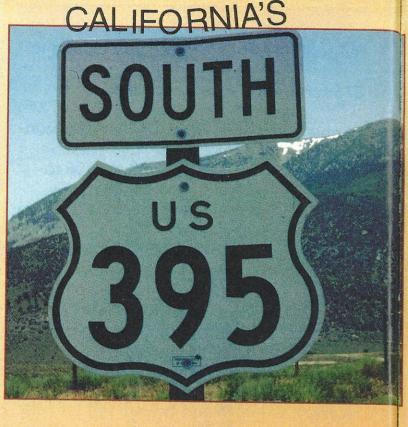
Gateway To TROUT

"From beginning to end, this 200 mile strip of asphalt runs alongside a wealth of drive-up fishing spots—a regular avenue of trout!"

DON VACHINI





Those who take advantage of Highway 395's roadside waters understand why it is labeled the gateway to trout!

Middle right: Weekly plants, averaging 1/2 pound, help maintain the roadside fishery.

Far right: Three trailheads are within short distances from Highway 395 arterioles. This backcountry lake is in the vast, half-million acre John Muire Wilderness.

loaked in brushy willows and rustling cottonwoods while gurgling pleasantly as it cascaded between pools and pockets, the 10-foot wide creek was a perfect match for me on this mid-July morning. Holding my fly rod high, I repeatedly tiptoed the weighted nymph along the rocky bottom. When it abruptly stopped, my first thought was "snag," but the immediate throbbing pulsations said "trout," and a sizable one at that. Flashing golden bronze, the brown's initial run instantaneously escalated my heart rate. However, faster than Deion Sanders in pass coverage, it bolted into a tangle of submerged roots, where, still visible in the slightly off-color water, I helplessly watched the probable three pounder shake its head vigorously, once, twice.... Then, it was gone—only its hefty image etched into my memory. I stared blankly at my fly line, now dangling limply in the current...

As reality edged the numbness from my senses, a car's familiar zzwoosh! was detected, followed by two more similar sounds in rapid succession of each other. Glancing upward through the brush reminded me that I was only yards away from a well-travelled thoroughfare!

While many individuals spend inordinate amounts of time and money to ensure extraordinary angling for trout well away from civilization, there is no reason to overlook the plentiful drive-up fishing available along some of California's more notable roads. In fact, when it comes to

planning a trouty destination with plenty of options, I have found the Golden State's Highway 395 to be in a class by itself.

Imagine, if you will, a 200 mile long strip of blacktop which parallels a scenic, snow-enshrouded mountain range, an active volcano, a pair of national parks, several ski resorts and a plethora of national forest campgrounds in addition to a trio of expansive wilderness areas. Indeed, from the time it enters the state at Topaz until it breaks away from the 14,495-foot prominence of Mt. Whitney south of Olancha to enter the Mojave Desert, significant trout waters seem to materialize around each sage-infested bend.

This roadway not only traverses a land steeped in Paiute and Shoshone Indian history but of stark contrasts as well. Indeed, looking out of one's car window brings vistas of granitic edifaces which seemingly reach past the clouds while the opposite side of the vehicle reveals volcanic tableland, alleuvial fans and carpets of bluegreen sage brush. In addition, it bisects both the highest and lowest points in the contiguous United States as Mt. Whitney and Death Valley are less than 60 miles apart.

Shadowing it almost step for step is a good portion of the Eastern Sierra Nevada Range whose jumbled and harsh escarpment not only provides a surprising number of fishing locales but some ideal trout habitat as well, according to Darrell Wong, a fisheries biologist with the Bishop's Department of Fish and Game (DFG)

office. All along the Sierra Crestline, minerals eroding from high elevation peaks naturally drain into numerous watersheds, ultimately enhancing plant and aquatic life. "Beyond a doubt, the Eastern Sierra accounts for some of the richest waters in the entire state," he ascertains. "The resultant smorgasboard of insect life," he continues, "is a big factor in area trout putting on heft."

While rainbows are the dominant trout, brown, brook, cutthroat and golden plus kokanee salmon can also be sought among the more than three dozen streams, lakes and primitive areas astride this secondary avenue of trout.

Roadside Impoundments

No less than three massive water-storing reservoirs, well-noted for outstanding brown and rainbow action, sit adjacent to this bountiful trout concourse between Nevada and Bishop. Topaz Lake, which straddles the California-Nevada border 65 miles south of Reno, provides some pleasant angling for those not intent on playing the odds on the stateline casino overlooking this water. Despite the fact that browns haven't been planted since 1971, some of the biggest trout caught annually are browns. During the fall, fair numbers of this hardy trout use the diversion feeder (from the West Walker) to spawn and then retreat back in the lake. While the official lake record is a 10-plus pounder, catches of browns over 12 have been reported annually. However, it is the rainbow trout, planted religiously by both California and Nevada, that provides the bulk of this fish-

Some of the best early-season lake fishing takes place right outside of the town of Bridgeport in Bridgeport Reservoir, nestled in a vast, flooded meadow at the 6,500' elevation less than an hour's drive from



Topaz. One absolutely frigid morning, my son lason and I were fishing in Buckeye Bay's inlet channel—an early season hotspot. Casting Bingo Bugs into the slowmoving water, we landed four husky rainbows in less time than it took us to rent our boat! May through June hotspots include the inlet feeder channels while the area near the dam known as the "bathtub," is very productive in the fall.

A dam across the southern end of Long Valley on the Owens River in 1941 created 12 x 5 mile Crowley Lake at the 6782' elevation, long considered one of the best producers of trout in the Eastern Sierra. The meadowy section at Benton Crossing is a prime locale to intercept lake-run troutrainbows in the spring and big browns in the fall.

According to Wong, these reservoirs, which resemble inland seas rimmed by treeless desert, are among the most fertile

the trout. "Later in the season, the bulk of these fish may hold in deeper water," he explains.

After these waters stratify in the summer, their fish may range anywhere from the surface to depths of 50 feet. The use of downriggers with sonar will allow anglers to pinpoint the correct depth and concentrate where the fish are holding. Sizable rainbows seem to prefer shiny, attractive spoons like the 501 nickle redhead Super Duper, Cripplures, Hum Dingers or Needlefish in bikini, frog or rainbow patterns while six- to nine-inch bronze or yellow-hued Rapalas or Rebels, probably resembling easy-picking planters, take their share of predator browns.

Working from a float tube is both popular and productive. Tubers using the countdown system, casting to individual fish or just trolling have solid results using adult or nymphal damselfly, dragonfly or



in the Eastern Sierra, benefitting greatly from the tremendous biomass delivered by tributary feeders. "Thanks to this extremely rich nutrient base, their trout growth is commonly measured in pounds," he beams. "Resident rainbows and browns often range between two to four pounds, but fish over five pounds are certainly not out of the ordinary," he adds.

While shore anglers casting the usual assortment of baits and lures will score, anglers pursuing steady big fish action need to be in a floating craft. Since lake levels fluctuate greatly due to agricultural needs, the use of electronic gear is central to consistent catches. During May and June, many of the bigger fish appear to be caught in water from five to fifteen feet deep and right along the shoreline. The most common explanation, according to Wong, is that the sun-warmed shallows attract small baitfish which in turn attract

midge patterns. Spring and late fall fishing appears best near the inlet or feeder streams where leviathan-sized specimens search for combinations of food, oxygen and spawning routes.

Soaking baits such as inflated night crawlers, salmon eggs with marshmallows or a varied selection of scented baits with a sliding sinker can often be a very effective shoreline endeavor.

Since frequent winds often tend to be ferocious on these open waters, safety should always be an issue. Although larger boats offer more protection and are less buffeted by the vehement gusts, the best advice is to get off the lake when the wind kicks up.

From an angling point of view, there are two places to absolutely avoid. Gigantic Mono Lake, whose alkaline waters are more famous for nesting birds, tufa towers and brine shrimp and Owens Lake, where

Off-Highway Options

While often associated with Hwy. 395, the following waters are reached by arteriole byways, both paved and dirt and usually under 15 miles. Although 4-wheelers rarely have a problem, be sure your 2-wheel drive can negotiate the dirt tracks, especially if there has been rain or snow in the area.

Turning on to and ascending Highway 89 just west of Monitor Pass, Heenan Lake and its Lahontan cutthroat populations are available. However, this broodstock refugorium for cutts in the 17 to 24 inch range is only open on weekends during September and October with barbless hook and non-consumptive regulations.

Proceeding less than a mile along Highway 108, one can locate the trailhead parking to Kirman Lake, where either a three-mile walk or bike ride allows anglers to try for out-of-this-country-type brook trout, consistently ranging in size from two to four pounds! While a few roadside turnouts allow access to the West Walker, other freedom-inducing options continue to beckon. Approximately seven miles from the Hwy. 395 junction, parking is available for Leavitt Meadows. By ascending the hogsback trail and traversing the ridgeline, Poore, Lane and Roosevelt lakes can be reached in a little over an hour. Rich in nutrients and aquatic life they too have well-fed brookies which, on occasion, can approach two to three pounds.

A few miles from Sonora Pass, an obscure dirt road can be followed to Leavitt Lake. Anglers here can opt for seven- to ten-inch brookies at Leavitt, or hike the easy trail another mile or so to Koenig Lake to pursue the kaleidoscopic state fish, which reaches lengths of up to 11 inches.

Twin Lakes and the Robinson Creek system are easily reached from the town of Bridgeport. Providing numerous campsites, a store, restaurant and marina, the lakes are not only the setting for some monstrous brown trout (the state record 26 1/2 pounder was taken here) but rainbow and kokanee salmon as well. Robinson and nearby Buckeye creeks are great little streams with sparkling water and lots of scrappy rainbows and browns. During summer, planted rainbows are abundant along the heavily-stocked campground sections, while fall is a prime time for resident and lake-run browns.

Accessed from the apex of Conway Summitt, the clustered Virginia lakes are nestled in a mountain canyon at 10,000 feet. Encircled with National Forest campgrounds, Big and Little Virginia along with Trumbull lakes are heavily planted with rainbows and browns while the nearby Hoover lakes offer native brook, browns and 'bows in much smaller sizes. The Hoover Wilderness trailhead is only yards from Big Virginia Lake and offers day-hike and extended backpack opportunities.

Lee Vining Creek along with Ellery, Saddlebag and Tioga lakes are all located adjacent to, or just off, Highway 120. Although the lakes are highly pressured by seemingly ever-present throngs of Yosemite National Park visitors, Lee Vining Creek offers plenty of secluded options along its cottonwood and aspen-choked banks.

The June Lake Loop (Highway 158) touches four of the most productive lakes in the Eastern Sierra. While brushy Rush Creek connects Silver and Grant, Gull and June lakes are especially noted for some hefty browns and startling numbers of rainbows. Reverse Creek is also an early season option.

The Mammoth Lakes Highway (Highway 203) brings travellers to a chain of waters known collectively as the Mammoth Lakes Basin. Mary, Mamie, George, Twin and Horseshoe lakes contain rainbow and brown with a few brook, while Crystal houses goldens, and specially-regulated McCloud contains Lahontan cutthroat. Anglers can either visit the San Joaquin River adjacent to the Devils Postpile National Monument or, by ascending a wicked 4-wheel drive road just south of Sherwin Creek, can reach the Laurel Lakes and some trophy, albeit wily, drive-to goldens.

Collecting melt from a vast cornucopia of backcountry waters, the North, South and Sabrina lakes triumverate not only provides trailheads to the John Muir Wilderness but also serve as tributary headwaters to the north, south and middle forks of Bishop Creek. The main stem provides a plethora of roadside angling locales, with the most productive being nearest Highway 168 for abundant planted 'bows and the steep canyon sections for wary native browns.

The road from 395 to Horseshoe Meadows gains over 5,000 feet in elevation in just 10 miles and eventually brings travellers within a few hiking miles of the Cottonwood Lakes, which serve as the source of the state's golden trout egg supply. While only the upper two lakes are open to fishing (to protect the valuable brood stocks), the creek along the trail is loaded with smallish but kaleidoscopic prizes. These waters sit adjacent to the Golden Trout Wilderness area.

The 47-mile long Kennedy Meadows Road, accessible off 395 just south of the tiny burg of Little Lake, affords access to the Kern River system and the original home of the state fish.

Facilities throughout the highway's course are numerous and varied. While campgrounds are adjacent to most roadside lakes and streams, there are resort lodges, motels and restaurants within easy reach of practically any fishing spot. For more information on these locales, contact either the Toyiabe National Forest Headquarters (619) 932-7070 or the Inyo National Forest headquarters (619) 873-4207.

its namesake river vitually disappears like a mirage (sucked dry by Southern California thirsts), are notably devoid of fish life.

Notable Streams

While swinging through the small east slope communities of Coleville, Walker, Bridgeport, Lee Vining, Bishop, Lone Pine and Independence, Highway 395 enhances its roadside reputation with numerous stream options. The Little Walker River, along with creeks Buckeye, Robinson, Virginia, Mill, Lee Vining, Rush, Reverse, Mammoth, Convict, Rock, Pine, Bishop, Baker, Big Pine, Independence and Lone Pine are bouncy, lively waters with a variety of gradients. Recruiting life-blood flows from some of the deepest snowpack in the state, they gush over freestone bases and course alleuvial channels from 20 to 75 feet wide. Either crossed or paralleled in certain lengths, they are surprisingly wild in character despite the amount of traffic roaring by daily.

All creeks and rivers along this portion of the roadway hold self-sustaining populations of native rainbows and browns. However, most of these highly accessible waters would soon be fished out were it not for the efforts of the DFG and an extensive planting program. Although planted trout don't often seem exciting, not too many of the nearly 1.3 million catchables infused in highway waters seem to escape anglers hooks, according to Wong. "Most stockers will average over a half-pound but plenty of one pounders are included in the weekly plants," he informs. "Besides the usual poundsized rainbows stocked in many of the area's smaller creeks, he continues," the department usually plants some 2,000 pounds of three- to four-pound brood-stock trout to supplement and add suspense to the fishery."

In addition to trout from the DFG's Hot Creek Hatchery, the pot is sweetened by the infusion of what is known locally as Alpers trout—privately grown rainbows which attain weights up to eight pounds or more! Financed by both county and local chambers of commerce coffers, they are sprinkled liberally throughout Mono and Inyo counties and obviously add a sense of drama to any setting. "No telling where they will show up," adds Wong.

Such was the case this past August while visiting the West Walker River, which parallels the highway for nearly 20 miles between the Sonora Pass junction and the town of Walker. Perfect for the camper or traveller who wants an easy-to-reach water with a great chance to catch a trout or two for dinner, it receives over 60,000 plants per year. While on my way to another destination, I alloted 15 or so minutes to sample a series of likely-looking pools a few steps from a brushy turnout. Setting the hook on what was presumed to be a "normal planter," I was pleasantly jolted as the runaway granddaddy immediately muscled its way past me downstream. Only some hasty boulder hopping allowed me to subdue the mint-bright, 2



Roadside Trout Kit

When travelling by car and following pavement in pursuit of trout, hit-and-run tactics are a common modus operandi. Tackle needs to be essential—yet simple and clutterfree—to facilitate easy in-and-out of car passage. In fact, a small carrying bag, daypack, simple vest or even a paper or plastic bag can hold all the necessary gear to efficiently pursue these roadside fish.

My personal trout bag, which easily fits on a car seat, consists of a selection of small weights and sliding sinkers, single and treble hooks in sizes 10 to 18, spools of two- and four-pound monofilament, a few jars of salmon eggs and a sampling of scented floating baits such as Berkley's Power Bait and Zeke's, plus a small plastic container holding a limited selection of lures and flies. Black Panther Martins with yellow spots, green and yellow Bingo Bugs, yellow Rooster Tails and bronze Vibrax in sizes 0 to 2 plus a half-dozen, dark-bodied nymphs round out the kit.

Since most fishing locales are next to the road, no large amount of gear is necessary. If working a lake, simply pick up the bag and carry it to the chosen spot. If working a stream, select the most necessary gear (hooks, weights, baits and lures) and place them in pockets or a vest. A 1x3x5-inch plastic box also comes in handy as a mini-tackle box while easily fitting into a shirt or pants pocket. An egg lug worn around the waist also helps to keep hands free and allows more efficient angling.

A valid California fishing license must also accompany the kit and be visibly displayed above the waist.

1/2 pound Alpers in the fast moving water!

Since an abundance of plants usually occurs in campgrounds, next to roadside turnouts, under bridges or along spur roads, knowledgeable anglers simply drive to a likely spot, park and begin fishing. To pursue these willing "highway trout," I often resort to to "hole hopping," a feasible tactic since the planters often gravitate to the broader, slower moving pools or holes. I initially begin flipping bait into the head of the pool, keep light tension on the line as it dredges the bottom and finally swing it through the tail of the pool. Since move-

ment is the key, I use just enough weight to keep the offering near the bottom yet allow it to be moved with the current.

If I experience 10 or so unsuccessful casts, I proceed to the next riffle or pool and follow the same procedure. Unselective stockers will gently mouth the offering several times along a drift, so "feel" your line and be prepared to set the hook on the second or third "tap."

Checking forest service maps, often a precursor to ground reconaissance, reveals some seemingly obscure "cricks" which fall under highway jurisdiction. Not much more than glorified rivulets which are often bypassed in the excitement to get somewhere else, Swauger, Parker, McGee, Hilton, Green, Eagle, Deadman, Laurel, Goodale and Glass are for the creek freak, inquisitive anglers who enjoy truly wild trout and don't mind stalking along open meadows or the handicap of crawling through jumbled brush for proportionate six to eight inchers.

One of my personal favorites is the seldom-fished section of Virginia Creek which drops away from the pavement in the vicinity of Conway Summit. Hiking a mile or so across a strip of mountain mead-

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Highway 395

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ow framed by cottonwood and quaking aspen, I hastily maneuvered to a spot where a pair of small beaver dams offered respite for the cascading, stepladder flows of the six-foot-wide stream. Working from a kneeling position to avoid shadows, I pointed my fly rod and fed line into the channel until my size 16 Humpy was over deeper water, then twitched it.

Duly enhanced by the rays of the late afternoon sun, each of the half-dozen diminutive char released during the 45 minute session had undersides splashed in vivid flaming orange, black and white bordered fins and an upper torso punctuated with red dots and blue halos—a strong piece of evidence as to why these streams offer me a gratifying, mystic high!

While each water along this blacktop avenue maintains its own angling atmosphere, there is usually no problem discerning similar productive pockets, eddies or seams on any of these. As with all trout anglers, roadside travellers plying this varied stream smorgasboard will need to be adept at reading water-not only to eliminate unproductive or marginal waters but to pinpoint trout. Besides this skill, I've found that the secret to catching a quick limit of trout in the roadside streams is to find pockets or pools that are a bit off the main access roads or turnouts, yet not too far away. These structures tend to hold quickly dispersing trout, yet are far enough from most anglers to keep pressure light.

Tackle Need Not Be Complicated

Light tackle is the key for roadside trouting. Most anglers will find light to ultralight spinning rods of around five to six feet with matching reels loaded with fourto six-pound line to be very effective. Besides fitting comfortably in the back seat of a car, these outfits seem made-to-order for working a wide variety of baits and lures. Bait fishermen will find that hatchery trout seem to prefer salmon eggs, worms or grasshoppers along with the wide arsenal of scented concoctions. Stream hardware includes small spinners matched in size with the water while Needlefish, Phoebes, Thomas Buoyants and other brassy spoons are more effective in lakes since they resemble baitfish to the larger trout.

One can't go wrong with nine-foot fly rods designed for four- to six-weight lines on most of these waters. While some lanquid sections require long 10- to 12-foot leaders tapered to 3X tippets and unweighted flies, I always feel more comfortable when I can get my offering down

Backcountry Connectors From Hwy. 395—Pack Stations

Paragraph or sea and the Eastern Sierra have gone together since the late 1800s, when trout were first stocked in wilderness lakes by mule train. Today, many visitors to the region are finding that going into the backcountry on horseback offers a great alternative since age or physical ability have no bearing. However, whether travelling on two or four feet, the following pack stations are located at most trailheads and not only offer varied services but can also provide valuable trail information to first time travellers:

Little Antelope Pack Station P.O. Box 179 Coleville, CA 96107 (702) 782-4528 or (702) 782-4960

Leavitt Meadows Pack Station P.O. Box 1224A Bridgeport, CA 93517 (916) 495-2257

Virginia Lakes Pack Station HC Route 1, Box 1076 Bridgeport, CA 93517 (702) 867-2591

> Frontier Pack Station Box 18, Star Route 33 June Lake, CA 93529 (619) 648-7701

Agnew Meadow Pack Train Box 395 Mammoth Lakes, CA 93546 (619) 934-2345 or (619) 873-3928

Mammoth Lakes Pack Station Box 61 Mammoth Lakes, CA 93546 (619) 934-2345 or (619) 873-3928

in the feeding zone. Applying a bit of weight just above the nymph not only puts the fly where it needs to be on the bottom but allows it to drift with the current in a natural manner. If using a floating line, a nine- to ten-foot leader tapering to 2X or 3X for larger nymphs and streamers is suitable while sink-tip leaders should be no longer than three feet. I have found any-

your offering near the surface and out of the feeding zone. In reality, only a few basic fly patterns are needed to successfully ply most 395 waters. I always carry a selection of light to

thing lengthier will allow currents to force

dark bodied A.P., Hare's Ear, Bead Heads, Bird's Nest, Pheasant Tails and Rubber Legs as well as generic caddis, stone and mayfly nymphs in sizes 10 to 16.

McGee Creek Pack Station Route 1, Box 1622 Mammoth Lakes, CA 93546 (619) 878-2207

Rock Creek Pack Station Box 248

Bishop, CA, 93515 (619) 872-8331 or (619) 935-4493

Pine Creek Pack and Saddle Trains P.O. Box 968 Bishop, CA 93514 (619) 387-2747

> Bishop Pack Ouffitters 247 Cataract Bishop, CA 93514 (619) 873-4785

Rainbow Pack Ouffit P.O. Box 1791 Bishop, CA 93514 (619) 873-8877

Onion Valley Pack Trains P.O. Box 1797 Bishop, CA 93514 (619) 873-8877

Kennedy Meadows Pack Trains P.O. Box 1300 Welden, CA 93283 (818) 896-4809 or (619) 378-2232

Mt. Whitney Pack Trains
P.O. Box 1514
Bishop, CA 93514
(619) 872-8331 or (619) 935-4493

Cottonwood Pack Station Star Route 1, Box 81A Independence, CA 93526 (619) 878-2015

For more information contact the Eastern High Sierra Packers Association; 690 N.Main Street; Bishop, CA 93514; (619) 873-8405.

Options Abound

For anglers seeking a change of pace or a special regulations challenge, Highway 395 complies fully. If your objective is to corral a trophy brown approaching five pounds or more, the East Walker below Bridgeport Reservoir and the Owens River below Pleasant Valley Reservoir are prime choices while the two mile section of Hot Creek, below the hatchery, contains some sophisticated rainbows which not only demand stealth but the ability to match the hatch to the last minute detail. In addition, the upper Owens in the Big Springs area offers some of the best fly fishing for wild trophy rainbows. Preferring red Glow Bugs and bright streamers, the feisty Kamloops, which have migrated from Crowley, commonly range from 16 to 20 inches!

For adventuresome anglers wishing to get away from it all, the "trout turnpike" indirectly leads to a trio of noted wilderness areas. The Hoover Wilderness, which borders Yosemite's eastern boundary, is home to numerous lakelets loaded with pan-sized brook and rainbows while the half-million acre John Muir Wilderness between Bishop and Fresno contains the largest concentration of golden trout waters in the world. The namesake Golden Trout Wilderness, located southwest of Mt. Whitney, possesses fragile aqua-bonita populations in their original territory.

The trout season in both Inyo and Mono counties is open from the last Saturday in April until October 31st with fishing allowed from an hour before sunrise to an hour after sunset. Fishing restrictions along 395 vary by water so carry a current copy of the California Department of Fish and Game regulations for specifics.

Housebound anglers intent on curing cabin fever a bit early can opt for a special early trout opener in Inyo County, which has become a popular tradition. Stream trout fishing here gets under way the first Saturday in March almost two months before the rest of the state! The area open to this special fishing is bounded by the Inyo county line in the south and west, Independence Creek in the north and Highway 395 in the east. Streams open to angling during this early season include Independence, Symmes, Shepards, Lone Pine, Taboose, Tuttle, Georges and lower Cottonwood creeks as well as the lower section of the Owens River (which is open yearround). The exception to this early season opener are the upper reaches of the Cottonwood Creek drainage and Cottonwood Lakes 5 & 6 (the only members of this six-lake chain ever open to fishing, mainly to protect the source of the state's supply of golden trout eggs). Also open at this time are Diaz Lake, which is three miles south of Lone Pine, and Pleasant Valley Reservoir, located a few miles north of Bishop.

Whether visiting in the spring when snow-laden peaks infuse their melt to arteriole feeders, in midsummer when tourists abound and flows are prime, or in the fall when travellers are sparse and the landscape is painted in golden yellows and burnt sienna, this well-travelled strip of macadam presents a myriad of angling options. Whether probing a sapphire pool within sight of your car, following the allure of a miniature creek, accepting the challenge of a special fishery or jumping off to the backcountry, those who take advantage of its winding route understand why Highway 395 provides the gateway to trout!



