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# Rainbows Of The Sac

*The section of tailwater that flows through Redding possesses one of the most underrated wild trout fisheries in the West.*

by Don Vachini

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Marveling at the chunky 15-inch rainbow trout filling my hand, I was afforded a brief glimpse of snow-enshrouded Mt. Shasta from mid-river. And yet I was fishing in one of the areas most unlikely to produce such a fish — in the heart of a city with some 70,000-plus residents. Although thick brambles, willows and cottonwoods obscured much of the shoreline, cement, wood and steel structures — sure signs of civilization — loomed beyond the foliage.

Officially known as the Lower Sacramento, this river that draws its lifeblood from Lake Shasta has a lot to do with quenching thirsty valley farmlands. With flows ranging between 4,000 and 10,000 cubic feet per second, the section that runs through the city of Redding is a serious river.

Unlike the Sacramento's federally endangered chinook runs and dismal steelhead returns, trout populations remain healthy and vibrant. According to Paul Wertz, information officer for the Department of Fish and Game's Region 1 office in Redding, the river's occupants are most likely progeny of trout from the Upper Sacramento and McCloud rivers prior to the construction of Shasta Dam. There is also scientific evidence that links them to steelhead stock. "Quite simply, any steelhead that doesn't leave this river for the Pacific Ocean is labeled resident trout," Wertz said. "There are numerous fish fitting that description in the stretch through downtown Redding."

Stable food sources, agreeable water temperatures and abundant spawning grounds make up a rich habitat that allows these fish to grow quickly to large sizes. Smaller trout are common in the diminutive feeder tributaries, with the vast majority of main-river fish falling into the 14- to 24-inch, 1- to 3-pound range. Specimens up to 5 pounds are fairly common.

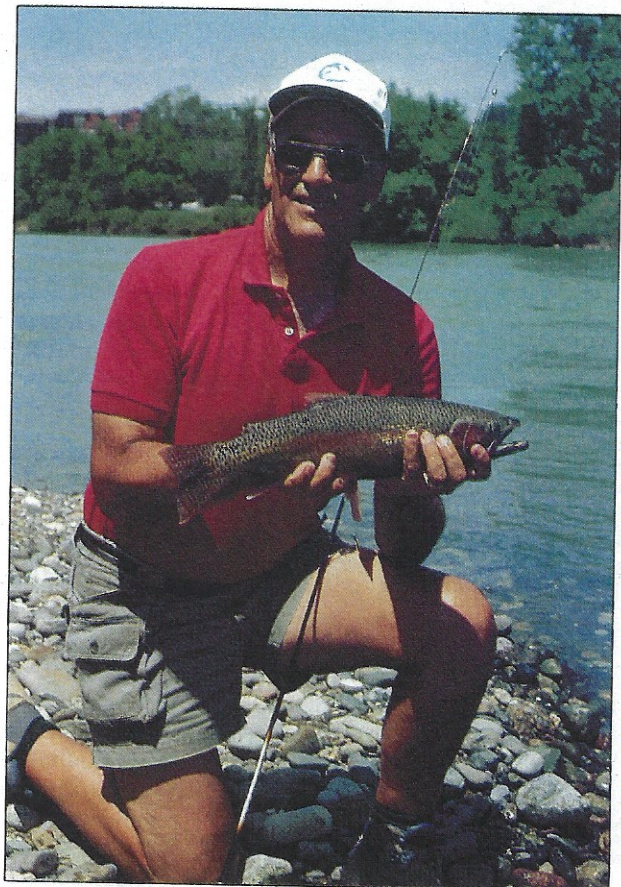
According to Wertz, the DFG favors a "natural genetic engineering" approach — leaving the fish alone and watching them adapt and thrive. "Although the limit is one trout per day, densities are such that the potential to

yield 20 to 30 fish in a hard day's angling certainly exists," he said.

## ANGLING TIPS

Guide Hank Mautz, who operates Professional Guide Service, believes the most productive time occurs in early spring before heavy irrigation releases begin. A boat opens the way to numerous opportunities unavailable to shore anglers, and Mautz is convinced that a jet boat is the perfect craft for this river, since it allows for repeat drifts. "No doubt: A jet sled offers more chances at missed waters. When given a second or third chance, odds for success increase in the angler's favor," he said.

The caveat is that this stretch of the Sac, as it is known locally, can be an intimidating piece of water, primarily because of its voluminous flows. With flows sometimes



*While bank access is possible in selected locations from Lake Redding Park downstream past the Bonnyview Road overpass, first-time Sacramento River anglers are encouraged to hire a guide and learn how and where to boat the river. Pictured is author Don Vachini with a 4-pound rainbow. Photo courtesy of Don Vachini.*

approaching 11,000 cfs, it swells to vast proportions and can be downright life-threatening. Mautz, who has guided over a dozen years on this section, stresses boat knowhow and safety. First-time visitors should enlist the services of a reputable guide, not least just to learn how to navigate the water safely.

Mautz was willing to part with a few tips that should improve a boater's odds considerably. Whether experiencing high or low flows, the trout are always present and can be taken in all conditions. In much the same way as an adept creek angler fluently reads trout structure, Mautz skillfully identifies and probes submerged cover. It is no secret that trout seek shelter behind boulders, rocks, sunken logs or other current-detering obstacles that break heavy flows. "Riffles emptying into pools and seams are also noteworthy trout lairs," he said.

While some anglers prefer to dupe the stream's residents with night crawlers, Mautz opts to bottom-bounce roe or Glo Bugs on spinning tackle rigged with pencil-lead sinkers. A light or ultralight rod and reel fished with 6-pound line woill prove a perfect setup for this large river, according to Mautz. "It is important to maintain a light tension on the line while guiding the offering with the rod tip," he added. "Try to feel the rhythm of the bottom, and set the hook on any peculiar action."

Back-trolling plugs such as Hot Shots, Wee Warts, Tadpolls and similar deep-diving plugs through holes and likely structure is also a worthwhile ploy. On a recent trip, Mautz positioned his boat next to shore and allowed my plug to run under a sweeper willow in an attempt to tease or irritate a strike. After an eternity-like two or three minutes, my rod was nearly jerked from my hands by a violent take, and a silvery missile exploded amid a splash of water. Of the 12 fish released during this trip, the near 5-pounder taken with this popular steelhead technique was the largest!

Besides locating productive holding water and tantalizing his quarry, Mautz ups his catch rate by using high-density polyethylene braided lines with his lures. Combining high test strength with thin diameters, the line's threadlike size not only allows a more natural lure action, but its



*Terry Knight admires a hefty 5-pound rainbow taken just below the Sheriff's Posse Park in Redding. Photo by Don Vachini.*

sensitivity (less than 2 percent stretch) enables a surer hookset.

#### **FLY-TOSSERS SCORE, TOO**

Spring is also the most productive time for fly-fishing the Sac. As surrounding valley temperatures rise, caddis larvae begin cutting their way out of their cases and emerging on the surface as adults. The caddis hatch continues throughout summer until late September, normally commencing about noon and continuing through midafternoon. "At times, hatches are so intense that it is often difficult to breathe and fish at the same time," Mautz said.

Since caddis are the most prevalent insect on the water, there are certainly no secret patterns. Bird's Nests, Elk Hair caddis, Pulsating caddis, Sparkle caddis Pupae, Hare's Ear and Z Wing caddis in sizes 12-16 are the most effective emerger patterns. The above patterns should be carried in beadhead form as well.

When enough emergers reach the surface, trout will start taking adults off the top, usually from mid-afternoon to evening. At this point, tailouts are where the majority of fish hold to feed on surface-riding adults. Elk Hair caddis and Pop Top caddis emergers in sizes 10-14 are common dry choices.

While light greens and yellows are prime colors during the caddis emergence, the scenario changes dramatically during late fall and early winter. One compelling reason to fish here during winter is that flows diminish to around 4,000 cfs — ideal for wading. Another reason revolves around the chinook. Find the salmon and you will normally locate the trout lined up downstream of their redds in search of a salmon

egg meal.

River entomology changes in the winter, as *Callibaetis* mayflies replace the caddis as the most abundant aquatic insect. Size 12-18 Bead Head, Pheasant Tail or Bird's Nest nymphs seem adequate, although pink and orange egg patterns are also worthwhile.

Whatever the time of year, the key ingredient in fly-fishing this hefty water is presenting the offering either just off the bottom or right on top — not in between. A 5- or 6-weight outfit used with floating line can easily work flies 4 to 6 feet under an indicator or topside. An 8-foot fly rod worked with a 5X or 6X tippet is the standard for nymphing, while a 4X is more appropriate for surface-risers.

While maintaining balance in waist-deep flows is often a priority for the wading fly-angler, high-stick nymphing is a special technique that often pays dividends. Keep as much line as possible off the water, but go as deep as possible using a bright strike indicator, and add weight a foot or so above the nymph. Carefully follow the floating indicator with the fly rod tip, keeping slack out of the fly line to ensure that the fly is floating drag-free. Nine- to 12-foot leaders are the norm.

It is common to get a strike as the offering is being lifted to recast. This subsurface strike is usually quite aggressive and unmistakable, but be prepared to set the hook quickly. These wily natives will reject an offering at the slightest resistance.

#### **RIVER ACCESS**

While most prime stretches of trout water snaking through downtown Redding are best reached by boat, there are a few notable locations within the city limits at which shoreline anglers will not only find productive riffles but reasonable access as well. The River Trail above Lake Redding Dam, Caldwell and Posse parks, Turtle Bay Trail, Cypress Street-Henderson Access and Bonnyview Bridge are the most notable.

For additional information on current flows, access points and guides, contact the Shasta Cascade Wonderland Association, 1-800-326-6944 or The Fly Shop, (530) 222-3555. A detailed Sacramento River map is also a valuable asset for streamside access. □