

Marin's Hidden Trout Lakes

While a low mist partially obscured the opposite shoreline, a kingfisher's harsh rattle rudely shattered the mid-morning stillness as I slid a sleek 15-inch rainbow trout back into its domain. It was hard to convince myself I was not in some faraway Canadian wilderness but a mere 10 minutes from a concentration of densely populated municipalities. On this particular March day, I was fishing Kent Lake, one of four manmade impoundments on Marin County's Lagunitas Creek.

Historically, Lagunitas Creek (a.k.a. Papermill Creek) drained the wrinkled face of 2,200-foot Mt. Tamalpais, cutting unimpeded through a steep canyon on its 25-mile journey to the Pacific coast at Tomales Bay. However, an ever-increasing population in the south of the county and its thirsty demands necessitated the construction of five water-storage reservoirs during the last 125 years. The Marin Municipal Water District (MMWD), a public corporation whose objective is water disbursement, currently oversees 26,000 acres of the Tamalpais watershed, including Lagunitas, Bon Tempe, Alpine, Kent and Phoenix lakes. A well-kept secret among Marin County anglers, these stepladder impoundments are tucked along the north-eastern shoulder of Bolinas Ridge, a redwood- and Douglas fir-shrouded barrier separating Stinson Beach and the Pacific Ocean from the cities of San Anselmo, San Rafael and Fairfax.

Though Marin County is noted for its special blend of corporate headquarters, open space, high-tech industries and forested knolls, it is the bragging-size rainbow trout finning in

The hulking prominence of Mt. Tamalpais conceals a group of lakes that represent the essence of primitive angling amidst a bustling metropolis.

by Don Vachini

these lakes that have Marinite anglers tight-lipped. Located about 20 miles north of San Francisco, these waters offer a one-of-a-kind urban trout fishery.

Ken Aasen, a fisheries biologist with the California Department of Fish and Game's Region 3, believes these lakes, some of which are beneficiaries of a special strain of trout, epitomize an urban trout fishery. The Coleman rainbow, a cross between Kamloops and steelhead, was introduced nearly 30 years ago and currently occupies three Marin lakes. "In addition to their vigorous fighting qualities and tendency to scatter and not school up, they are winter spawners, making them ideal for coastal-type drainages like Marin,"

Aasen adds.

County meteorological reports indicate that "Mount Tam" garners triple the average rainfall of nearby locales. Collected directly or via underground aquifers, the ensuing runoff ensures this quintet of lakes' year-round habitat for trout, according to Aasen. Although natural propagation takes place on Kent and Alpine, populations in both are sustained by annual springtime plants of 40,000 fingerlings. "In the presence of deep, cold water, adequate food forms and vast, unpressured expanses, this species tends to grow to its optimum."

Planted fingerlings surviving a year attain about 6 to 8 inches in length, and, Aasen points out, trout up to 5 pounds are landed annually.

Aasen believes that administrative factors also contribute to the lakes' propensity to produce hefty trout (and keep them that way). There is a strict MMWD policy against any water-contact activities. Since boats, float tubes, swimming and wading are prohibited, and anglers are rigidly restricted to a shoreline venture, Aasen says the odds shift heavily in favor of the trout, since anglers can't pursue them everywhere on the lakes. "Once away from shore, the trout can live and grow virtually unmolested in a deep-water sanctuary," he says.

Originally constructed for maintenance travel and firefighting, a net-

Gathering run-off from Mt. Tamalpais, Lake Lagunitas sits at the head of the four-lake chain and offers notable trout fishing along with a scenic setting. Photo by Don Vachini.

MARCH 2000

work of more than 150 miles of dirt roadways and paths link all of these lakes. Though closed to public vehicular travel, these interconnecting trails many times offer the only reasonable access to water, further curtailing angler pressure.

While there is no paucity of large fish in these lakes, Aasen admits that both locating and catching them are not easy feats. "However," he maintains, "the fact that anglers face a healthy challenge provides the true essence of a real wild trout fishery."

LAKE LAGUNITAS

An earthen dam built in 1873 at the confluence of the west, middle and east forks of Lagunitas Creek created this 23-acre lake, the smallest and oldest of the five MMWD drinking-water sources. Initially planted with rainbow catchables from 1921 on, this popular lake changed direction in 1987. Under the guidance of the Lake Lagunitas Fisheries Enhancement Program, which combined the efforts of the MMWD, Cal Trout, Inc., the DFG and the Marin Rod and Gun Club, this jewel is currently managed under special regulations. While artificial

lures or flies with barbless hooks are the only permitted means of take, a two-fish slot limit is also in effect; all fish 14 inches or over must be released.

The original idea behind the Lake Lagunitas Urban Trout Program was to permit catch-and-release while allowing the trout to naturally perpetuate by spawning in the lake's feeder streams. While the initial results were satisfying, and some natural recruitment does take place, periodic plants are now needed to replace the smaller trout legally taken by consumptive fishermen and pesky cormorants. Special stockings of 6,000 12- to 15-inch rainbows help maintain the numbers in this scenic water, while holdover trout not only keep angler interest but are too large for the winged fish-eating predators.

Retrieving a fly or lure parallel to the underwater ledges along the creek channels often enhances a hookup, and casting into the deep holes 50-70 feet from each inlet is also profitable. Since *Callibaetis* mayflies are the most common insect form in the drainage, imitations of their life stages are smart selections. While size 14-16 Thorax

Callibaetis, Elk Hair Caddis and Adams are solid dry choices, nymphal forms are best imitated by size 12-16 Zug Bug, AP, Hare's Ear and Pheasant Tail patterns in light green to olive shades. Black or brown scud or leech patterns are especially effective wherever shoreline vegetation is present.

Tiny mosquito fish inhabit the lake, providing an excellent forage source without making an impact on the trout. Spin-fishermen working tiny jointed plugs adjacent to weedbeds often experience heart-stopping takes while small yellow or white crappie jigs or Needlefish worked in the proximity of shoreline structure also produce their share of excitement.

BON TEMPE RESERVOIR

About 150 yards downstream from Lagunitas sits this 144-acre impoundment. Completed in 1948, it features drive-to access, an encircling trail system and a handicapped ramp along the entrance road. Bon Tempe has become an increasingly popular rendezvous for people intent on taking home a five-trout limit, made possible by the fishery's dependence on hatchery fish

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to sustain the sport fishery. Benefitting from an annual total of 30,000 10- to 12-inch planters, it is easy to see why!

Though just about any point of land jutting out into deeper water will produce a schooling trout, the most reliable location is the wooded southern shoreline, where water is pumped up from Alpine. This well-oxygenated spot along the dam bubbles noticeably.

Various shades and scents of Power Baits have proven deadly on the numerous planters, but bait-dunkers using worms, night crawlers, corn, marshmallows or salmon eggs also take their share of trout. An ultralight rod and reel, 2- to 4-pound-test line and small treble hooks with a sliding sinker best complement the above baits.

While fly-fishing opportunities are present on the more open sections of the lake, a variety of tiny spinners and spoons usually cull the more gullible stockers for a few days after the bi-weekly plants. Yellow and orange-hued Rooster Tails, Panther Martins and Bingo Bugs work the best magic.

ALPINE LAKE

A concrete arch dam poured in 1918

backed up water flowing through a narrow canyon to form this 219-acre 3-mile-long lake, which differs greatly in physical structure from the reservoirs above it.

Though brush and rapidly ascending slopes make for difficult access in places, no part of Alpine is inaccessible if one is willing to walk. A trail follows the entire southern bank from Bon Tempe spillway to the dam. Strolling this sometimes sketchy footpath, anglers will view verdant ferns and mosses beneath a forest canopy of redwoods, bay laurels, oaks and broadleaf maples. The possibility of a two-car shuttle remains a popular option.

Access problems are easily solved, but fishing this lake effectively can prove difficult. Aasen imparted a few basics to help shift the odds ever so slightly. "Winter is the absolute prime time for the best results. Since Alpine (and Kent likewise) is deep and narrow, its water tends to stratify. From late November through March, turnover keeps the trout in the upper 10 feet," he said.

The inlet coves of Cataract, Van

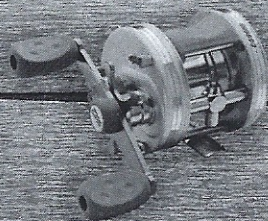
Wyck and Swede George creeks are reliable bets, especially after storms swell these tributaries. Large rainbows are often located near their cascading waters. "Probably attempting to ascend these creeks to spawn, they become more vulnerable than at any other time of the season," he says. "These brief pre-spawning gatherings are as close to schooling up as the Colemans will come."

That was pretty much the case as son Jason and I trudged the trail one drizzly February morning to where Swede George Creek tumbles into the lake. Much to our amazement, several large trout were porpoising within 20 or so yards of the creek, their dorsals fanning visibly amid occasional raindrops. A white size 8 Woolly Bugger twitched from the creek toward deeper water proved irresistible, and within a half-hour we released a pair of hefty bows in the 2-pound class.

Silvery plugs and hammered spoons worked in erratic motions off these coves will take their share of trout, but it is the reliable night crawler that seems to be most productive. Since the

Continued on page 60

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turnover keeps the trout between 2 and 10 feet of the surface, draping the annelid 4 to 6 feet under a bobber is a profitable ploy, provided that the angler continually monitors and adjusts the rig.

KENT LAKE

Completed in 1953, Peters Dam created the last of the impoundments on Lagunitas Creek. Raised an additional 45 feet in 1981, the dam forms a 4-mile-long ribbon-thin body of water which collects in a tapering, orthogonal valley virtually devoid of human

presence. Bounded on the west by Pine Mountain and on the Pacific side by Bolinas Ridge, it has extremely limited access. Since there are no trails around its immediate shoreline, the lake is only reached by hiking. The best entry route involves hiking or biking along either ridgetop road and then cross-country scrambling downhill to the lake through dense scrub brush. From our forays into this terrain, I have found that a daypack containing food and water plus a pack rod best suits this type of travel.

According to Aasen, the progeny of the original steelhead trapped behind the dam still exist here in addition to the Coleman strain. Successfully maintaining their genetic integrity in the feeder streams, they are just as wary and pugilistic as their ancestors.

Although lake residents readily dine on various insects and zooplankton, they relish the prevalent crayfish and tiny baitfish, relying on them for their high-calorie staples. When using these small freshwater crustaceans, peel the shell off a fresh tail section, impale the white meat onto a number 6-8 hook, cast the whole rig into the lake without weight and let it settle. Since a cruising trout will often mouth the free-drifting bait gingerly before ingesting it, an open bail helps prevent detection.

Patiently soaking other natural baits such as worms or night crawlers either on the bottom or under a bobber also rewards anglers with time on their hands.

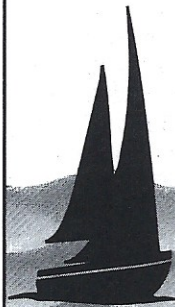
These wild rainbows often mistake minnow-imitating Rebels, Rapalas, Kastmasters, Krocodiles, Thomas Buoyants or Flatfish, randomly worked at various depths and with erratic actions, for bite-size morsels.

Preferring depths of 80 to 100 feet during summer, they move to the surface when turnover occurs — usually when topwater temperatures approach a suitable 50-55 degrees. Fed by numerous submerged springs, the Big Carson, Little Carson and Lagunitas creek inlets provide the closest thing to a sure bet on this vast water. "The Big Carson arm often produces the largest specimens," said Aasen. "Its underwater springs maintain ideal temperatures year 'round, and it is not easily reached."

Typically, strenuous hikes to uncrowded terrain do not necessarily guarantee results on this water. When my son Matt was a teenager, we made several wintertime treks into the Big Carson area over two seasons. While Matt landed a rotund 2-pounder and I released a pair just over 15 inches, eight different trips yielded only those three fish. However, despite the empty creel stories, its potential is sufficient to keep knowledgeable anglers coming back.

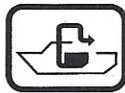
Reaching deep into my personal bag of tricks, I have found a medium-sized Kastmaster with a silvery streamer fly or a Rooster Tail spinner with a yellow

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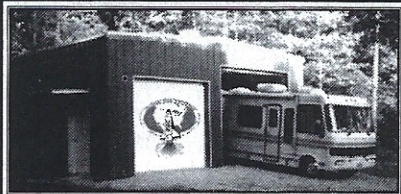
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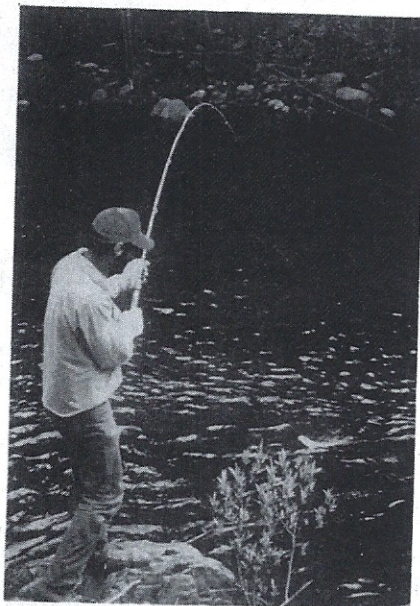
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or brown Woolly Bugger towed 3 feet behind will occasionally draw inquisitive residents. Hookups will usually be on the trailing fly.

PHOENIX LAKE

Formed by a dam on Ben Williams Gulch, this 35-acre MMWD water-storage facility sits on the northern slopes of Mt. Tamalpais above the town of Ross. While anglers must park in the Natalie Coffin Green Park parking lot and climb a short distance along the scenic oak- and bay laurel-studded trail, the entire shoreline is readily accessible and easily walked, making it popular for everybody from youngster to senior citizen.

Though not a part of the Lagunitas Creek system, abundant late-winter run-off keeps the fishery alive with incoming flows while March plants sustain a reliable fishery up to three to four days after each plant. Prime spots include the inlet creek, where trout often stack up in large numbers in the narrow channel, and the dam, which is very productive for bait-dunkers. While shiny spinners or spoons take planters following biweekly infusions, red salmon eggs and Power Bait



Ken Eide battles a husky rainbow from the Big Carson arm of Kent Lake. Photo by Don Vachini.

soaked off points of land are also productive standbys along these structural ambush points, especially after trout have scattered.

Harboring a pair of secluded impoundments which challenge both

physical and angling skills, a special trophy water plus two generously stocked put-and-take fisheries, this bountiful watershed truly has something for everyone!

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

Although these lakes are open to angling all year, the best times to fish them are from late December through March. The bag limit at Phoenix, Bon Tempe, Alpine and Kent lakes is five trout; no gear restrictions are in place. Lagunitas is governed by special catch and gear restrictions; a slot limit is in effect. Always check the current rule booklet and posted signs before wetting a line.

Gates to MMWD parking facilities open at 8 a.m. and close at sunset. Car entry to Lagunitas and Bon Tempe costs \$5 at the Sky Oaks Entrance Station, (415) 459-5267; foot entry is free. For entry information, contact either the MMWD, (415) 945-1455, or the Mt. Tam Watershed recording (415) 945-1194. Western Boat in San Rafael can provide both angling and access information. □

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