

# HIGHWAY 395 Roadway To Trout!

*Take a windshield tour from Topaz Lake to Mt. Whitney, and you'll discover dozens of trout waters — along with an opportunity to challenge yourself with the Sierra Slam.*

*by Don Vachini*

Imagine a 200-mile-long strip of blacktop that 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! On one side of this road, granitic edifices seemingly reach past the clouds while the opposite vista reveals volcanic tableland, alluvial fans and carpets of blue-green sagebrush. 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, Highway 395 is dotted with significant trout waters around each sage-infested bend!

Shadowing it almost mile for mile is a good portion of the Sierra Nevada Range, whose jumbled and harsh eastern escarpment provides ideal trout habitat as well. All along the Sierra crest, minerals eroding from high-elevation peaks naturally leach 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," says biologist Darrell Wong of the Department of Fish and Game in Bishop. "The resultant smorgasbord of insect life is a big factor in area trout putting on heft."

Whether visiting when snow-laden peaks infuse their melt into arterial feeders in spring, when flows are prime during midsummer, or when the landscape is painted golden yellow and burnt sienna for fall, this well-traveled strip of macadam pre-

sents myriad angling options. Among them is the seeking of the Sierra Slam — catching five species over the course of either a day or an entire trip! While rainbows are by far the dominant trout, brown, brook, cutthroat and golden trout can also be sought among the more than three dozen East Slope streams, lakes and primitive areas astride this avenue of trout. Most of these are available roadside, and others are reached via brief jaunts on secondary byways or short hikes.

#### 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 West Walker and Little Walker rivers, along with Buckeye, Robinson, Virginia, Mill, Lee Vining, Rush, Reverse, Mammoth, Convict, Rock, Pine, Bishop, Baker, Big Pine, Independence and Lone Pine creeks are bouncy, lively waters with a variety of gradients and self-sustaining populations of browns and rainbows. Gushing over freestone bases and coursing alluvial channels from 20 to 75 feet wide, they are surprisingly wild in character despite the amount of traffic roaring by daily.

Most of these highly accessible waters would soon be fished out if not for the efforts of the DFG's extensive planting program. Although planted trout don't often seem exciting, not many of the 1.3 million catchables infused into East Slope

waters escape anglers' hooks, according to Wong. "Most stockers will average over a half-pound, but plenty of 1-pounders are included in the weekly plants," he says. "Besides the usual pound-sized rainbows stocked in many of the area's smaller creeks, the department usually plants some 2,000 pounds of 3- to 4-pound brood-stock trout to supplement and add suspense to the fishery."

In addition to trout supplied from the DFG's Hot Creek Hatchery, the pot is sweetened by what are known locally as Alpers trout — privately grown rainbows that attain weights upwards of 8 pounds. Financed by both county and local chambers of commerce, they are sprinkled liberally throughout Mono and Inyo counties.

On an outing to the middle fork of Bishop Creek that my son Jason and I undertook last June, he set the hook on what we presumed to be a "normal" planter, but Jason's rod bowed sharply as a runaway behemoth muscled its way downstream toward a brushy tangle, violently disturbing the serenity of what was a pleasantly babbling stream. Some hastily improvised boulder-hopping, brush-dodging choreography ensued before the 2 1/2-pound Alpers was netted!

Since an abundance of plants will usually be found near campgrounds,

---

*Author Don Vachini examines a 2-pound, 2-ounce golden trout, taken in a backcountry Sierra Lake, that now holds the International Game Fish Association's 6-pound tippet-class world record. Photo courtesy of Don Vachini.*

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 "hole-hopping" — a feasible tactic, since the planters often gravitate to the broader, slower-moving pools or holes. I initially begin flipping bait to 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 movement is the key, I often use just enough weight to keep the offering near the bottom yet allow it to be moved in the current.

Some seemingly obscure "cricks" fall under highway jurisdiction. Not much more than glorified rivulets often bypassed in the excitement of

getting somewhere else, Swauger, Parker, McGee, Hilton, Green, Eagle, Deadman, Laurel, Goodale and Glass are for the true "creek freaks" — inquisitive anglers who enjoy truly wild trout and don't mind stalking among open meadows or the handicap of crawling through dense brush for proportionate 6- to 8-inch brookies, browns and "bows!

While each water along this black-top avenue maintains its own angling atmosphere, there is usually no problem discerning similar productive pockets, eddies or seams on any of these. Anglers plying this varied stream smorgasbord will need to be adept at reading water — not only to eliminate unproductive or marginal waters but also to pinpoint trout. Light to ultralight spinning rods and reels loaded with 2- to 6-pound line

are very effective for probing baits and small spinners, while light- to dark-bodied Hare's Ear, AP, Bead Heads, Bird's Nest, Pheasant Tails and Rubber Legs as well as generic caddis, stonefly and mayfly nymph patterns in sizes 12-16 are best utilized with 7- to 9-foot fly rods and 4- to 6-weight lines.

#### ROADSIDE IMPOUNDMENTS

Three massive water-storage reservoirs notable for outstanding rainbow and brown action sit adjacent to Highway 395. 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 in the state-line casino overlooking this water. While some browns in the 12-pound range are landed each season, it is the rainbow



trout planted by both states that account for the bulk of this fishery.

Some of the best early-season lake fishing takes place in Bridgeport Reservoir, nestled in a vast flooded meadow, at an elevation of 6,500 feet, less than an hour's drive from Topaz. May and June rainbow hotspots include the three inlet feeder channels. The area near the dam known as the "bathtub" is productive for October browns.

A dam across the southern end of Long Valley on the Owens River created Crowley Lake, one of the best season-long producers of trout in the Eastern Sierra. McGee Bay, Alligator Point, South Landing, Leighton Springs and the Owens channel are among its hotspots.

Resembling inland seas rimmed by treeless desert, these reservoirs, among the most fertile in the Eastern Sierra, according to Wong benefit from the tremendous biomass delivered by tributary feeders. "Thanks to this extremely rich nutrient base, their trout growth is commonly measured in pounds," he said, beaming. "Resident rainbows and browns often range between 2 and 4 pounds, but fish over 5 pounds are certainly not out of the ordinary."

While shore-anglers casting the usual assortment of lures and baits — such as inflated night crawlers, cheese, salmon eggs with marshmallows or a varied selection of scented Power Baits — will score, anglers pursuing steady big-fish action need to be in a floating craft. Since lake levels vary greatly depending on 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 5 to 15 feet deep and right along the shoreline. The most common explanation,

according to Wong, is that sunwarmed shallows attract small baitfish, which in turn attract the trout. "Later in the season, the bulk of these fish may hold in deeper water," he explains.

During summer, 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 on where the fish are holding. Sizable rainbows seem to prefer shiny, attractive spoons like the 501 nickel redhead Super Duper, Cripp-lures, Humdingers, Thomas Buoyant and Needlefish in bikini, frog or rainbow finish, while 6- to 9-inch bronze or yellow-hued Rapalas or Rebels take their share of predator browns.

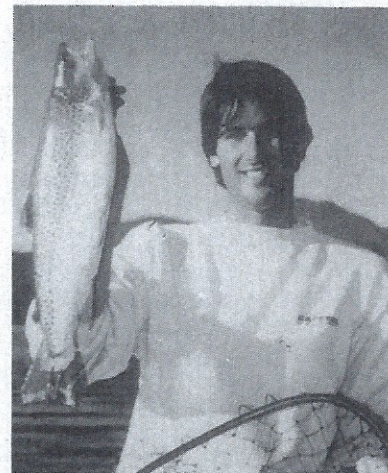
Float tubers using the countdown system, casting to individual fish or just trolling have solid results using adult or nymphal damselfly, dragonfly or midge patterns. Spring or late-fall fishing appears best near the inlet or feeder streams in which leviathan-sized specimens search for combinations of food, oxygen and spawning routes.

#### OFF-ROAD OPTIONS

Reached by either paved or dirt arterial connectors and under 15 miles from the main highway, the following waters can help fulfill "slam-quest" requirements.

Turning onto and ascending Highway 89 just west of Monitor Pass, Heenan Lake and its Lahontan cutthroats are available. According to DFG stats, cutts here average an incredible 18 to 23 inches, with individuals up to 27 inches — translating to fish in the 3- to 5-pound category, with a few possibly approaching 8 pounds! Small wonder that explorer John C. Fremont labeled them "Salmon-Trout" in de-

scribing them for his 1844 journal. Open only on weekends during September and October, this broodstock repository is under barbless-hook and non-consumptive regulations. Besides shrimp imitations, black or purple leech, Bead Head



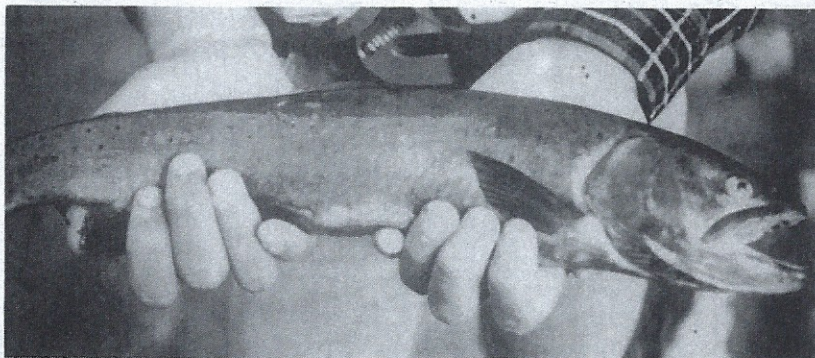
Try October for Twin Lakes' big brown trout. Jason Vachini's 4-pounder came from there. Photo by Don Vachini.

and Matuka patterns worked with sink-tip or full sinking lines and heavier tippets to combat weed growth are very effective.

Proceeding less than a mile along Highway 108, one can locate trailhead parking to Kirman Lake, where a three-mile walk or bike ride allows anglers to try for brook trout that consistently approach 2 to 4 pounds and resemble footballs! A few miles farther along Highway 108 is the Leavitt Meadows turnout, from which Poore, Lane and Roosevelt lakes can be reached in under an hour's hike. Rich in nutrients and aquatic life, they too house well-fed brookies that on occasion approach 2 to 3 pounds. Sons Chris and Jason, daughter Angela and I have made several day-hikes into this "trout trapezoid" over the past three seasons, on four occasions landing girthy 15- to 17-inch specimens that have established seven line- or tippet-class world standards!

Paralleled by Highway 203, the East Walker River, with its trophy browns, is one of our favorite hit-and-run waters. Notably one of the West's finest wild brown trout streams, its nutrient-rich green waters allow heavy leaders or tippets, which are needed to land the 4-

*Continued on page 49*



Lahontan cutthroats in Heenan Lake typically measure from 18 to 23 inches in length, and some approach 5-pound weights. Photo by Don Vachini.

## HIGHWAY 395 ... Continued

to 6-pound leviathans against a challenging current and brushy obstacles. Midsummer through late fall is a good period for tempting the big browns with meaty size 2-8 Sculpin, Deceiver, Muddler Minnow, Clouser Minnow or Woolly Bugger streamers in black and yellow shades or brassy 4- to 6-inch Rapala and Rebel plugs.

Early May and late fall are prime times to troll the scenic Twin Lakes for their monstrous browns, which range up to 26 pounds.

Nestled in a mountain canyon at 10,000 feet, the clustered Virginia lakes are accessed from the apex of Conway Summit. While Big and Little Virginia and Trumbull lakes are heavily planted with rainbows and browns, several nearby Hoover Wilderness lakes offer brookies in the pan-size range while you're en route to Yosemite National Park.

Known as the June Lake Loop, Highway 158 touches four very productive waters. Silver, Grant, Gull and June lakes are especially noted for startling numbers of rainbows along with some hefty browns, plus an occasional brook.

Accessed via Highway 203, the



*Steve Fannuchi and Angela Vachini nabbed these chunky rainbow trout from the West Walker River. Photo by Don Vachini.*

Mammoth Lakes not only provide evidence of volcanic activity but also their own concentrated "Sierra Slam." While brookies, browns and rainbows are caught regularly in the five Basin Lakes within city limits, cutts and goldens are found in a pair of local lakes guarded by special

gear and zero-limit restrictions. A 3/4-mile hike toward Mammoth Pass, McCloud Lake holds Lahontan cutts up to 15 inches, while the Laurel Lakes, reached via a white-knuckle-type of 4-wd "roadway" a few miles south of town, are one of a handful of places where anglers can find gold at the end of the road — in this case, trophy-sized goldens up to 14 inches! The two-mile section of Hot Creek below the hatchery contains sophisticated rainbows that demand both stealth and the ability to match the hatch to the last detail, while visitors to the Owens River below Pleasant Valley Reservoir must deal with restrictive regs and swift flows. The trio of North, South and Sabrina lakes, which collect melt from a vast cornucopia of backcountry waters, not only provide takeoff points to Kings Canyon National Park but also serve as tributary headwaters to the extremely popular north, middle and south forks of Bishop Creek along Highway 168.

The road from 395 to Horseshoe Meadows gains over 5,000 feet in elevation in just 10 miles but brings travelers to within a few 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 angling, the creek along the trail is loaded with smallish but kaleidoscopic prizes.

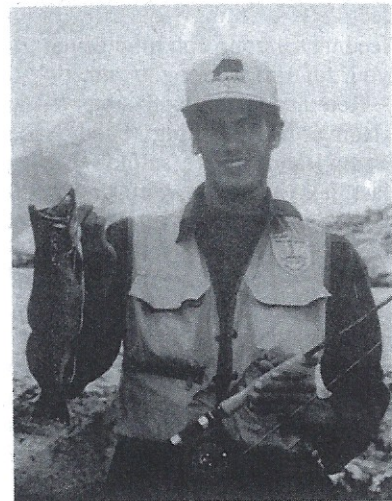
### BACKCOUNTRY OPPORTUNITIES

For adventuresome anglers wishing to get away from it all, Highway 395 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 brookies and rainbows, while the namesake Golden Trout Wilderness, located southwest of Mt. Whitney, possesses fragile aqua-bonita populations in their original territory. However, it is the half-million-acre John Muir Wilderness between Fresno and Bishop that contains the largest concentration of golden trout waters in the world!

Of the 120 lakes in the interconnecting French Canyon, Bear Creek and Humphrey's Basin drainages, maybe a dozen or so house world-class specimens.

On one magical backpack venture a few summers back, sons Jason and Matt and I visited a trio of French

Canyon lakes nestled well over 11,000 feet. In addition to enduring daily scrambles over icy snowfields and jumbled talus, rigorous Rambo-like stalks and awkward casts from contorted positions, we matched wits with bruisers between 1 and 3



*This 1 1/2-pound brook trout, taken by Jason Vachini in a backcountry lake, makes up a fifth of a Sierra Slam. Photo by Don Vachini.*

pounds for over four days. Although proving just as difficult to catch as they were to reach, we eventually managed to land five line- or tippet-class world records between us. Our real reward, however, remains the recollection of these granddaddies setting the crystalline waters on fire with their freedom-seeking thrashings. Resembling red-hot embers fanned by a breeze, their vivid vermilion, lemon yellows and flaming oranges remain forever etched in our memories.

Certainly, many more options exist. Whether probing a sapphire pool within sight of your car, following the allure of a miniature creek, accepting the challenge of a Sierra Slam or jumping off to the backcountry, those who take advantage of its winding route understand why Highway 395 is the gateway to trout!

For general information, contact: Inyo National Forest, (730) 873-4207; Toiyabe National Forest, (730) 932-7070; Darrell Wong, (730) 872-1171; Rick or Tracy Rockel of Ken's Sporting Goods in Bridgeport, (730) 932-7707; or Culver's Sporting Goods in Bishop, (730) 872-8361. All are excellent sources of up-to-the-minute angling conditions. □