitations of the tiny scud is a tedious operation usually requiring a high density sinking line to quickly sink the flies to around 10 or 20 feet. From there, they are best twitched along the bottom or upward ever so slowly, using a sink-and-draw



technique. Point the rod tip toward the fly and keep it just in or near the surface to aid in a more efficient hook-

lure will sometimes arouse the feeding instinct, enhancing the possibility of a long-line connection.

Often, working a lure or fly parallel to a shelfline instead of perpendicular to it will result in a payoff, while trailing a fly three to four feet behind a spinner occasionally will pique the interest of a big brookie. Wherever feasible, a float tube is helpful, as it allows for a variety of casting and retrieving angles

impossible from shore for most anglers.

Though ravenous right after ice-

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out, large brook trout are especially catchable during the late fall spawning season, when they become highly territorial. For example, hiking into California's Trinity Alps Wilderness a week before the season closed, I selected a small lake just above 6000 feet. Orange, yellow and bronze painted the hardwoods while a light snow dusted the landscape. Nearly a dozen brookies lined the reed-infested channel, their vivid undersides flaring the early morning light as they nudged the

'They became more aggressive towards one another, and twice attacked a hooked fish'

weeds, apparently intent on dislodging snails. While dining on the displaced groceries, they were also creating a noticeable surface disturbance, squabbling among themselves.

Carefully dabbing a weighted nymph while kneeling just beyond them, I was able to hook, land and release four pot-bellied, "one-pound runts" without spooking them from the narrow waterway. In fact, they became more aggressive toward one another, and twice attacked a hooked fish as it struggled across another's domain.

Adventuresome anglers intent on matching wits with members of this flashy char family must not only endure rigorous challenges posed by jumbled rocks, inhospitable ridgelines and trailless terrain, but should be equipped with a tactical arsenal as well. However, dedicated visitors to these remote Golden State lakes will have a chance at landing fish which will forever dispel the myth of diminutive brookies. 

Outdoor writer Don Vachini of Petaluma, California, holds several line and tippet class records of the National Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame and the International Game Fish Association.

HOW TO PINPOINT BIG BROOKIES

While anglers sometimes will stumble by accident onto productive waters housing chunky brook trout, serious trophy-seekers do their homework ahead of time. Normally, this includes poring over national forest and wilderness area maps while plumbing for advice from authoritative sources.

Once a quadrant is selected, you should isolate known brookie waters and then, using a topographical map, focus on lakes appearing to have sketchy or difficult access. At this point, enlist the services of local tackle shop owners, forest rangers, area guides and packers for additional advice. Regional fisheries biologists, however, remain the most logical sources of firsthand information, since they willingly share comprehensive data.

Call these phone numbers for assistance:

The Shasta-Cascade Wonderland Association, (800) 326-6944, and Department of Fish and Game biologists Mike Rode (916) 225-2362, or Dennis Maria, (916) 842-3249, are excellent sources for northwestern California. Map information on the Marble Mountain and Trinity Alps wilderness areas may be obtained from the Shasta/Trinity National Forest headquarters, (916) 246-5222.

For Lassen National Forest map information, call (916) 257-2151. For angling information on the Caribou and Warner wilderness areas, contact DFG biologist Paul Chappell, (916) 254-6363. Map information is at Modoc National Forest headquarters, (916) 233-4611.

Rick Rockel of Ken's Alpine Sporting Goods, (619) 932-7707, can provide detailed information on Kirman, Poore, East and Roosevelt lakes. Hoover Wilderness Area maps may be ordered from the Toiyabe National Forest office, (619) 932-7070.

For Southern Sierra map information, contact the Sierra National Forest headquarters, (209) 487-4155, and ask for a John Muir Wilderness map. Angling information may be obtained from DFG biologists Dale Mitchell, (209) 222-3761, and Darrell Wong, (619) 872-1171.

Don Vachini