

Lake McSwain's Trophy Brook Trout

As the beneficiary of an innovative management plan, this small, low-elevation impoundment now holds brook trout of monstrous proportions!

by Don Vachini

After a dogged battle with an unseen adversary, I was finally able to visualize a rotund brook trout gasping in my net. After taking hasty measurements and two quick photos of the prized fish, I allowed the brave battler to dart back into its watery domain. While the vivid spectrum of scarlet flecks surrounded by blue halos framing contrasting black and white-edged fins cured my bout of cabin fever, the 17-inch char meant much more to me than mere anecdotal story fodder. It established a new line-class world record.

Although winter had not totally released its grip in the higher elevations, this particular mid-March morning found son Jason and me plying the waters of Lake McSwain in relative comfort at an elevation of 880 feet. Also contributing to the day's memorable character was the fact that we released seven pudgy char, four of which eclipsed the 2-pound mark, and two of which established line-class standards! Admittedly, the potential for establishing line- or tippet-class standards without having to travel halfway around the world was immediately attractive to me.

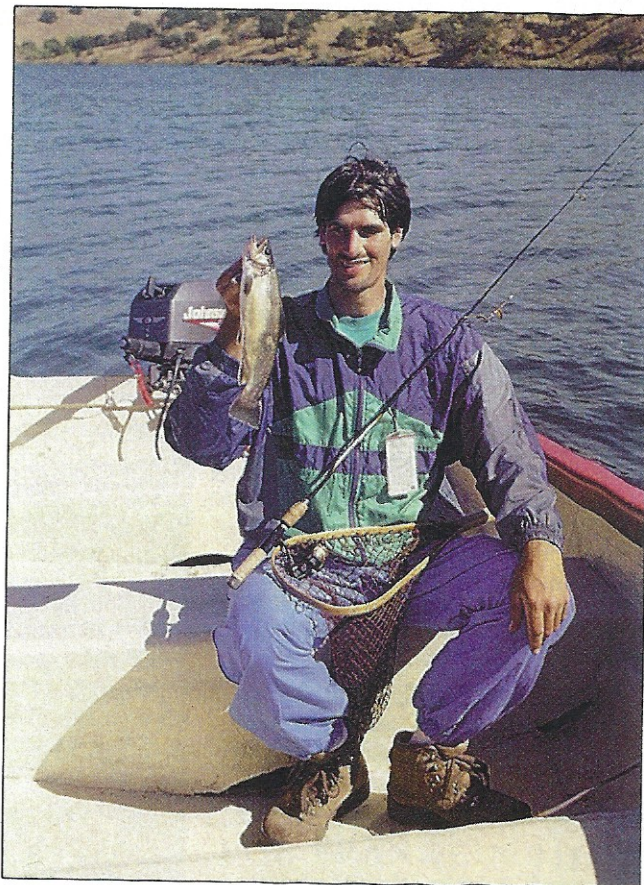
McSwain is indeed a source of both quantity and quality fishing. A readily accessible lower-elevation lake sitting along the western slope of the Sierra Nevada, it is situated about 20 miles east of Turlock. While the Department of Fish and Game infuses about 36,000 catchables into the lake annually, the privately owned Calaveras Trout Farm adds another 12,000 trophy-sized trout. According to Jack Kemper, manager of the McSwain Marina, the lake is managed for chunky brookies in the 13- to 16-inch range. "As part of the concessionaire's contract to provide bigger fish here, a few approaching 7 pounds are included in certain shipments," he said. "Throw in holdovers, and there is definite potential to tie into a real lunker."

THE BROOKIE STORY

How this low-elevation lake became a brookie mecca is an interesting story. According to Tim Goodson, manager of the

nearby Calaveras Trout Farm, this lower Merced River impoundment housed both planted and native rainbows plus an occasional brown until 1995, when a mysterious copepod-related disease infected much of the rainbow population. The afflicted fish became aesthetically unacceptable to anglers, and many of the 'bows died. Fisheries biologists then concluded that the water was best suited for brook

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The author's son, Jason, shows off an average McSwain brookie. The Calaveras Trout Farm keeps this lake well stocked. Photo by Don Vachini.

trout, which not only are immune to the disease that killed the rainbows but also actually eat the organisms responsible for the contamination. "In other words, the brook trout act as a biofilter eliminating the disease-bearing copepods," Goodson said. The Calaveras hatchery subsequently modified production to include a fast-growing strain of *Salvelinus fontinalis*.

And, as Goodson pointed out, the brookies are popular with anglers, as the fish undergo rapid, healthy growth at the facility (which helps cut production costs). Goodson is able to raise 1- to 2-pound fish in 12 months, and fish held for 15 months approach 3 pounds. Over the past 3 seasons, brood fish in the 5- to 7-pound category have been released into the lake.

To meet the demand for bigger fish, Goodson is also entertaining plans to triploid a portion of the fast-growing brookies, enabling them to attain phenomenal growth and provide even bigger fish. "Large numbers of fish in the 5- to 6-pound range could be the realistic expectation in the very near future," he says.

HABITAT AND HOTSPOTS

Water temperature certainly plays an important role in the activity level of brookies. It is no secret that squaretails prefer cold, oxygenated water like that at McSwain. Although this water holds up well all year, one of the best times to expect great results without crowds is usually mid to late March, when several factors come together to help the action for trophy brook trout reach its kindling point.

Thanks to releases from deep behind Lake McClure's Exchequer Dam, McSwain's water temperatures hover near 52 or 53 degrees all season long. In addition, tiny seasonal tributary feeders contribute murky flows, which seem appealing to larger congregating specimens, while chilly surface temperatures and the beginning of terrestrial insect activity help to keep them active at or very near the surface. At this time they are vulnerable to anglers casting either lures or flies from either shore or boat.

For those making their initial visit, Kemper suggests, the face of the dam and the adjoining handicap-access dock offer the best chances for success, especially after a stocking of hatchery

fish. A huge hole several yards out from the floating handicap dock offers sanctuary for big fish, while the gently moving current provides food and oxygen.

Personally, I prefer to head uplake, where incoming flows enter McSwain. Big fish seeking solitude hang out here, and yet relatively few anglers bother with the trip. In addition to cruising the main channel, a good number of the largest fish tend to scatter in areas like the Brushpile, the Chimney and numerous other small coves.

Near the stone Chimney landmark, a small feeder creates a steep dropoff. That's where we began our world-record quest. From our boat, I began working my spoon through the color line from shore toward deeper water. The initial tug was nondescript, but the sting of steel was met with much greater force. The give-and-take battle eventually produced the thick 2-pounder that subsequently qualified as the 14-pound-test line-class standard in the Catch-and-Release Division.

FLOATING TACTICS

Since the brookies tend to scatter a bit over time, a floating craft comes in very handy to locate either schools or individual fish. While sonar is very helpful, trolling is the primary method used by trophy brookie hunters at McSwain, mainly because you can cover a lot of water relatively quickly. Downrigging small, flashy Pro Secrets, Kastmasters, Bingo Bugs, Humdingers, Needlefish and Crippures within 3 to 6 feet of the surface regularly produces hefty fish. Generally, bright lures incorporating reds and oranges seem most productive, especially during cloudy or overcast periods.

Some opt to troll size 8 white, olive or cinnamon Woolly Buggers or Woolly Worms behind leadcore line set at one or two colors, while others prefer to tip a lure with half a night crawler or tow a flasher/crawler combination. In any of these cases, Kemper prefers a thin-diameter, low-stretch braided super line, which tends to efficiently register hits.

Personally, I have found casting and retrieving a variety of tiny minnow-imitating Rapala and Rebel plugs or Thomas Buoyant spoons from a boat in a fan shape pattern to provide jolting

and aggressive strikes. If I observe numerous follows without a take, I tie a fly 3 feet behind the lure.

Float tubers find that flicking or towing meaty Matuka, Marabou Muddler or Woolly Buggers along the deeper sections of the dam or just off the dock early and late is also productive for fish.

Other options exist for those confined to shore. Kemper says anglers tossing a wide array of spoons or spinners will find their share of action, and patiently still-fishing with Power Bait 2 to 3 feet off the bottom is the top shore tactic. When chunky residents become tight-lipped, Kemper often resorts to still other tactics. "It is no secret that the bigger fish sometimes prefer the moving action of a night crawler either suspended 3 to 4 feet under a clear plastic bobber or inflated and rigged with marshmallows on a sliding sinker. Results are usually good," Kemper says.

Yet another of Kemper's secrets is rigging and drifting mealworms on 2-pound line. "Keep them suspended, and periodically impart some sort of slow up-and-down action," he advises.

Working the upper river channel from shore has also been lucrative for me, especially when scouting from above. On one occasion, I identified a pod of fish hugging the shoreline of a cove below the access road, their ebony and white-bordered fins flaring in the slightly murky water. For nearly an hour, I worked a blue-tinted Kastmaster parallel to the brush line, catching and releasing several fish until they eventually finned out of range.

Although McSwain's early-season brook trout are aggressive feeders and will jump at the chance to dine on an unsuspecting target, it is prudent to come prepared with a full repertoire of tactics and strategies. While ultralight rods and reels with smooth drags enhance the battle, downsizing to 2- to 4-pound monofilament is also a sporting endeavor. The water is also ideal for a 4- or 5-weight fly rod.

A day-use fee is charged and facilities include a campground, marina, double boat ramp, boat rentals, gas, bait and groceries. For current water conditions, hotspots or other information, contact Kemper at the Lake McSwain Marina, (209) 378-2534. □