

# Highway 89: Our Gateway To Trout

*Traversing a pair of mountain ranges, two volcanoes and over two dozen waters, this well-used two-lane roadway has trout around just about every bend!*

*by Don Vachini*

The pleasant gurgle of rapidly moving water soothed my senses as it echoed through a pine-studded canyon. From my vantage on a streamside rock I watched a teenager gingerly balancing on a midstream log as he carefully placed a weighted nymph into a swirl of water behind a partially exposed boulder. On the subsequent drift, his strike indicator vanished, instantly transforming his fly rod into a parabola. With a grin that reached both ears, he struggled to stay on his narrow perch as he deftly led a frisky rainbow trout to net.

Before the morning shadows were chased from the creek, my son Jason and I, totally immersed in solitude, had released a mixed bag of rainbows and brookies ranging up to 13 inches. However, upon scrambling a dozen or so yards up the steeply inclined bank to our car, the whooshing din of vehicles reminded us we were astride one major strip of asphalt. The two of us were plying a brush-enshrouded section of Upper Hat Creek, a few miles west of the Lassen Volcanic National Park entrance.

While healthy populations of trout exist away from civilization, there is no reason to overlook the bountiful drive-up fishing available along some of the state's more notable roadways. In fact, when it comes to trout destinations, the Golden State's Highway 89 is a main artery into the heart of fabulous mountain trout angling.

Imagine a 350-mile strip of

macadam coursing past a pair of mountain ranges, an active volcano, one national park, six state parks and a plethora of national forest campgrounds, and paralleling two wilderness areas. Indeed, from the time Highway 89 departs Interstate 5 south of Mt. Shasta City until it reaches its southern terminus at Highway 395 near Topaz, significant trout waters seem to appear around each bend.

While the rainbow is the dominant species, brown, brook, mackinaw and cutthroat trout, plus king and kokanee salmon, reside in the more than two dozen snow-fed streams, lakes, man-made impoundments and specially managed waters adjacent to this two-lane blacktop.

## NOTABLE STREAMS

Mt. Shasta, a dormant volcano marking the southernmost limits of the Cascade Range, and Mt. Lassen, an active volcano that commences the lengthy Sierra Nevada chain, dominate the waters within the nearly 100-mile gap between. Eternal snow and ice melt trickles deep into the bowels of these hulking edifices and collects in underground aquifers. The water eventually seeps toward surface springs that funnel into a network of swelling rivulets.

The McCloud River and Burney, Hat and Lost creeks certainly typify these lands of fire and ice. All of them tumble moderate gradients over igneous beds and, thanks to icy subterranean flows and sometimes-thick

forest canopy, run a near constant 44 to 48 degrees.

Other noted volcano-origin waters on the southern shoulders of Mt. Lassen include the North Fork Feather River and Mill Creek near Mineral.

Continuing its 180-mile journey through such North Sierra mountain communities as Greenville, Quincy, Graeagle, Sattley, Sierraville, Truckee, Tahoe City and Markleeville, the trout turnpike connects waters of the North and Middle Feather, Little Truckee, Truckee and East and West Carson rivers, further enhancing its roadside reputation. While a few of the Blue Ribbon waters receive life-blood flow from natural or manmade lakes, most depend heavily on surface snowmelt drawn from a vast back-country famous for some of the deepest snowpack in the state. In stark contrast to the Burney Basin's virtually unwavering flows, these brawling, flood-plain torrents gush over freestone bases and range anywhere from 70 to 110 feet wide.

Tributaries Spanish, Indian, Sagehen, Donner, Taylor and Markleeville creeks, scaled down mini-versions of the main rivers they feed, offer testimony to some thoughtful select-cut logging practices as well as pleasant angling possibilities.

Some little-known, seemingly obscure and glorified rivulets also fall under highway jurisdiction. A self-proclaimed creek freak, I often seek these out for an agreeable change of



*Several small creeks flow astride Highway 89. Here, author Don Vachini lands a Sagehen Creek trout. Photo courtesy of Don Vachini.*

pace. I have found Guernsey, Greenhorn, Wolf, Cold Steam, Prosser and Alder creeks, plus a few unmentionables, to be proportionately productive. I once witnessed one of my teenaged sons pry a hook-jawed brown weighing 2 pounds from a tiny brush-infested creek no more than 4 feet wide; frisky 6- to 8-inch wild trout are more often the prize.

Keeping shadows off the water, deftly crawling up on a pool, poking bait through brush or under a logjam and drifting a worm along an undercut bank are pretty much mandatory skills on these diminutive and oft-neglected flows.

#### **ROADSIDE TACTICS**

It is no secret that sections close to the roadway would soon be depleted were it not for healthy numbers of

planted trout. Of the six Department of Fish and Game regions statewide, Redding's Region 1 and Rancho Cordova's Region 2 offices service Highway 89 in its entirety, accounting for nearly 250,000 catchables per season. According to Paul Wertz, information officer with the Region 1 office, weekly infusions of hatchery trout help ease the pressure created by campers and roadside anglers and serve to maintain decent angling as well. "While most catchables average between 1/3 to 1/2 pound, a few up to 2 pounds are often included in a shipment," he says. "Taken from fast water, these larger fish often come as a pleasant surprise to anglers."

A few hundred feet downstream of the bridge on Markleeville Creek, son Matt set the hook on what he believed

was a typical planter. However, the ensuing bow in his rod told a different tale, and he was hastily forced to perform some boulder-hopping, brush-dodging choreography before netting a silvery 3-pound stocker.

These trout are delivered to areas of easiest access: bridges, roadside turnouts, public spur roads and campgrounds. In-the-know car anglers need just drive to a likely spot, pull over and begin fishing.

A small daypack, fanny pack or vest — even a paper bag — can hold all the gear necessary to pursue roadside fish. My roadside trout kit con-

sists of a selection of small weights and sliding sinkers, single and treble hooks in sizes 10 to 18, spools of 2- and 4-pound monofilament, a few jars of salmon eggs and scented baits, plus a small plastic container holding a limited selection of lures and flies. I lean heavily toward spinning gear. A 4-piece ultralight 6 1/2-foot rod matched with a spinning reel loaded with 2- or 4-pound line is my favorite outfit, since it is ideal either for quickly breaking down for the trunk or for leaving rigged in the back seat while in transit. While black Panther Martins with yellow spots, green and yellow Bingo Bugs, yellow Rooster Tails and bronze Vibrax in size 0-2 are very effective on stream structure, bait-fishermen will find that hatchery-reared trout readily give in to salmon eggs or prepared dough baits in various colors and scents.

Isolated sections both upstream and down of easily accessed areas will often yield, in addition to hatchery quarry, impressive wild rainbows and scattered browns and brookies. When in pursuit of such wild fish, I usually don waders and work with a fly rod. Besides allowing more room for backcasts, wading affords me opportunities and approaches unavailable to the shorebound.

Fly-tossers along Highway 89 can't go wrong with size 14 to 16 Humpies, Irresistibles and Goddard Caddis in dry or size 10 to 14 caddis, Hare's Ear, Bead Head, Black Ant and Pheasant Tail nymphs in light tan to dark olive shades. Used with a 7- to

8-foot 4- or 5-weight fly rod and floating fly line equipped with a strike indicator, this setup is very practical for me. A few tiny split shot a foot or so from the fly keep it near bottom and within the strike zone.

While each of the rivers or streams along Highway 89 has its own distinctive angling atmosphere, fishermen who can read water fluently will have little trouble discerning productive pools, pockets, eddies, edges or seams on any of these. Although the ability to read water and aggressive wading are basic for most wild trout advocates along Highway 89, I have found fly penetration into the water to be the main key.

On any briskly moving water, trout will choose the path of least resistance, continually holding behind rocks or boulders, where the current is somewhat subdued. By dapping a weighted nymph behind boulders and holding the rod high, the wading angler can keep the offering deep and current-free. In this often deadly high-sticking technique, the fly is presented near the trout's mouth, and the fish expends little energy pursuing it.

#### MASSIVE ROADSIDE LAKES

Lakes Almanor and Tahoe, a pair of expansive, high-altitude jewels bordered by the Highway 89 trout causeway, are reminiscent of inland seas. Bank-anglers casting the usual assortment of lures and baits on these conifer-rimmed — inflated night crawlers, marshmallows, salmon eggs, scented dough baits — will oc-



Ken Eide prepares to free a wild 'bow in tiny Pleasant Valley Creek near Markleeville. Photo by Don Vachini.

asionally score. However, both of these lakes demand the use of a boat with electronics and specialized tactics to score consistently. Enlisting the services of a guide, especially for first-time visitors, is highly advisable.

Using fish finders and trolling flasher/worm combinations or minnow-imitating lures along submerged river channels will fool Almanor's rainbows, browns and king salmon. Eagle Lake-strain rainbows prefer green Humdingers, bronze Crippures or Needlefish in bikini, frog and rainbow patterns, and surface plugs trolled early or late in the day are effective in duping leviathan-sized browns. Six- to 9-inch Rebels and Rapalas in rainbow finish probably resemble easy-picking planters to these hungry predators. Springtime is also right for 3- to 5-pound king salmon, which are often taken on cut anchovies drifted along the bottom of the Hamilton arm.

As popular for its shoreline casinos as for its deep-dwelling mackinaws, 1,600-foot-deep Lake Tahoe possesses the 10th-cleariest waters in the world. Numerous charter services are available on both north and south shores.

While fishing downriggers and leadcore line in depths of 100 to 300 feet is common practice for mining 4-

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#### TIMING HWY. 89'S BUG HATCHES

McCloud-Burney Basin waters are blessed with caddis, small stonefly and Hex hatches during May and June. Standard local nymph patterns to match them include size 14 to 18 Peacock, Yellow Jacket, caddis pupa, mayfly and small stonefly nymphs or dry Elk Hair Caddis. Ted Fay's Fly Shop, (530) 235-2969, or Vaughn's Sporting Goods, (530) 335-2381, can supply current hatch information.

While *Callibaetis* mayflies, green drakes and mosquitoes are prevalent in the North Tahoe region, practical early summer Truckee area patterns also include meaty olive to black Woolly Buggers, leeches and Matukas, as well as caddis emergers or blood midges fished as a dropper off a beadhead nymph. Contact Mountain Hardware, (530) 587-4844, for up-to-the-minute conditions and advice.

In addition to various nymph stages, the arid Markleeville area is noted for terrestrial patterns such as grasshoppers, Brindle Bugs, Carpenter Ants, Light Cahills and stoneflies. The Outdoorsman, (530) 541-1660, or Monty Wolfe's Trading Post, (530) 694-2201, will provide current conditions and hatches. — Don Vachini

## HIGHWAY 89 ... Continued

to 12-pound deep-water char, my favorite method involves graphing productive shelves and vertical-jigging for them with light tackle. Once concentrated schools are located, they seem to have an almost insatiable appetite for flashy Apex or Diamond jigs worked up and down among them. Dacron line with a short monofilament leader allows a surer hookset, especially in depths over 100 feet.

South shore trollers also take kokanee salmon by working 50 to 75 feet deep near the Taylor Creek inlet with dodgers in front of Kokanee Kandy, Wedding Rings and Dick Nite spoons tipped with corn.

### CHALLENGING OPTIONS

For Highway 89 anglers seeking a change of pace, some challenging options are available under the special regulations designation. If your objective is to try for wary rainbows, Lower Hat Creek — barbless hooks, two-fish limit, 18 inches or longer — contains some sophisticated residents that not only demand stealth but the ability to match the hatch to the last minute detail. Float tubers working size 6 to 10 leech or 14 to 16 *Calli-*



*Terry Knight admires a typical mackinaw from Lake Tahoe's deep, clear waters. Photo by Don Vachini.*

*baetis* or Haystack patterns on Manzanita Lake (single barbless hooks, two-fish limit, 10 inches or under) will fool natives up to 20 inches. In addition, aggressively wading the East Carson River below Hangman's Bridge (artificials with barbless

hooks, catch-and-release) will offer the chance at 12- to 14-inch 'bows, plus an occasional brown up to 4 pounds.

Located just west of Monitor Pass, nutrient-rich Heenan Lake (barbless hooks, catch-and-release) provides Lahontan cutthroat in the 18- to 23-inch range. Open to angling only on weekends during September and October because its cutts are used as broodstock, Heenan is best worked from a float tube while using Bead Head, shrimp, leech and Matuka patterns on sink-tip or full-sinking lines matched with heavy tippets.

### NEARBY OPTIONS

While more than two dozen roadside waters are touched by Highway 89, plenty of nearby options exist and can usually be reached with drives of less than 20 miles. McCloud Reservoir, the last known stronghold of California Dolly Varden (bull trout), harbors some tempting wild rainbows up to 5 pounds, while the Ah-Di-Nah section of the river below the dam is a noted special fishery under a reservation system.

In the Burney Basin, Fall and Pit rivers plus tiny Baum Lake boast some impressive albeit leader-shy denizens. Clark Creek, a tumbling tributary of Lake Britton, is excellent for gullible early-season planters.

The North Fork Feather River, tributary Warner Creek and the Hamilton Branch all contain feisty lake-run rainbows and browns, some very sizeable. The steep Feather River canyon below the dam provides some excellent hike-to browns.

In addition to trout-laden Jackson Meadows, Prosser and Milton reservoirs, kokanee-rich Stampede and Boca reservoirs are located north of Truckee on short spur roads, while tiny 70-acre Martis Lake, situated four miles east of Truckee, produces trophy browns and rainbows under no-kill regulations.

Indian Creek Reservoir, a productive early-season water for portly broodstock rainbows, and Pleasant Valley Creek, a stocked, flies-only water, are a pair of Markleeville waters in marked contrast, and centrally located Grover Hot Springs State Park offers weary anglers the chance to soak tired muscles in soothing hot

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*A brook trout from Lost Creek near Mt. Lassen was Terry Donahoe's prize. Photo by Don Vachini.*

baths.

In addition to these nearby waters, Highway 89 also runs near a pair of wilderness trailheads. While Thousand Lakes is primarily noted for pan-sized rainbows, heavily pressured Desolation is dominated by brookies, but also offers an outside chance at a kaleidoscopic golden.

Obviously, Highway 89 provides myriad choices. Whether opting to work a brushy rivulet, trying for planted rainbows along a roadside turnout or accepting the challenge of a special fishery, anglers who fish along this mountain motorway soon realize why it is California's super-highway to trout!

#### FOR YOUR INFORMATION

Although most roadside waters fall under general guidelines, some vary by locale. In addition to a valid and visible California license, carry a current DFG regulations book for specifics. Reliable general information by area can be obtained by contacting the Shasta Cascade Wonderland Association, 1-800-4-SHASTA, for the McCloud Area; Lassen View Resort, (530) 596-3437, for Lake Almanor; Mickey Daniels, (530) 583-4602, for Lake Tahoe's north shore; and Sorensen's Resort, (530) 694-2203, on Lake Tahoe's south shore. □



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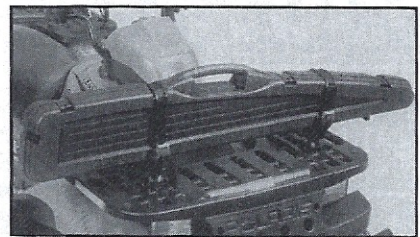
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