

Kit Carson Trout

During the mid-1840s, government explorers John C. Fremont and Kit Carson explored extensively around what is now known as California's Alpine County. Just prior to the Civil War, the Pony Express utilized an east/west passageway, supposedly blazed by Carson, that cut a tiny ribbon across the mighty Sierra Nevada. This seemingly insignificant trail gained notoriety by connecting mail delivery between St. Joseph, Mo., and Sacramento in 1860 and '61.

The area frequented by those rugged Pony Express riders, roughly 30 miles south of the neon flash of Lake Tahoe's casinos, remains one of the least populated regions of the state. Today, a paved version of this ancient mail route bisects portions of the El Dorado, Stanislaus and Toiyabe national forests, which include over 25 lakes and nearly 80 miles of creeks and rivers brimming with trout.

Ranging in elevations from 5,400 feet to lakes above 10,000 feet, some of these waters sit adjacent to Highway 88; others are short backcountry destinations. While rainbow and brook trout are the most abundant, brown, cutthroat, golden and mackinaw trout can be found in a combination of snow-fed streams, manmade impoundments and backcountry waters set amid the cover of sagebrush and mixed conifers and granitic vistas. Offering numerous stream opportunities, these West Slope waters drain into the American, Mokelumne and Stanislaus river systems; east-side snowmelt feeds the Upper Truckee and the East and West Carson rivers.

Besides a network of water sources, the geology of this

Bisected by a trail of the famed Pony Express, Alpine County has only a few more human inhabitants than it did when Carson and Fremont explored here. What it does have, however, is a high population of trout!

by Don Vachini

land seems to favor ideal growing conditions. Moisture percolating through numerous high meadows combines with wooded cover to account for vibrant and diverse insect populations and, thus, predictably good hatches.

STREAM OPTIONS

Rising in the lofty meadows near Carson Pass, the West Carson courses the broad Faith and Hope valleys before plunging nearly 2,000 feet between Sorensen's and Woodford's. The meandering stretch along the junction of highways 88 and 89 sees heavy

pressure as the result of a systematic annual deployment of 20,000 planted rainbows. A few times a year, usually sometime between May and June, surplus Lahontan cutthroat brood stock in the 2- to 5-pound class will be released into this meadowy section, albeit in small numbers.

Before the coming of settlers from the East, *Salmo clarki henshawi* was the sole trout inhabitant of the entire Lahontan Basin, which includes the Truckee, Walker and Carson river drainages. These gullible trout were noted for their extraordinary size. Unregulated market fishing, dams that cut off spawning access, and the introduction of non-native species combined with naturally shrinking habitat to drive Lahontan cutts to the brink of extinction by the early 1940s. Saved from this fate partly by refugia such as nearby Heenan Lake, they are nevertheless present in less than 5 percent of their historic range.

Several seasons ago, I visited the West Carson near the Highway 89 bridge a few days after some brood-stock cutts had been planted there. Remembering this



subspecies' propensity for seeking slower flows, I walked downstream to several large rocks that diverted the main current. Drifting an Elk Hair Caddis over a lengthy shape finning languidly in the shade of the light forest canopy provided a payoff, and after 10 minutes I managed to turn the battle in my favor. Flaming-orange slash marks under the jaw identified it, and the size of its bronze-hued, lightly spotted body totally amazed me. As it revived in the shallows, the 22-inch leviathan vividly brought Fremont's account of this fish to mind. In his 1844 journal, he labeled them "salmon-trout," describing them as "... generally 2-4 feet in length." Certainly the fish gasping at my feet lent credence to that description!

Below Sorensen's Resort, the river changes character as it descends drastically in the seven-mile stretch to Woodford's. Here, bait dunkers have the best luck at taking the willing planters that shelter in the swift pocket water, plunge pools and deep, brush-infested holes accessible along turnouts and a trio of forest service campgrounds. Beyond Woodford's, the West Fork leaves the roadway and flows east toward Nevada. For adventuresome anglers willing to wade, it contains some

Beautiful Caples Lake is noted for its excellent rainbow trout fishing but is also home to mackinaw trout. Photo by Don Vachini.

sizable browns and 'bows in the 1- to 3-pound class.

The East Carson drains a vast backcountry before cutting through a steep flood-plain valley where Highway 4/89 parallels it for about eight miles. High desert vegetation covers the arid canyon while the scents of piñon pines and sage fill the dry air. Holdovers, abundant DFG planters and brood cutts augment the wild rainbow and brown trout population through the roadway section. While many roadside warriors are content to fish alongside their cars, I find it challenging to wade sections away from the macadam, especially where the canyon narrows. Here, reading water and probing its deep pools with a gold Vibrax or yellow Rooster Tail or flicking beadheads through riffles, seams and pocket water help me to escape mentally back to when Carson and Fremont trod this soil.

The put-and-take section ends just south of Markleeville at Hangman's (Continued)

Bridge, which takes its name from an episode in 1874, when a band of masked vigilantes lynched a murder suspect from this structure. Downstream from this historic landmark, the river carries both wild trout and California Wild and Scenic designations, while its population of robust 12- to 20-inch browns and rainbows is guarded by regulations that mandate fishing with only artificials with barbless hooks, a 14-inch minimum size and a two-fish limit. Since this region is loaded with beetles, grasshoppers and ants, size 10-12 imitations of these terrestrials work the best.

While East Carson tributaries Wolf, Silver, Pleasant Valley (flies only) and Markleeville creeks are infused with numerous hatchery trout, they also offer a good selection of resident 7- to 10-inch browns, 'bows and brookies and merit consideration for short off-road jaunts. Used with short, inventive presentations, Hare's Ear, Pheasant Tail, caddis, Cahill and Parachute patterns in sizes 12-18 often tempt the minute but wily inhabitants of these creeks.

ROADSIDE STILLWATERS

Both granitic-rimmed Silver and Caples lakes (at elevations of 7,200 and 7,800 feet, respectively), are the first roadside jewels viewed when approaching from the west along Highway 88. Forming the headwaters to the Silver Fork American

River, Silver is the recipient of over 18,000 rainbows, but it is also secretly prized for its early-season browns. Often attaining double digits, the browns favor minnow-imitating Bug-Eyed Stingers, jointed size 3-4 Rapalas, Hot Shots or broken-back Rebels toplined back and forth off incoming tributaries during April/ May. Downrigging the narrows along Treasure Island or just off the boat ramp at dawn or dusk with shiny metallic Triple Teasers, Z-Ray or Rainbow Runners is highly productive for spirited rainbows.

While some anglers prefer to troll baitfish-imitating Hopkins spoons, Swiss Blinkers or F-7 Flatfish through the deep channel near the dam for mackinaw, most anglers prefer to pursue the rainbows at 604-acre Caples, formerly the site of a scenic way-station for both wagoners and mail riders. Little Cleos, Bingo Bugs, Speedy Shiners, Wee Warts and Crippures, either top-lined or pulled behind downriggers along the inlets and contour points, work best. Although shore-anglers score readily from the dam area and the rock-laden northern shoreline using Panther Martins, Rooster Tails and Vibrax spinners, early- and late-day float tubers prefer working meaty Matuka, Woolly Bugger and scud patterns in the calm bays for big browns and 'bows.

Since both lakes are susceptible to

windy conditions, drift-digging with the breeze is a successful ploy on either water. Or try dunking a variety of baits from shore.

Both tiny Kirkwood and Woods lakes offer aesthetic, peaceful campsites, an absence of motorized boats and respectable fishing for small rainbow planters early in the season. Kirkwood is best plied along its rocky dropoffs on either side of the lake; here, working lures or flies toward the middle of the lake is as productive as soaking worms, salmon eggs or Power Bait on a sliding sinker, while Woods' most productive spot is a fan-shaped depression 50 yards from the outlet stream.

Home to some hefty, well-fed brookies and 'bows in the 10- to 13-inch range, Red Lake is tucked up against the east side of Carson Pass. Though many anglers turn to bait, thanks to early-afternoon winds, size 14-16 black and olive midge patterns worked with the breeze have produced well for me. When evening hatches bring fish to the surface, size 12-14 Royal Wulff, Black Gnat and AP nymphs plus Elk Hair Caddis and Humpys are heartily engulfed.

Blue Lakes Road 12, miles off the old pony route, offers some pleasant variety. Surrounded by a thick conifer forest and, beyond, stark granitic peaks, Upper and Lower Blue plus Twin lakes are classic High Sierra waters loaded with planted and holdover 'bows. Catching them is as easy as towing a cut night crawler behind a set of small flashers or hauling Kastmasters, Z-Rays and Super Dupers on leadcore line along shelflines.

Nearby Meadow, Tamarack, Sunset and Summit lakes offer abundant populations of small rainbows and brookies as well as pleasant and scenic hikes.

Best fished from a boat or float tube with high-visibility Crippures, Panther Martin or Vibrax lures, Burnside Lake is reached via a five-mile dirt road off Route 88.

Located on a four-mile spur road just before Markleeville at the 5,600-foot level, Indian Creek Reservoir remains a top early-season hotspot for trophy-sized rainbows, along with an occasional *Salvelinus fontinalis* (brook trout). Trout, especially the holdovers, grow fast at this water storage facility, benefiting



Author Don Vachini took this husky 15-inch brook trout from a snow-enshrouded backcountry lake. Photo courtesy of Don Vachini.

greatly from incoming cold water and a prodigious smorgasbord of aquatic life. Shore-anglers who work Rebel, Rapala or Thunderstick plugs parallel to the dam or the steep side of the reservoir with Power Bait and a sliding sinker score heavily during April/May, but as drawdown progresses and the water warms, weed growth takes over. Float tubers are able to get outside the weeds and advantageously work Matukas, Woolly Worms and peacock herl patterns on a sink-tip line with 5- to 6-weight fly rods.

ALPINE COUNTY'S BACKCOUNTRY JEWELS

Alpine County provides plenty of opportunities, accommodating the fishing backpacker with a plethora of feasible day hikes, weekend trips or extended stays. A pair of well-maintained trailheads to some of the best locales will be found right off Highway 88 at Carson Pass. To the north, the trail ascends into the Upper Truckee drainage, which collect melt from Meiss, Four, Round and little-known Showers lakes. A few seasons ago, a well-placed Woolly Bugger duped a husky, 15-inch squaretail on a late May morning from this nearly snowbound water.

Traversing south into the Mokelumne Wilderness also offers additional prizes — as I discovered last spring. An hour's hike along the trail took me past Winemucca Lake, which houses feisty, 9- to 12-inch brookies. After a brief cross-country scramble while being haughtily scolded by Clarke's nutcrackers, I arrived at sparkling Round Top Lake. Opting for a steep, rocky dropoff, I plied the azure water with a fly/bubble setup.

The 8-incher's hearty strike set the early-morning water on fire with a startling array of vermilion, lemon yellow and flaming orange, thereby tipping off its identity. As it wriggled in the shallows, it was easy to see how appropriate the last word in *Oncorhynchus aquabonita* really is; translated, it means "pretty in the water"! (And you thought it was merely a golden!)

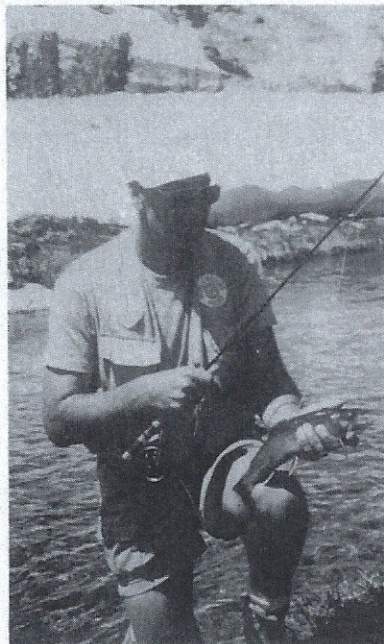
Fourth of July Lake, also containing goldens, is reached by crossing the ridgeline a few hundred feet away. Other popular trailheads are located at the Blue Lakes; here adventuresome anglers can find

finning gold in several directions. From the Summit Lake trailhead, Raymond Lake, nestled up against 10,000-foot Raymond Peak also contains the glittery prize, and the trailhead from Upper Blue offers an additional route to Fourth of July.

One of the lesser traveled sections of the Pacific Crest Trail runs nearby Upper Kinney, a great opportunity for a three-day trip or longer that incorporates several fishing stops along the way. In addition to the Mokelumne, the Carson-Iceberg Wilderness Area is attained by routes off Highway 4 south of Ebbetts Pass.

CATCH-AND-RELEASE OPPORTUNITIES

Heenan Lake and its noteworthy



A rainbow trout from Pleasant Valley Creek, a fly-only water. Photo courtesy of Don Vachini.

Lahontan cutthroats are available on weekends during September and October for catch-and-release angling with barbless hooks. To protect threatened populations of Paiute and Lahontan cutthroats, angling is prohibited in Silver King Creek and tributaries above Llewellyn Falls, Murray Canyon Creek and the East Carson above Carson Falls. A non-consumptive mindset should also prevail on Kirkwood, Red Lake, Summitt City, Wolf, Woods and Horsethief creeks. Dapping flies (bouncing them off the surface to simulate insects laying eggs) or downstream presentations

over or around brush will often reward anglers with spirited 6- to 8-inch battlers.

TACKLE

The vast selection of waters and trout types is suited for both spin-and fly-angling. Most lake angling, either from shore or boat, can be handled sportingly with a light to ultralight rod and reel and 2- to 4-pound line. For dunking worms or salmon eggs in streams, small BB weights and size 10-12 snelled bait hooks are perfect. An assortment of Rooster Tail, Mepps, Panther Martin or Vibrax spinners will pretty much always prove productive for shore-fishermen or boat anglers.

If towing hardware in a boat, Needlefish, Humdingers, Kastmasters, Bingo Bugs, Rainbow Runners and Crippures are always worthwhile, especially if paired with sonar. A fly/bubble combination can be very effective on all of the area lakes.

For the flyfisher, two rods are almost a must. For tiny streams or creeks, a balanced 7-foot 3-weight system is ideal; for bigger rivers or windy conditions, use a 9-foot 5- or 6-weight. In this locale, popular and effective dry patterns are Parachute, Stimulator, Elk Hair Caddis, Humpy and Royal Wulff. Productive nymph patterns include Hare's Ear, caddis pupa, Golden Stone, AP Black and beadheads. Muddlers, Zonkers, Woolly Buggers and Matukas also provide meaty choices for some larger residents.

While visitors now traverse this land by car, not in the saddle, and mail is no longer delivered by horse, this route, in great part the same one famed for its association with Kit Carson, is still much used today. Whether you're dunking bait for a roadside rainbow, dabbing a fly for a tiny brookie, climbing toward the clouds for a golden or pursuing Fremont's legendary "salmon-trout," this famed passageway certainly continues today to deliver you much-anticipated messages — in the form of trout!

For maps or angling information on the Alpine fisheries, contact the Markleeville Ranger District at (916) 694-2142 or Sorensen's Resort at (916) 694-2203. □