

Sea-Run Trout

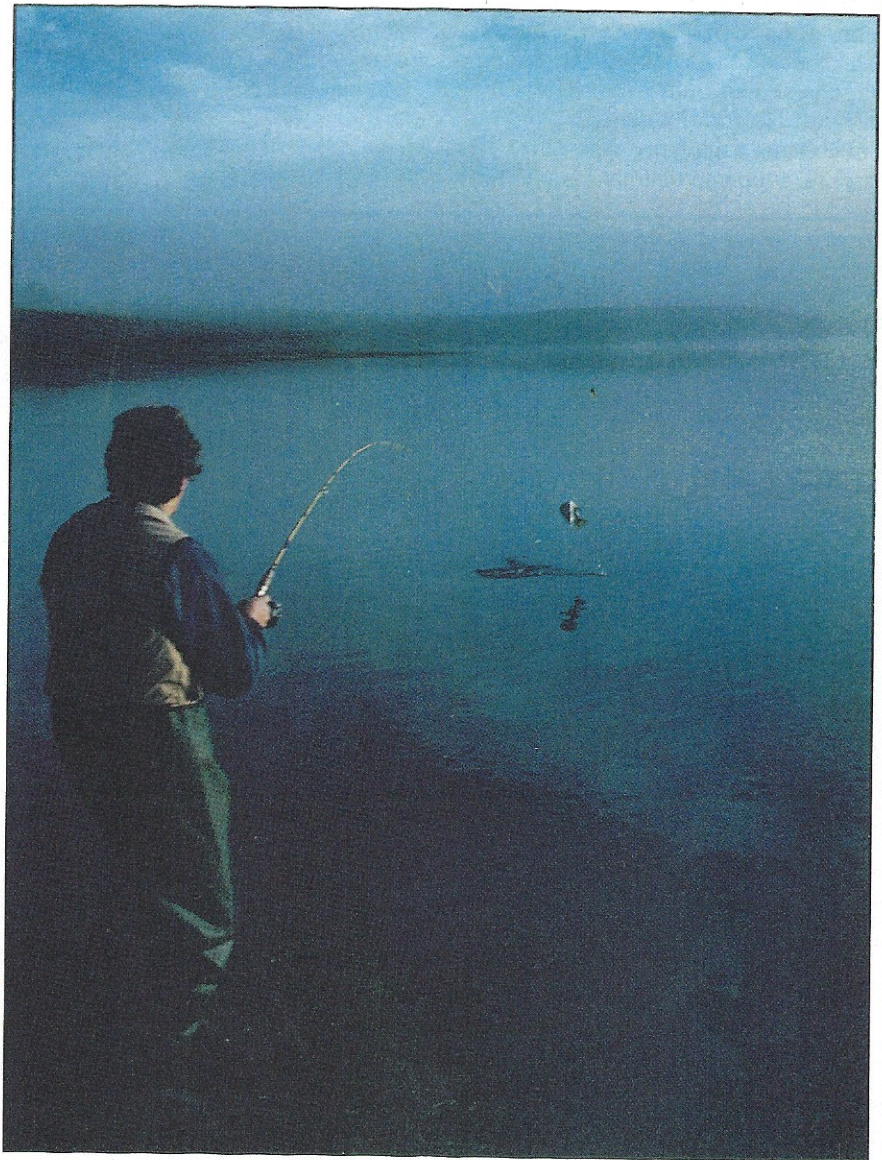
Three lagoons north of Eureka along Highway 101 offer anglers a rare opportunity to catch sea-run rainbows, steelhead and — the real treat — cutthroat trout.

by Don Vachini

With breakers noisily crashing on one side of the narrow sandbar, tiny 6-inch wavelets were gently lapping the sandy beach on the opposite side. Walking the shoreline under a threatening, leaden sky and with the fragrance of moist redwood and salt air invigorating my nostrils, I flicked cast after cast into the latter water as I moved along the sandbar. Halfway through one presentation, a ferocious jolt transformed my rod into a vibrating parabola. A couple of minutes later, a silvery 15-inch trout with irregular black spots lay defeated in my net. Pale orange slashes under its jaw identified the fish as a coastal cutthroat.

I was fishing Stone Lagoon, a sprawling freshwater body separated from the Pacific Ocean only by a thin spit of sand. During nearly 2 hours of working along the beach (before February rains chased me away), I managed to release another pair of sea-runs, the largest of which neared 17 inches.

Nestled adjacent to the Pacific and Highway 101, Big and Stone lagoons remain some of the Golden State's top haunts for sea-run cutthroats and significant numbers of hefty sea-going rainbow trout. Along with nearby Freshwater Lagoon, this trio

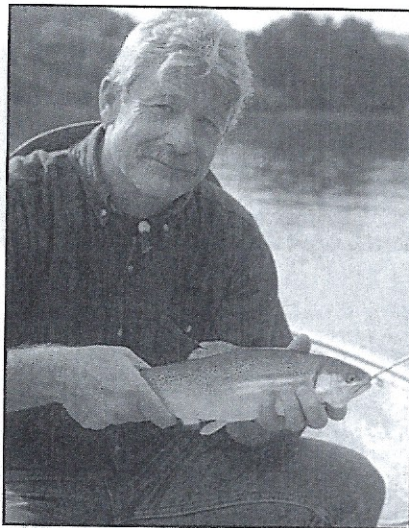


Chris Vachini enjoys a battle with one of big Lagoon's rather feisty steelhead. Spills over the sandbar let these fish in. Photo by Don Vachini.

of bleak, non-descript coastal waters 30 miles north of Eureka is an especially well-kept secret among anglers along northern California's Pacific Coast.

THE CAST OF SPECIES

For most of the year, Big and Stone lagoons are separated from the sea by a thin ribbon of sand. However, late-winter storms routinely dump huge amounts of rainwater into them, and when the ocean runs high and rough, water breaks through the barriers and pours into the sea. According to Mike Dean, a wild trout biologist with the Department of Fish and Game, these rainwater-induced breaches not only serve as passageways for the fish in the lagoons to voyage to salt water but account for bonus trout — ocean-dwelling salmonids that enter and become trapped when these channels close. On these two waters, coastal cutts traditionally use feeder creeks to spawn and grow in the lagoon proper until they can escape to salt water. "Although lagoon inhabitants usually average 12 to 13 inches, a top cutt that has been to sea



Dick Pearlman gently handles one of Stone Lagoon's sea-run cutthroat trout before its release. Photo by Don Vachini.

will be a gallant fighter and approach 16 to 18 inches, ranging from 1 1/2 up to 3 pounds."

Rainbow trout, a.k.a. steelhead, their fighting ability deeply enhanced by a competitive life in the ocean, routinely range 3 to 5 pounds,

with double-digit specimens not uncommon. "As dictated by the breaches, some good-sized rainbows and cutthroat take up temporary residency, often for a year or more," Dean said.

THE MANAGEMENT PLAN


In decades past, catchable-sized rainbows and cutts grown in hatcheries were used to augment native trout populations in the lagoons, but ethicists championed a plan to manage these as native waters with a focus toward increasing the dwindling numbers of *Oncorhynchus clarki clarki* — sea-run cutthroats. Dean says that expansive Big and Stone lagoons, both part of Humboldt Lagoons State Park, are benefactors of a special DFG management plan designed to assist natural recruitment, bolster numbers to historic levels and increase fish size. As part of their recovery effort, volunteer groups continue to improve spawning habitat on feeder creeks; the Mad River Fish Hatchery annually infuses 10,000-15,000 fingerling cutthroats to maintain appropriate densities and allow competition

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Despite both natural and man-made glitches during the late '90s, cutt numbers remain steady. In general, Dean considers both fisheries to be healthy and viable, happily revealing a catch rate of about one fish per 1 1/2 hours of angling.

LAGOON TACTICS

While the trio of lagoons is all naturally formed and composed of fresh water collected via abundant Eureka-region rainfall and resultant creek run-off, Freshwater Lagoon does not open to the ocean. Year-round angling is allowed at all three, but special regs to include no bait, barbless hooks and special size limits apply at Big and Stone. Cutts 14 inches or longer may be kept at Stone, while at Big the size limit is reduced to 10 inches. All other salmonids must be released.

Because of the vast size of 1,470-acre Big and 520-acre Stone lagoons, many anglers opt to work them from small boats, canoes or float tubes. The best boating bet is to intercept the quarry by contour trolling the shoreline, the mouths of

inlet streams or the areas of moving water near active breaches. While most boaters use either toplined or side-planed baitfish-imitating hardware, others prefer rowing, paddling or finning single or double flies.

Productive areas on Stone include forested Ryan's Cove and the extreme northern timbered shoreline on Big. Dean says the greatest winter success rates are achieved along the lengthy, albeit barren, sandbars, both of which are accessible by vehicle; Big's sandbar is 3 1/2 miles long while Stone's bar is a mile. "Not only are the gently sloping shorelines safely and easily waded," he said, "but persistent anglers regularly locate the trout in one to 3 feet of water."

I have found the trout to be more active just after a storm or during early afternoon when the waters are relatively calm. One of my favorite approaches is to hike along the shore, visually searching for rising fish and then work over them.

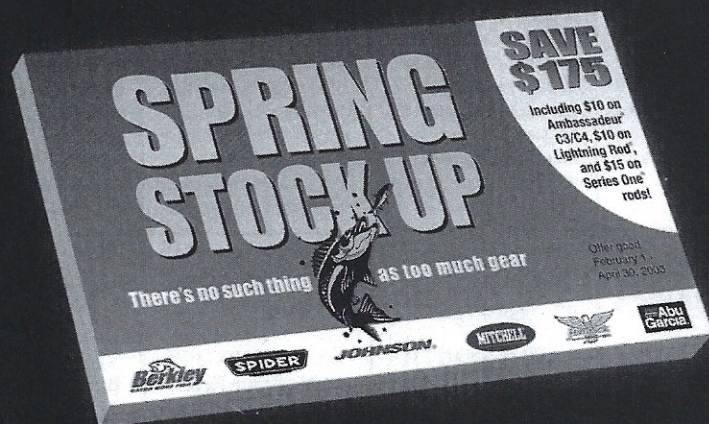
Sitting on the east side of Highway 101 and adjacent to a popular RV park, 50-acre Freshwater Lagoon

probably provides the best catch results of the three since the DFG maintains a put-and-take winter fishery for rainbow trout. In addition to receiving 32,000 stockers annually, it is also the recipient of occasional surplus Mad River cutt fingerlings. With no gear restrictions, anglers here can utilize ultralight tackle and a more conventional approach. The majority of visitors ply the easily accessible roadside shoreline with an assortment of lures or they soak worms, night crawlers, salmon eggs or Power Bait to reap five-fish limits. The reeds along the eastern side are more-realistic bets for holdovers occasionally tipping 2 to 3 pounds.

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

For information on access and lodging, contact the Humboldt County Convention and Visitors Bureau at 1-800-346-3482 or the Humboldt Lagoons State Park office at (707) 488-2041. For tackle or angling information, contact the Eureka Fly Shop (707) 444-2000. □

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