

West Slope Winter Trout

February can be a cruel and difficult month. Christmas bills are finally coming due, the Sierra Nevada Mountains are thickly enshrouded in snow, and before the stream-trout opener (which is just three months down the line) state and federal taxes are payable! While a rough period of denial remains ahead, the trout enthusiast who's willing to brave icy winds, driving sleet and numbing temperatures will be able to exploit several unbelievably pleasant and inexpensive options.

Huddled deep in our down jackets, Shasta Tackle Company's Gary Miralles and I were doing our best to pursue alternative No. 1. Between storms on a cold, crisp February day, we were trolling Lake Oroville, a reservoir in the steeply climbing foothills above the eastern Sacramento Valley. Without warning, my rod bowed sharply and then danced vigorously. Reaching to grab it, I suddenly became oblivious to the chill, as the fish on my line, straining both my tackle and my nerves, performed a welcome series of thrilling aerobatics. Indeed, the thrashing in the net of that silvery 16-inch rainbow made me forget totally that it was winter!

It should be borne in mind that wintertime trout often differ greatly from those encountered in summer, the main caveat being that their optimum living conditions are now found at or near the surface. During the cold months they're apt to be found just about anywhere on top of a lake or reservoir, making inclement weather a challenge secondary to actually locating them.

Adventuresome anglers prepared to tolerate the elements will find more than half a dozen manmade lakes dotting the lower to middle elevations of the Sierra Nevada's west slope, each a fast, under-two-

*A half-dozen
Western Sierra
reservoirs not
only hold
prospects for
feisty wintertime
trout but are also
only a short drive
from Sacramento
and other Central
Valley areas.*

by Don Vachini

hour drive from nearby metro areas and each offering a welcome respite from midwinter doldrums — along with a chance to land some hefty trout. Central/Sacramento Valley lakes, Camanche, Pardee, New Melones, Don Pedro, Sly Park, Rollins, Collins and Oroville all provide a timely fix for anglers afflicted with cabin fever, allowing them to dodge responsibility a tad longer!

CAMANACHE

Under an hour's drive from Stockton, Camanche Lake, a 7,700-acre impoundment, sits at an elevation of 325 feet in the gently sloping foothills east of Lodi in Amador County. Providing 53 miles of shoreline, it's a well-known winter trout hotspot for DFG planters, which normally run 10 to 12 inches. The private Lake Camanche Fishing Access Fund infuses it weekly with 600 to 1,200 pounds of trout with a minimum weight of 1 pound. Planting expectations this season range between 75,000 and 80,000

pounds of rainbows. At least 5 percent of these fish will be between 5 and 12 pounds, with occasional individuals ranging up to 14 pounds!

A 3-acre pond along the south shore is also stocked with trophy trout, greatly narrowing the area you need to search for productive water. In addition to shore-anglers, this 80-foot-deep pond proves popular with float-tubers working black and purple Woolly Buggers and Matuka streamers away from the bank.

Main lake hotspots include the north shore in the vicinity of the boat ram, the submerged river channel, along the dam and southwest of Hat Island. Boaters after holdovers should check out the Mokelumne feeder arm first. Trolling night crawlers behind gold or silver flashers proves a steady producer, while Rainbow Runners and bikini Needlefish take their share of trout as well.

Shore-anglers setting up near the north and south shore marinas score well soaking a variety of baits, which typically translates to rainbow and chartreuse Power Bait. Those with the most patience often score the heaviest.

From Stockton, take Highway 88/12 to Clements. Follow Highway 12 to reach the south shore. To reach the north shore, continue two miles past Clements and turn east on Liberty Road. North shore information can be obtained by calling (209) 763-5166; south shore information, (209) 763-5915.

PARDEE

Opening the first weekend in February, Lake Pardee — 2,000 surface acres and 43 miles of shoreline amid a forested setting — is set up exclusively for fishermen. According to Art Wilcox, Pardee's director of public relations, this water is heavily planted by both the



DFG and a private concessionaire that distributes healthy numbers of trophy trout much as it does at Camanche. "Most trout fall into the 12- to 15-inch range and tip the scales at a pound or above," he said.

During this time of the year, Wilcox says, surface temperatures are ideal for both trolling and shore-anglers. Since the incoming water is often clouded by runoff from the Mokelumne River, he suggests trollers use high-visibility lures such as Crippures, yellow or brown Rooster Tails and gold Vibrax, which create a noisy disturbance. "Those who get on the water early and work from the boat ramp to the North Arm are not often disappointed," he offered.

Some of the best shore-angling will come from the Marina cove and

the narrows where Power Bait, Sierra Gold, salmon eggs, marshmallows and inflated night crawlers will consistently put anglers into fish. Although it's a bit early in the season and temperatures are too cool for them, kokanee could come to lucky anglers towing Pro Secrets or R&K spinners from 15 to 50 feet. Most will be just shakers in the 6- to 8-inch range.

From Stockton, follow Highway 88 to Clements. Turn right onto Highway 12 and follow the signs to the lake. For information, call the Pardee Recreation Area, (209) 772-1472, or Art Wilcox, (916) 481-2188.

NEW MELONES

Lying at an elevation of 1,085 feet, Calaveras County's 12,500-acre New Melones Reservoir is a good

Holdover trout, such as the 3-pounder netted by author Don Vachini at Lake Oroville, add a great deal of excitement for winter anglers. Some West Slope lakes plant hatchery fish that are even bigger than this one! Photo courtesy of Don Vachini.

producer of early-season trout, thanks to over 70,000 DFG-stocked fish. In addition to rainbow trout running to pan-sized and larger, this water also contains brown trout — some in the 3- to 4-pound class!

Cold-weather anglers will usually find the north or upper ends of the lake best. Trolling the mouth of Carson Cove, Angel's Arm and the river arm between Parrot's Ferry and Highway 49 seems productive for

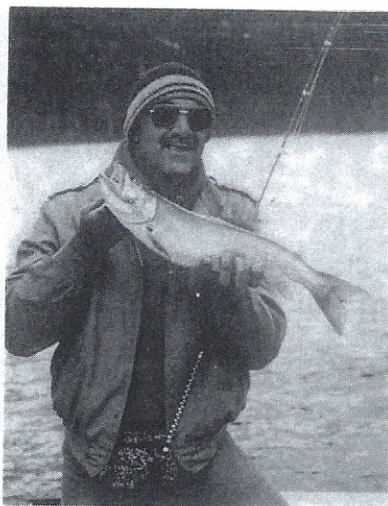
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early-season fish. Some beautiful holdover rainbows in the 14- to 16-inch range, commonly going on the bite as the weather gets colder, can often be teased into striking by top-lining Kastmasters, fire-tiger Needlefish and Rainbow Runners. Slow-trolling live minnows with a single split shot across the dam is also worth the effort.

Those after elusive brown trout will find meaty Rebels, Rapalas, Bug-eyed Stingers and other minnow-imitating replicas to be highly effective. According to Bob Schiel, owner of Glory Hole Sports, browns can often be located where the Stanislaus enters the lake, in an area affectionately referred to as "the logjam."

From Stockton, follow I-5 to Highway 120. Turn east through Manteca and Oakdale (where it becomes 120/108). While some small roads will connect with the lake, turn north on Highway 49 at Sonora to reach the north end of the lake.

For additional information, phone the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, New Melones, at (209) 536-9094, or Glory Hole Sports, (209) 736-4333.



Besides rainbows, Sly Park reservoir also contains mackinaws, which can be dredged from the main channel. Photo courtesy of Don Vachini.

DON PEDRO

A giant of a lake, situated in the foothills west of Yosemite National Park at an elevation of 800 feet, 13,000-acre Don Pedro boasts 160 miles of shoreline. Beneficiary of an annual infusion of 60,000 rainbow trout, this water is unique in that it also offers the bonus of a chinook salmon fishery along with its trout

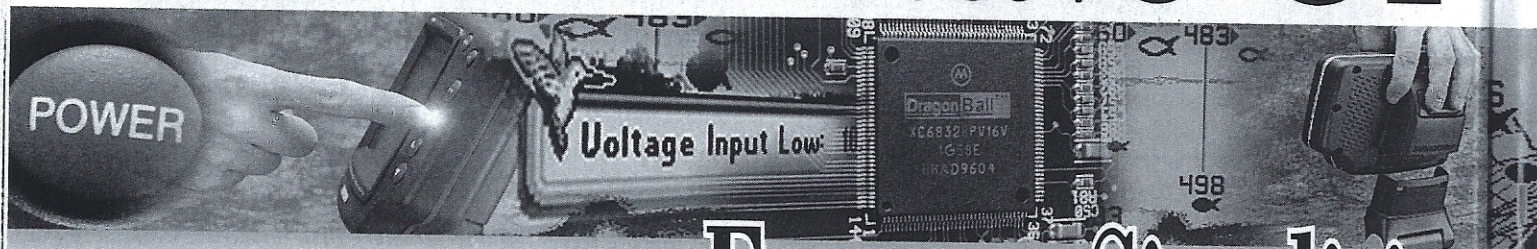
population!

The launch areas and points of land in the South or Middle Bay regions, as well as Sullivan, Big and Ramos creek inlets are profitable early-season locales for boaters top-lining or trolling silver Humdingers, Mepps or Panther Martin spinners along the surface. Recently planted trout also tend to cruise in the vicinity of the marinas and campgrounds, where can be reached by bankside fishermen soaking baits or casting lures.

Although shore-anglers seem to fare best where access is easier, a few locales off the beaten path also produce. Dodging droplets one chilly, overcast day, I was bouncing salmon eggs deep into Moccasin Inlet, where the incoming stream had gouged a deep hole. The subtle *tap-tap-tap* sensation belied the actual size of the feeding rainbow, which tipped the scales just under 4 pounds — enough to persuade me to ignore the persistent drizzle!

Special chinook techniques include downriggers towing dodgers with frozen shad wraps or silver Flatfish worked anywhere from 30 to 70 feet deep. The most consistent

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area is from the Highway 49 bridge south through the middle river channel where the bottom is loaded with rocks. Minnows and salmon congregate here, especially early in the year.

From Stockton, drive south on I-5. Turn east on Highway 120 and proceed through Manteca and Oakdale. Continue on Highway 120, driving five miles past Chinese Camp, and turn left to Moccasin Point.

From Modesto, drive about 32 miles east on Highway 132 to the town of LaGrange. Turn north on LaGrange Road (County Rd. J59) and travel to the dam. For further information, contact either the Don Pedro Recreation Agency, (209) 852-2396 or Flaming Point Marina, (209) 852-2479.

**SLY PARK
(JENKINSON LAKE)**

Jenkinson, tucked away in a valley at an elevation of 3,500 feet in El Dorado National Forest, is virtually deserted in February — an ideal winter destination for those hoping to pick up a trout or two for dinner. Since the DFG plants 35,000 trout per year in this 640-acre



Chris Vachini busted this hefty rainbow trout from Collins Lake in the Yuba County foothills. Photo by Don Vachini.

impoundment, there are plenty to go around.

The best approach to angling in the winter seems to be trolling the surface along the narrow upstream arms or casting blue/silver Thomas Bouyants, bikini Needlefish, Humdingers and silver Vibrax

within 30 yards of the shoreline from a boat while drifting. Although you're liable to find snow along the shoreline in February, cold water temperatures are about ideal for pursuing rainbow trout around the eight miles of coniferous shoreline.

While planted and holdover rainbows are the dominant species here, an occasional brown will take a deep-running Wee Wart, Shad Rap or Rapala. It's not highly unusual to dredge up a skinny mackinaw using Apex jigs just off the bottom of the channel.

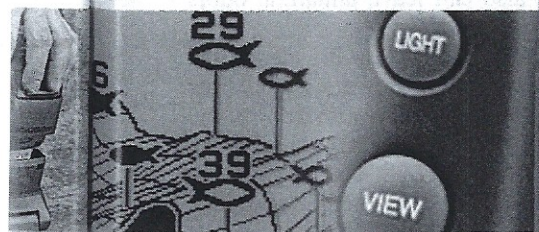
From Placerville, travel Highway 50 east 11 miles to the town of Pollock Pines. Take the Sly Park exit and follow the road south five miles to the lake. Call either Sly Park Recreation Area, (916) 644-2545, or Russell's Sportsman's Corner, (916) 621-2483, for up-to-the-minute information.

ROLLINS LAKE

Featuring 26 miles of shoreline, 900-acres Rollins Lake nestles at an elevation of 2,100 feet, where foothill country meets forest. It's one of my favorite impoundments for both a solitude-filled escape and a

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WEST SLOPE . . . Continued

big trout limit. Each season the DFG plants over 14,000 rainbow trout, more than half of which are over 1 foot and weigh a half-pound or better. These, coupled with holdovers from past seasons, make this a water that offers great potential for a trophy trout encounter.

Although shore-anglers are pretty much limited to a cruiser intercepting bait, a boat comes in handy, not just for trolling topwater lures but for allowing anglers to

pursue schools as well. Since water here tends to be a bit murky, flashy lures such as silvery Mepps, Swiss Blinkers, olive or white Rooster Tails and Humdingers are highly effective. Thomas Bouyant, Kastmaster and Wob-L-Rite spoons towed behind Dave Davis or Sep's dodgers are also productive.

Follow Highway 80 east of Sacramento. From Highway 80 take the Colfax exit, and then head northeast on Hwy. 174. The lake is reached via either Orchard Springs, Greenhorn or You Bet Roads. The Greenhorn Campground, (916) 272-

6100, Orchard Springs Campground, (916) 346-2212, Peninsula Campground, (916) 477-9413, or Long Ravine Campground, (916) 346-6166, will provide additional information.

COLLINS LAKE

Set at a 1,200-foot elevation in the Yuba County foothills, this lake's 12 miles of shoreline hold out the prospect of some ideal February trout. According to Lincoln Young, manager of the Collins Lake Resort, this water not only benefits from abundant DFG plants but also boasts Northern California's largest trophy trout planting program. "While approximately 25,000 rainbows and 1,500 browns make up scheduled DFG plants, the private

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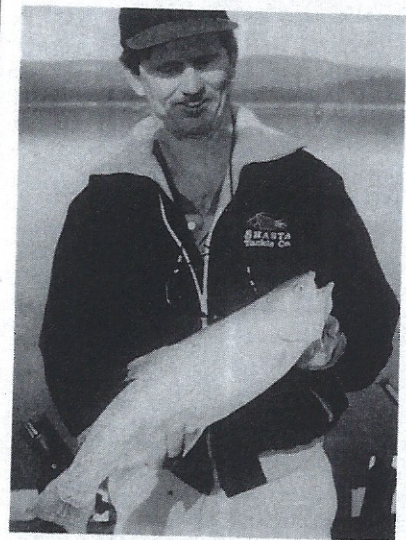
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Shasta Tackle Company's Gary Miralles trolled Lake Oroville for this scrappy 3-pound trout. Photo by Don Vachini.

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concession provides three times as many fish," he said. "The majority of the Mt. Lassen-strain rainbows range from 1 to 7 pounds."

Lincoln says the fishing at this lake is usually best when water temperatures are cool. However, when the cold flows of Dry and Willow Glen creeks pour in from above, their runoff affects the coloration of the lake, often turning it murky. "Depending on its intensity," he noted, "action really turns on about a week or so after a storm when surface visibility improves."

Boaters hauling Kastmasters, Z-Rays, Super Dupers and Thomas Bouyants behind lead-core line along the surface will score although

shore anglers working the beach, dock or dam areas soaking night crawlers, worms and an assortment of Sierra Gold or Power Bait will score well, too.

From Marysville take Highway 20 east for 12 miles and then travel 10 miles on Marysville Road to the lake. The Collins Lake Resort, (916) 692-1600, can provide additional information.

LAKE OROVILLE

At an elevation of 900 feet, Lake Oroville is a vast foothill impoundment covering 15,000 acres that harbors in each of its four extensive arms loads of trout. While the fishery tails off in the summer months, when water drawdown limits it somewhat, the transition to late winter pretty much translates to a solid fishery. Some big trout are present and the late-winter/early-spring fishery is often the best the year has to offer.

It was here two seasons ago that Gary Miralles and I connected on some fine 'bows while toplining the lake's west branch. Disdaining flashers and downriggers, Miralles towed green and yellow-hued Crippures and Bingo Bugs about 200 feet behind the boat and about 5 feet under the surface.

"This time of year, fish will be well scattered," he reported, "but the structure we're working just looks trouty!"

Zigzagging 100 yards beyond and across the slowly moving water of the inlet channel proved fortunate. Although we only landed three trout on the half-day, they measured 16 to 18 inches, with the biggest of the trio over 2 1/2 pounds!

While big rainbows are often the takers, browns up to 4 to 5 pounds will occasionally smash the bait. Jointed size 3 and 4 Rapalas and Rebels in fire-tiger or rainbow finish commonly elicit big strikes.

King salmon are also present in this Butte County lake. Drifting minnows or vertically probing white or yellow Crappie or Apex jigs along the face of the dam will frequently entice feisty chinooks between 2 and 8 pounds.

Other productive locales include Lime Saddle Marina, Potter's Cove, Bidwell Bridge, Bidwell Marina and the dam. Since threadfin shad populations abound in the lake,

Hopkins spoons, Little Cleos or any baitfish imitations seem to work magic. While drifting live minnows under a clear bobber from many points on the shore is another productive technique, there's no telling which of the "Big Three" will take the bait!

From Oroville on Highway 70, drive east on Highway 162 or north on Highway 70 to the lake. For additional information, contact: the Lake Oroville State Recreation Area, (916) 538-2200; Bidwell Marina, (916) 589-3165; or Lime Saddle Marina, (916) 877-2414.

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

Your February trouting venture will obviously get rolling well after New Year's Day, so be sure you have purchased and are wearing your 1997 fishing license. As per regulations, all of these impoundments have daily limits of five fish with 10 in possession. As a matter of assurance before angling, always double-check the current regulations booklet and familiarize yourself with any restrictions on a particular body of water. □



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