

Fire & Ice Trout

As rich in folklore as it is in volcanic activity, northern California's northeastern region is also home to a wide variety of outstanding trout fisheries.

by Don Vachini

Appearing as ivory-tipped fangs protruding from an undulating blanket of coniferous forest, snow-capped Mount Shasta and Mount Lassen, both of volcanic origin, provide a major impact on trout fishing in what is known as the Intermountain Area.

While dormant Shasta's hulking prominence is covered by massive glaciers and snowfields, hissing sulfur vents, steaming fissures and bubbling-hot mud pots hint at the tremendous forces below Mt. Lassen's lava-strewn surface and attests to its active status. Eternal ice and snowmelt percolates deep within their bowels then seeps through lava fields to nurture little springs, ponds and rivulets that sustain some of the most productive trout waters in the north state.

TROUT CAPITAL OF THE NORTH STATE

A pie-shaped sector touched by highways 5, 89 and 299 and vectored between Redding, Mt. Shasta and Burney, the Intermountain Area (IA) geographically encompasses parts of Shasta, Lassen, Plumas and Tehama counties. According to Steve Vaughn, local fishing guru and owner of Vaughn's Sporting Goods in Burney, this region is blessed not only with ideal water conditions but with bountiful terrestrial activity as well. Minerals from deep inside the earth leach through igneous filters and into the icy flows, providing nutrients for assorted weed growth and resultant insect development. "In addition, the

forest canopy not only houses a wealth of insect species but helps maintain water in the 42- to 48-degree range, providing optimum trout habitat."

Rainbow, brook and brown trout ranging from pan size up to 20 pounds reside in numerous area streams, rivers and stillwaters. Besides native residents, Mt. Shasta and Crystal Lake, a pair of state-operated fish hatcheries, keep area waters well stocked with catchables, providing over 1.2 million supplemental

trout annually. Indeed, fishing fanatics are faced with a cornucopia of both drive-to and hike-to waters of varying preferences, earning the area the unofficial title of "Trout Capital of Northern California."

GROCERY LIST

It is certainly no coincidence that IA trout grow strong and healthy. According to Vaughn, hatches here are both abundant and varied throughout the warming days of April and into the hot days of summer, its long-established insect populations a testa-



Angler Ken Eide busted this 17-inch rainbow in the McCloud River. Photo by Don Vachini.

ment to subterranean-fed and nutrient-rich flows. "Insects include salmonflies, golden stones, little yellow stones together with pale morning duns, pale evening duns, blue-winged olives, tricos and *Callibaetis* mayflies, plus various caddis species."

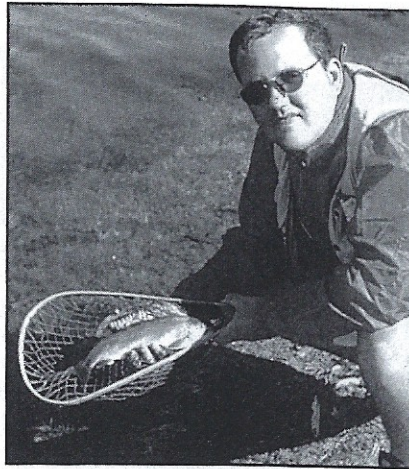
To this list, add midges, crane flies, aquatic worms, snails, scuds and sculpins — a varied training table that not too many trout will miss!

DRIVE-TO WATERS

Several famous and little-known waters are available within a 50-mile driving radius of Burney. Although Lake Britton, located right on Highway 89, is a fair bet for early season trout where feeder streams enter, Baum and Crystal lakes steal most of the local stillwater thunder with easy access and bountiful plants. While the pair is bisected by a fish hatchery, 89-acre Baum is the recipient of over 20,000 rainbows and a few brookies. However, its elusive double-digit browns, religiously pursued, grow to prodigious proportions thanks in part to a dense, nearly impenetrable weed mass. The lake record is a battle-scarred 23-pounder.

Easily accessed waters found along paved or arteriole dirt roads include Hat, Burney and Hatchett creeks plus the upper McCloud River. Followed closely by Highway 89 throughout its upper reaches, Hat Creek is the most popular stream in the area, receiving over 75,000 rainbows and 5,000 brookies while likewise-popular Burney Creek (12,000 rainbows in just under a half-mile section) flows through MacArthur-Burney Falls State Park before plummeting 129 feet over lava cliffs prior to entering Lake Britton. Planted trout are often found in deeper pools, pockets and undercut banks near campgrounds and roadside turnouts where they were infused. Skimming a Woolly Bugger or bouncing salmon eggs or worms through these spots will normally prove productive hit-and-run tactics for roadside warriors.

Tiny Rock, Goose, Clarke and Green Burney creeks are often brushy or difficult to access. My favorite tactic involves parking near a cross bridge or culvert and then hiking sev-



Ben Leech and a typical 'bow from Baum Lake. Photo by Don Vachini.

eral hundred feet up or downstream to ply less-frequented locales. Residents make use of any structure on these diminutive waters with brush-infested pockets, pools and riffles holding the bulk of their trout.

During early season, the quarry is often resting in slow water where they can feed off the current. Tiny seams and breaks can, on occasion, yield trout that will surprise, witness a near-2 pound brown which snatched son, Chris' size 16 beadhead several seasons ago, then had to be coaxed out of a tangled root pile on Goose Creek.

Vaughn hints the deeper pocket water can also be worked with a dry fly/dropper rig. "A fast-sinking Copper John nymph 18 or so inches below a buoyant Stimulator is highly successful for always-hungry natives," Vaughn said.

HIKE-TO WATERS

Two wilderness areas are available within this region, offering myriad woodland lakes sitting between 5,000 and 7,000 feet elevation amid some primitive lava plateaus. Since these waters are often air-planted with fingerlings, they can produce some piscatorial rewards for anglers willing to strap on hiking boots. At Thousand Lakes Wilderness Area, Eiler, Durbin, Everett, Barrett, Box, Hufford and Magee are noted for pan-sized brookies or 'bows, while the Caribou Wilderness, located on the eastern slope of Mt. Lassen, is more conducive and friendly to day hikes. Black, Beauty, Betty, Turnaround,

Snag, Juniper, Cypress and Emerald lakes are best suited to day packs and backcountry trout up to 13 inches. A particular favorite of mine is driving to Silver Lake, parking at the trailhead and day-hiking the loop around Emerald, Betty and Shotoverin lakes.

SPECIAL WATERS

The entrance to Lassen National Park puts anglers at one of the biggest waters in the park. Sitting at the 5,890-foot elevation, 53-acre Manzanita Lake is fed by off-limits Manzanita Creek and surrounded by conifers. While hefty rainbows and browns in the 20- to 26-inch range are the target, single barbless hooks and zero limit mandates help to maintain the quality fishery. Anglers utilizing 8- to 9-foot 4- to 5-weight outfits matched with a floating line are able to hunt individual fish for best results. The leviathans seem to favor tiny, size 14 to 18 dry Mosquito, Gray Hackle Yellows and Black Gnats. Vaughn hints that the best times are at dawn and dusk when the big fish move close to shore and cruise the surface, dimpling their way near land as they suck down flies.

Lower Hat Creek, a 3 1/2-mile section between Hat 2 Powerhouse and Lake Britton, offers some slow-moving, challenging, dry-fly water. The 12- to 18-inch browns and 'bows are heavily pressured, elusive and often hunker down, demanding stealthy, catlike stalks and dainty presentations with gossamer 12-foot leaders.

The Pit River below Britton offers rugged hikers some hard to reach, brushy and difficult to wade water with best spots for high-sticking anglers located between Pit 3 and Pit 5 powerhouses.

The tiny and appropriately named Lost Creek, found within Lassen National Park boundaries, contains healthy, self-perpetuating native rainbows and brook trout and is best approached with a non-consumptive attitude.

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

For up-to-the-minute information, contact Steve Vaughn of Vaughn's Sporting Goods in Burney, (530) 335-2381, or The Fly Shop in Redding, 1-800-669-3437. □