

Toiyabe's *Trophy Trout* Triangle

A cluster of mid-elevation lakes tucked in this national forest next to the Hoover Wilderness and Yosemite National Park will produce some outsized trout every summer.

by Don Vachini

With wind gently hissing through pine needles and gnarly sagebrush, we maintained a low profile and peeked into the clear water below us. Our hearts began racing, and, grips tightening on our spinning rods, we grinned like schoolchildren at a trio of finning forms, each of which appeared to be between 2 and 3 pounds. Exactly the situation we had envisioned!

On this particular early August morning, son Jason and I were about to sample Poore Lake, one of four highly productive mid-elevation lakes situated in the West Walker drainage north of Bridgeport. Bordered by Yosemite National Park and the Hoover Wilderness, this sector of the Toiyabe National Forest supports 30 lakes and over 100 miles of stream. Indeed, ice and snowmelt from this quadrant produce most of the water for the West Walker River system, which eventually terminates in Nevada's Walker Lake.

Poore, Roosevelt, Lane and Secret, four extraordinary, extremely productive lakes, are nestled around an elevation of 7,000 feet amid extensive stands of Jeffrey, lodgepole and white

pine and a bountiful blanket of rolling, high desert sage. According to local guide Brad Beckering, this clustered quartet, unofficially dubbed the "Trophy Triangle," continues to gain a reputation for some better-than-average rainbow, cutthroat and brook trout. While a large proportion of their residents fall between 13 and 15 inches and average close to a pound, a healthy share sporting broad shoulders and massive girth approach the 2-pound category.

"Fish in the 3- to 5-pound class — often labeled 'Schwarzenegger trout' — are not uncommon," he says. "True to form, a pair of these waters have yielded a half-dozen line- or tippet-class world records over the past five years!"

WHY SO HEFTY?

The residents in these lakes are undoubtedly exceptional for the normally harsh Eastern Sierra escarpment, which commonly provides pan-sized trout. Beckering hints that the growing conditions of this quartet — conducive as they are to producing hefty trout — would appear unlike those at most

high-elevation backcountry waters, where growing seasons are short and productivity is low, and specimens tend to overpopulate and stunt. "Quite simply put, triangle waters enjoy a richer than usual mix of nutrients."

While higher lakes in the region are granitic-rimmed potholes with limited fertility, these seem to enjoy a more profitable position from the nutrients standpoint. The minerals eroding into these four lakes in such great variety mean that aquatic growth potential is greatly enhanced there. Consequently, they harbor a solid insect food base. In addition to caddisflies, mayflies and midges, several other airborne or terrestrials such as beetles, flying ants and grasshoppers also are blown into the waters from the nearby wooded environment.

Although trout can live on the smorgasbord that includes the various life stages of aquatic critters plus leeches, crayfish and snails, they prosper significantly on other tangibles below the surface. Big-fish waters anywhere in the Sierra are usually found loaded with scuds or freshwater

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shrimp, and these are no exception. Since these high-caloric crustaceans are most active during periods of low light or cloudy skies, triangle trout can easily dine on photophobic forms, whether in the shallows or fringes of the depths, pretty much all day long.

The presence of baitfish too, is a good predictor of rapid growth. These lakes all contain fair to large numbers of Lahontan redbreasted suckers, which serve as an additional forage base for contributing heft.

THE CAST OF CHARACTERS

Maintaining a proper balance between food, numbers and sizes, these lakes, each with its own particular characteristics, are well suited for trophy management. A 100-acre man-made impoundment sitting in an open, windswept canyon, **Poore** is most noted for its hefty, fast-growing

brookies and ballistic Kamloops rainbows. A relatively shallow water in its upper courses, where it is susceptible to afternoon zephyrs, it holds its most productive structure in the lower third of the lake; there it narrows, approaching depths of 85 feet near the dam.

The gently sloping forested ridgelines of the surrounding granitic batholith hint only a little of the harshness of this vast drainage. The 8-acre twins **Roosevelt** and **Lane** appear as tiny jewels set in an emerald ring of forest cover at an elevation of 7,300 feet.

Roosevelt hotspots include the inlet, the sloping dropoff near the trail and the logjammed outlet. Connected with Roosevelt by a narrow creek, Lane Lake is more rockbound than its neighbor. Its most productive locale is the western shoreline, which features a

The author's 2-pound, 2-ounce Roosevelt Lake Lahontan cutthroat became a tippet-class world record. Photo courtesy of Don Vachini.

deep, rock-laden channel and a hole gouged out near the outlet. Both of these tiny tandem lakes have deep portions near their centers approaching 30 feet but also notable shallows. Cutthroat and brook trout are present in fair numbers.

With all the fun poked at many so-called "secret lakes," the one located astride the trail a few hundred yards above Poore really is — **Secret!** Slightly over 7 acres, this circular-shaped, natural lake contains a moderate density of wary cutthroats. Weedbeds on two sides produce a heavy aquatic food base while restricting shoreline access. The best action

usually occurs in the central part of the lake, which is also its deepest at 25 feet.

On Jason's 26th birthday we targeted Poore, where we were eyeballing the leviathans patrolling the steep dropoff. Opting for ultralight spinning gear and deepwater tactics, Jason began casting over an especially dark shelf, allowing his spoon to sink and settle for 10 to 15 seconds before retrieving. Moments after reciprocating on a tug, his rod buggy-whipped in combat, and black and white-edged fins flared through the ebony depths. The gallant battler flashed, bored and rolled repeatedly but eventually ran out of tricks and was subsequently landed. Carefully freeing the stocky, 15-inch brookie, Jason broke into an ear-to-ear grin for two birthday presents: catching the fish and then having been recognized as the National Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame's 15-pound line-class standard in the catch-and-release division!

While all four waters contain *Salvelinus fontinalis*, each one has additional surprises in store. Walking my Woolly Bugger along the bottom of Roosevelt's trouty-looking inlet, I gingerly tightened the line with a rapid wrist twist as something gently nudged it. Although the thumping sensation was weighty, the trout shook its head methodically, seemingly fighting in slow motion. While I was gently removing the fly, I observed the slender, bronze-cast body lightly garnished with black dots and trademark flaming orange mandibles that firmly identified it as a Lahontan cutthroat, the only trout indigenous to this drainage. Long renowned for possessing the greatest growth potential of any cutthroat, this subspecies has recently been reintroduced into this locale by the Department of Fish and Game — adding yet another pleasant angling dimension. This particular 2-pound, 2-ounce beauty set the HOF's new unlimited tippet-class mark.

Maintaining a proper balance between food, numbers and sizes, these lakes are obviously well suited for trophy management. Trout densities remain stable, but Beckering sounded a note of caution: "A nonconsumptive mentality goes a long way toward helping to protect potentially fragile populations."



Author Don Vachini admires a typical 15-inch brook trout he caught on a fly from the waters of Roosevelt Lake. Photo courtesy of Don Vachini.

LOCATING PRODUCTIVE STRUCTURE

Beckering, who fishes these lakes religiously, firmly believes that trout can be found in or near areas with optimal water conditions — namely, proper temperatures, sufficient oxygen and abundant food supplies.

Since it is common knowledge that most trout actively feed and grow the quickest in water between 58 and 64 degrees, Beckering advises finding the thermal belt closest to the 60-degree mark. "The best fishing in Toiyabe waters routinely occurs around this magic temperature."

Identifying proper structure is another key to locating a particular lake's trout. It is a fact that certain areas are more likely to hold fish than others. Underwater points, rockpiles, steep banks, shoals, gravel bars, springs and submerged weedbeds are primary structural hotspots. Here, protected by deeper water, trout patrol in and out of the shallows in search of easy pickings and are somewhat susceptible to deep-running spoons, spinners or rapid-sinking streamers.

The littoral zone (that area allowing light to penetrate to the bottom) provides the most feasible stretch on these lakes, while the shoals from littoral to deeper water are also prime locales. Fish here often cruise from one feeding zone to another, depending on the time

of day, moving to deep or shallow water as needed. "It is common to find the seemingly fishless shallows of mid-day explode with rise forms or signs of baitfish being surrounded at dusk," Beckering says.

Big bruisers can also be found in or near inlets and tributary feeders, where the moving current not only provides food but oxygen as well. During a first-light session at Poore a half-dozen years ago, I watched my son Chris tie into an airborne-prone Kamloops where an incoming rivulet cut a narrow channel in the lakebed. Resembling a silvery missile, the rotund 4-pounder repeatedly managed to kick-start our hearts with a series of acrobatic, spray-spewing pirouettes executed while it bored in vain toward the sanctuary of deep water.

TECHNIQUES AND TACTICS

Lahontan reddsides are a main food source at Poore. According to Beckering, pudgy trout commonly feed on these suckers early and late in the day, when they chase them away from the shelves and corral them in the shallows. Anglers working the shallow edge of the lake during these periods have the best windows of opportunity. A float tube makes for an absolutely ideal way to sample the varied structure from a more advantageous angle.

I have found tiny, minnow-imitating plugs, to be very effective, especially when retrieved parallel to the shoreline. On numerous occasions, the slashing ambush comes from deep water. Since they are difficult to cast, I use ultralight spinning tackle and the lightest gossamer line possible for conditions. Four-pound-test is my consistent favorite on these waters.

I have also doctored the silvery finish on some of my minnow-replicating plugs. Using an indelible marking pen, I add shades of yellow and red to better resemble the Lahontan reddsides' coloration. Changing the action of the plug is an additional ploy. Bending the eye down will cause more wiggle; up, less. A small pair of pliers or hemostat will handily accomplish this feat.

Steadily growing in popularity, clear or yellow mini-jigs or tube jigs paired with a plastic bubble have become increasingly effective. Indeed, the soft action of an ultralight rod imparts a

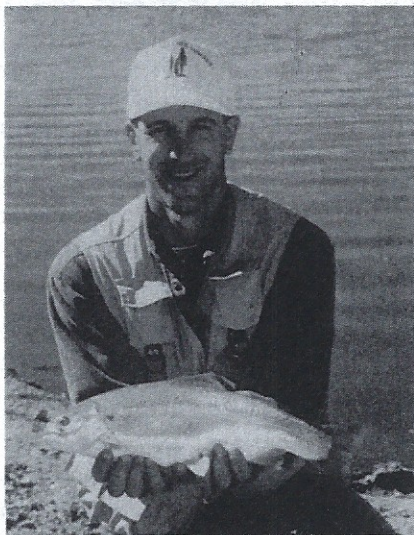
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darting movement to the jig with every bobber movement, especially in windy conditions.

Fly-tossers also find success using redside clones. Multicolored Marabou Muddler streamers with some gold and red dressing probably best imitate this prolific baitfish. My most memorable reminder occurred just this past October as I worked my streamer through a school of fleeing redsides hugging Poore's shoreline. Like a lightning bolt, the dark form smashed the imitation head on, its orange sides setting the water on fire while its pulsating surges transformed my fly rod into an arc as it repeatedly submarined for the depths. While the bewildered hook-jawed trout was probably intent on an easy pre-spawn meal, all the 4-pound, 2-ounce fish got was a mouthful of feathers and steel-and the distinction of holding down the HOF's unlimited tippet-class world record!

Imitating noninsect subaquatic food forms such as leeches and even trout fry likewise meets with success. Baitfish imitations should be white or shiny, although brown and yellows have proven effective too. Tying patterns with wool instead of deer hair allows them to soak up water and sink faster. Long hooks in sizes 8 to 10 are about the right size. A high-density sinking line is advisable.

Polaroid glasses come in handy not only for locating fish but structure as



Chris Vachini's 4-pound Kamloops rainbow came from Poore Lake, which is also known for its fast-growing brookies. Photo by Don Vachini.

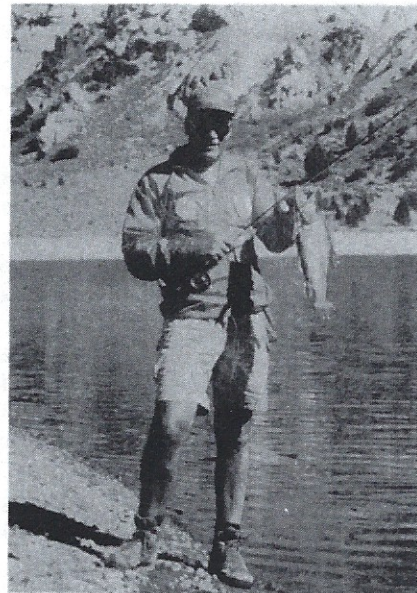
well. When operating along dropoffs, I let the fly settle, counting five to 10 seconds before twitching. I try not to strike a fish by rearing back hard on the rod, instead lightly and swiftly flicking my wrist. If I happen to miss the fish, the short movement of the fly doesn't alarm it, and chances of another take as it settles are increased.

These "college graduates" are capable of outwitting even the most sophisticated efforts of the angler armed with a great tactical arsenal, Beckering suggests. "Although varying somewhat, a catch rate of one fish every two to three hours would be considered very good," he said.

BEST LURES AND FLIES

One of the secrets to consistently catching hefty trout from these lakes is not only identifying and matching their food forms but also presenting them in as natural a manner as is possible. Fly-rodgers equipped with 5' to 6-weight outfits will find nymphs such as the Prince, Bird's Nest, AP, Pheasant Tail, Gold-Ribbed Hare's Ear, Bead Head, Zug Bug and leech patterns (sizes 12-16) twitched deep and slow to be effective on all lakes at various times. Dry caddis, Cahill, *Callibaetis* and Adams patterns (sizes 14-16) are often successful at dusk when hatches seem most active, while patterns like Marabou Muddler with red and gold dressing, white Woolly Bugger, Matuka, Zonker, Johnson's Minnow and Pond Smelt (sizes 4-8), stripped in foot-long jerks, work their magic as baitfish-resembling streamers. Hoppers, Flying Ants and Ladybugs are perfect terrestrial imitations, while orange, olive and green scuds are effective *Gammarus* imposters.

A light to ultralight spinning rod armed with a reel loaded with 4-pound line will be a sporting choice. Productive lures include brassy, yellow-bodied Panther Martin and Vibrax spinners, silvery-bladed Mepps Aglias, Swiss Blinkers and Sep's Pro Secrets. Flashy Wob-L-Rite, Thomas Buoyant, Needlefish, Krocodile, Z-Rays, Cripp-lures and Humdinger spoons doctored with fluorescent stripes work best retrieved slowly along the bottom, while small, silvery Flatfish, yellow Bingo Bugs and Rebel or Rapala plugs in silver or rainbow finish do their best to replicate bite-sized Lahontan red-



Poore Lake produced this 4-pound brook trout for author Don Vachini. Photo courtesy of Don Vachini.

sides.

These stillwater fisheries undoubtedly offer some of the most challenging yet rewarding trouting found anywhere in the state. For adventure-some anglers willing either to strap on a day pack and hike a short distance or to shoulder a backpack with sleeping bag for an extended visit, Toiyabe's trophy brook, cutthroat and Kamloops can provide the ultimate backcountry rendezvous!

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

The season concludes Oct. 31. While Poore, Secret and Lane fall under general regulations and bag limits, which allow five fish per day, 10 in possession, Roosevelt operates with a two-fish limit. It is always prudent to check the regulations prior to fishing. For current angling information on the Toiyabe Triangle, contact either Brad Beckering, (760) 934-1990, P.O. Box 3461, Mammoth Lakes, CA 93546, or Rick Rockel, (760) 932-7707.

These lakes are reached via an easy three-mile hike from the Leavitt Meadows Campground trailhead along Highway 108. A topnotch map of the Bridgeport Area is the U.S. Geological Survey's Bridgeport, California-Nevada; it's available in Bridgeport or from the USGS, Denver, CO 80225. □