

California's

This 3-pound rainbow provided a timely fix for the author.

WEST SLOPE WINTER TROUT

"Only a short drive from the Sacramento/Central Valley metropolitan areas are six Western Sierra reservoirs that provide great wintertime trouting."

Don Vachini

On a cold, crisp February day between storms, Shasta Tackle Company's Gary Miralles and I were trolling Lake Oroville, a massive reservoir in the steeply-climbing foothills above the Sacramento Valley. Ears, necks and hands buried deep in our down jackets, we were doing our best to ignore the persistent, numbing chill while intently awaiting action. At the precise moment that we passed a rocky point, my rod bowed sharply and a big trout erupted from the surface a few hundred feet behind the boat. Bounding with newfound energy, I suddenly became oblivious to the chill as the fish took to the air between a series of sizzling subsurface runs

Truly, the months of February and March can be harsh and difficult. The Sierra mountains are firmly enshrouded in

snow and the stream trout opener is two months down the line. But, if you are willing to tolerate icy winds and driving sleet, there are over half a dozen man-made lakes dotting the mid-to-lower elevations of the west slope of the Sierras that provide very good winter trout fishing.

Sacramento Valley Hotspots

Lake Oroville

At 900 feet elevation, this foothill impoundment covers a vast 15,000 acres and has great numbers of trout in each of its extensive arms. Big trout are present, and the late winter/early spring fishery is often the best the year has to offer. While big rainbows are more common, browns up to four or five pounds will occasionally smash the bait. Jointed size 3 to 4 Rapalas and Rebels in rainbow or

fire-tiger finish are popular lures here.

King salmon are also present in this Butte County lake and vertically probing with white or yellow crappie or Apex jigs, or drifting minnows along the face of the dam wall will often entice feisty Chinooks up to eight pounds.

Other productive locales include Bidwell Bridge, Bidwell Marina, Lime Saddle Marina, Potter's Cove and the dam. Since there are abundant threadfin shad populations present in the lake, Hopkins spoons, Little Cleos or any baitfish imitations work well. Drifting live minnows under a clear bobber from many points on the shore is another productive technique for all species.

From Oroville drive east on Hwy. 162 or north on Hwy. 70 to reach the lake. For additional information contact: the Lake

Oroville State Recreation Area (916) 538-2200; Bidwell Marina (916) 589-3165; Lime Saddle Marina (916) 877-2414.

Collins Lake

Situated at an elevation of 1,200 feet in the Yuba County foothills, this lake has 12 miles of shoreline to explore and, according to Lincoln Young, manager of the Collins Lake Resort, this water not only benefits from abundant DFG plants but 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 concession provides three times as many fish again. The majority of the Mt. Lassen strain rainbows range from one to seven pounds."

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

Shore anglers working the beach, dock or dam areas soaking worms and an assortment of Sierra Gold or Power Baits score consistently as do boaters hauling Kastmasters, Z-Rays, Super Dupers and Thomas Bouyants with lead-core lines.

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

Rollins Lake

At over 900 acres and 26 miles of shoreline, this man-made impoundment is one of my favorites for both solitude and a big trout limit. Each season the DFG plants over 14,000 rainbow trout, over half of which are over twelve inches and half a pound or better. Coupled with holdovers from past seasons this water, nestled at an elevation of 2,100 feet where foothill country meets forest, offers real potential for an encounter with a trophy trout.

A boat is a great advantage on this water. Since the water is often murky, flashy lures such as silvery Mepps, EGB 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.

Take Hwy. 80 east of Sacramento. From Hwy. 80 take the Colfax exit, then turn northeast on Hwy. 174. The lake is reached via either Orchard Springs, Greenhorn or You Bet Roads. The Greenhorn Campground can be contacted at (916) 272-6100; Peninsula Campground at (916) 477-9413;

Orchard Springs Campground at (916) 346-2212; Long Ravine Campground at (916) 346-6166. All can provide additional information.

Sly Park (Jenkinson Lake)

Sly Park is virtually deserted in February; an ideal destination for those hoping to pick up a trout or two for dinner. Since the DFG annually plants 35,000 trout per year in this 640 acre impoundment tucked away in a valley in the El Dorado National forest, there are plenty of trout to go around.

The best approach to fishing this lake in the winter seems to be casting blue or silver Thomas Bouyants, bikini Needlefish, Humdingers and silvery Vibrax within 30 yards of the shoreline from a boat while drifting along the narrow upstream arms. Although you are liable to find snow along the shoreline in February, cold water temperatures are ideal for pursuing rainbow trout around the eight miles of coniferous shoreline.

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

From Placerville travel Hwy. 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 at (916) 621-2483 for up-to-the-minute information.

Central Valley Reservoirs

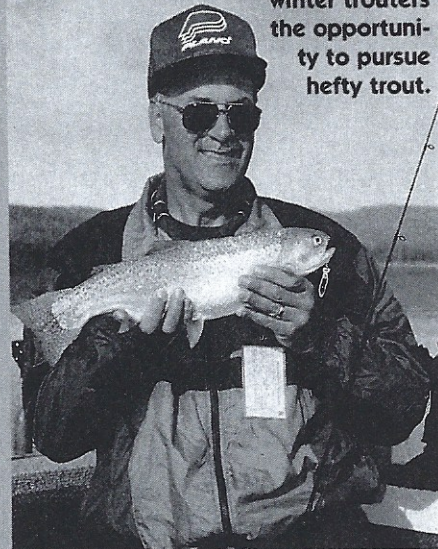
Pardee

Opening the first weekend in February, 2000 acre Pardee is organized exclusively for fishermen. This water is heavily planted both by the DFG and a private concessionaire. According to Art Wilcox, Pardee's Director of Public Relations, "most trout fall into the 12- to 15-inch range and tip the scales at a pound or above."

During the winter surface temperatures are ideal for both trolling and fishing from the shore. Since the incoming water is often cloudy due to runoff from the Mokelumne River, Wilcox suggests that trollers use high visibility lures such as Crippures, yellow or brown Rooster Tails and gold Vibrax to create a noisy disturbance. "Those who get on the water early and work from the boat launch to the North Arm are not often disappointed" he adds.

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 nightcrawlers will consistently put anglers into fish. Although rather early in the sea-

A boat offers winter trouters the opportunity to pursue hefty trout.



New Years Resolutions

Although still considered winter, February through March trouting is really a "New Year" venture, so be sure you have purchased and are wearing your 1998 fishing license. While the purchase of a special stamp allows use of two rods, all of these impoundments have daily limits of five fish with 10 in possession. For assurance, always double check the current regulations booklet in advance to become familiar with any new restrictions on a particular body of water.

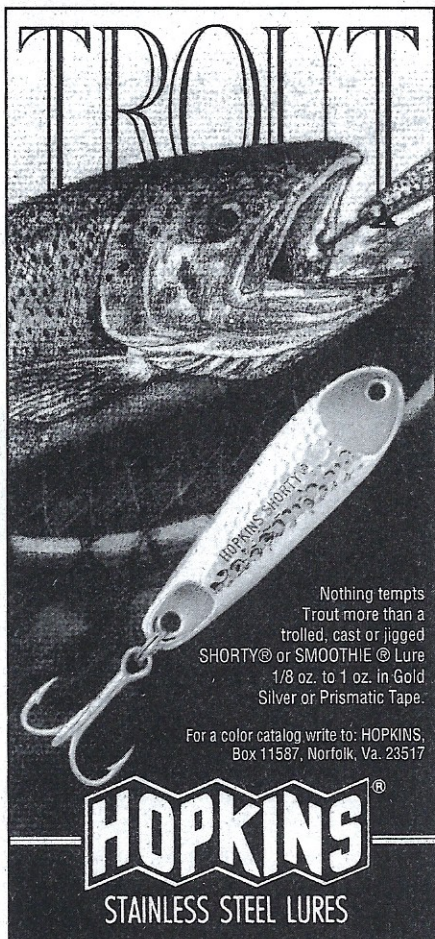
Thanks to private planting programs at several lakes, many wintertime trout fall into the 3- to 10-pound range!



Winter Behavior

Wintertime trout will often differ greatly from those of summer, the main difference being that their optimum living conditions are now found at or near the surface. During this time, they are apt to be found just about anywhere on top of a lake or reservoir, making inclement weather a secondary challenge to actually locating them.

When in a boat, use a floatation device and keep a watchful eye toward the sky. Hypothermia can be a killer. Warm clothing and rain gear are a must and a thermos of hot coffee or chocolate will keep both comfort levels and core temperatures up.



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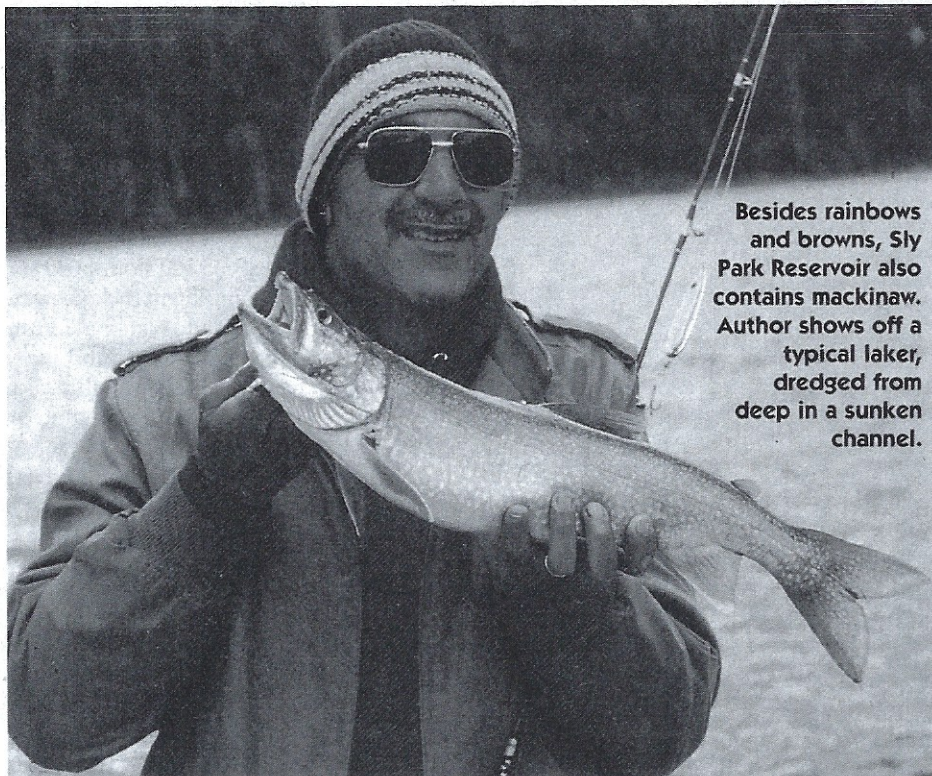
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Besides rainbows and browns, Sly Park Reservoir also contains mackinaw. Author shows off a typical laker, dredged from deep in a sunken channel.

son, lucky anglers towing Pro Secrets or R & K spinners 15 to 50 feet behind the boat will occasionally connect with small kokanee.

From Stockton follow Hyw. 88 to Clements. Turn right onto Hwy. 12 and follow the signs to the lake. For information call the Pardee Recreation Area at (206) 772-1472 or Art Wilcox at (916) 481-2188.

Camanche

Sitting in the gently sloping foothills east of Lodi at an elevation of 325 feet, this 7,700 acre Amador County impoundment is under an hour's drive from Stockton. In addition to the DFG planters which normally run 10 to 12 inches, the Lake Camanche Fishing Access Fund infuses 600 to 1,200 pounds of trout (with a one pound minimum) weekly. Planting expectations this season are in the range of 75,000 to 80,000 pounds of rainbow with at least five percent of those fish weighing between 5 and 12 pounds and individuals going up to 14 pounds.

A small three acre pond along the South Shore is also stocked with trophy trout. This 80 foot deep pond proves popular with shore anglers and float tubers who work Matuka streamers or black and purple Woolly Buggers away from the bank.

Main lake hotspots include the north shore in the vicinity of the launch, the submerged river channel, along the dam and southwest of Hat Island. Boaters after hold-overs should check out the Mokelumne feeder arm first. Trolling nightcrawlers behind gold or silver flashers is a steady producer, while Rainbow

Runners and bikini Needlefish also take their share of fish.

Patient shore anglers setting up near the north and south shore marinas score well soaking a variety of baits, typically rainbow and chartreuse Power Bait.

From Stockton take Hwy. 88/12 to Clements. Follow Hwy. 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 at (209) 763-5915.

New Melons

Resting at an elevation of just over 1000 feet this 12,500 acre Calaveras County reservoir is a good producer of early season trout. Stocked with over 70,000 DFG trout this water also contains some browns in the three to four pound class.

Cold weather anglers will usually find the north or upper ends of the lake to be most productive. Trolling the mouth of Carson Cove, Angel's Arm and the river arm between Parrot's Ferry and Highway 49 seems to be productive for early season fish. Some beautiful fish in the 14 to 15 inch range commonly go on the bite as the weather gets colder, often teased into striking by top-lining Kastmasters, fire-tiger Needlefish and Rainbow Runners. Slow-trolling live minnows with a split-shot along the dam is also worth the effort.

Those after 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, they can often be located where the Stanislaus enters the lake in an area affectionately known as "the logjam".

From Stockton, follow I-5 to Hwy. 120. Turn east through Manteca and Oakdale (where it becomes 120\108). While some small roads will connect with the lake, turn north on Hwy. 49 at Sonora to reach the north end of the lake. For additional information phone the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, New Melones at (206) 736-4333.

Don Pedro

This is a very large lake situated at an elevation of 800 feet in the foothills west of Yosemite National Park. Don Pedro covers over 13,000 surface acres and has 160 miles of shoreline. A beneficiary of an annual infusion of 60,000 rainbows, this water is unique in that it also offers the bonus of a Chinook salmon fishery.

The launch areas and points of land in the South or Middle Bay regions, as well as Sullivan, Big and Ramos Creek inlets are productive early season locales for boaters topline 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 they can be reached by bankside fishermen soaking baits or casting lures.

Although shore anglers tend to concentrate in areas where there is easy access, off-the-beaten path spots can 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, a fish that I found out weighed about four pounds. Suddenly the rain didn't seem so bad after all.

Special Chinook techniques include downriggers towing dodgers with frozen shad wraps, or silvery Flatfish worked anywhere from 30 to 70 feet deep. The most persistent area is from the Highway 49 bridge south through the middle river channel where the bottom is loaded with rocks. Both minnows and salmon congregate here, especially early in the year.

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

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

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