

BAY AREA'S TOP 5 TROUT WATERS FOR 2005

BENEFICIARIES OF AGGRESSIVE STOCKING PROGRAMS, A QUINTET OF LOW-ELEVATION BAY AREA RESERVOIRS HAVE BECOME SYNONYMOUS WITH QUALITY WINTER TROUT FISHERIES.

by **DON VACHINI**

Briefly admiring the silvery 3-pound rainbow before sliding it onto my stringer, I glanced around at the emerald hills surrounding Los Vaqueros Reservoir and marveled at my surroundings. Los Vaqueros plus four other reservoirs convenient to the San Francisco Bay Area give anglers what they want — big fish. In fact, that fish was the third chunky trout I had added to my stringer that day.

Those who don't want to travel far to satisfy their trophy trout urge will discover that the following Top 5 list of Bay Area trout waters offer solid February fishing.

Department of Fish and Game stocks of hatchery trout are supplemented with planted trophy fish from commercial hatcheries in Lake Chabot and San Pablo, Del Valle and Los Vaqueros reservoirs. All are situated within a 60-mile stretch. Catches at this quartet of manmade impoundments average between 1 and 3 pounds, with individual fish regularly approaching double digits.

According to Cathy Lambert of the Urban Park Concessionaires, these pay-to-fish waters are beneficiaries of notable, well-established stocking programs, in which fishing fees are used to bolster success by purchasing additional trophy trout from private hatcheries. "Rainbows from private

concessionaires will consistently run between 12 and 17 inches and weigh between 1 and 3 pounds," Lambert said. "A typical weekly concessionaire plant is 1,200-1,500 pounds of trout, including 5- to 8-pounders in each shipment. Additionally, their contract calls for including a few trout up to 10 pounds or more in each delivery."

Rounding out our list is vast Lake Berryessa, which benefits from a put-and-grow philosophy managed by the DFG. Each year anglers take numerous trout in the 1- to 2-pound range, with holdovers topping 3 pounds.

LAKE CHABOT

A 315-acre lake situated in the foothills east of San Francisco Bay and just north of Castro Valley, Chabot sits in a section of the Oakland Hills that stays relatively cool. Conditions often remain conducive to fine late-winter trouting. There is little doubt the presence of large trout infused by the private Lake Chabot Outfitters are the main attraction here.

During winter the quarry is regularly found near the water's surface, usually just 5 to 15 feet deep. Whether still-fishing with a bobber, floating bait off the bottom or casting and retrieving lures, shore anglers usually do well, especially a day or so after a visit by the stocking truck.

While most prefer to play the waiting game and pursue the constantly cruising 'bows with red salmon eggs, worms, marshmallows or Power Bait

on a sliding sinker, I prefer to cast spinners and spoons to corral trout. I rely on lengthy casts and erratic, herky-jerky retrieves of yellow or brown Rooster Tails, or orange and black-spotted Panther Martins, gold Vibrax and orange or red Bingo Bugs. Personally, I have found any type of stop-and-go fluttering action or change in direction can illicit an impulse strike. Best shore spots include Coot Landing, Honker Bay, Bass Cove, Raccon Point and Alder Point.

While heavy runoff can cloud the water and turn off fishing for a bit, trollers should work with 6-pound monofilament and scented lures through Half Moon Bay, along the west side of the island or along the dam. Topliners commonly let out 1 1/2 to 2 colors of leadcore line paired with long leaders and tiny silvery lures while downriggers work flasher/night crawler combinations.

Facilities include a bait and tackle shop, restaurant plus a small marina. The lake has no boat ramp and privately owned boats are not allowed. Private kayaks, canoes and float tubes can be launched for a small fee and rental boats with and without electric motors are available.

Handicapped-accessible fishing piers are also present.

For information, contact the East Bay Regional Parks District 510-635-0135, Lake Chabot Marina 510-582-2198 or visit their Web site <www.norcalfishing.com>. For a

Author Don Vachini (left) and Ben Leech hoist an impressive stringer of trout from Los Vaqueros Reservoir. Photo courtesy of Don Vachini.

recorded fishing message call 510-562-PARK.

SAN PABLO RESERVOIR

Vast, 720-acre San Pablo Reservoir, tucked in the East Bay Hills above El Sobrante, is a water-storage impoundment noted for lots of big trout. That Dam Company plants huge numbers of trout into San Pablo, and each truckload contains a few fish weighing more than 10 pounds.

The lake is closed to angling from mid-November to mid-February, and since fish tend to scatter, boaters enjoy the added advantage of locating and exploiting trout-filled haunts.

Angling methods are pretty much constant, especially during this early-season timetable. For those intending to troll, the key is to have something shiny or glittery. Large minnow-imitating Rapalas, shallow-diving Rat-L-Traps or Rebels in fire-tiger, silver, chartreuse, brown, black or perch patterns are effective. Some anglers use pearl Needlefish, Midge Wobblers, blue/silver Kastmasters, Crippures or Sep's Pro Secrets in fluorescent green or orange shades pulled behind

dodgers along the top 10 feet, especially when visibility is an issue. One suggestion is to use a downrigger to fish multiple lures at different levels on the same line until the strike zone is discovered.

In clearing or dropping water, be prepared to change fishing depth, lures or colors. When the lake is roily, something odiferous suspended off the bottom with a sliding sinker rig or a few feet below the surface under a bobber should be on the menu. Trout can sniff out Pautzke's Balls o' Fire, Sierra Gold, Crave, Power Bait, scented cheese, night crawlers or worms as they cruise. Applying an attractant, such as Crave Gravy, Smelly Jelly or Pautzke's krill gel, to the above prior to casting makes them more detectable.

Notable torrid locales usually occur nearby where plants take place: Scow Canyon, Berkely Towers, along the east shore of the dam, the Rock Wall and right in front of the main bait shop.

Boat rentals, a snack shack and launching facilities are available. For

additional information contact That Dam Company at 510-223-7413.

DEL VALLE RESERVOIR

Located in the lower reaches of the Diablo Mountain Range near Livermore at an elevation of 700 feet, this low-elevation impoundment encompasses 750 surface acres surrounded by 16 miles of shoreline. Boats are limited to a 10-mph lakewide speed limit.

Throughout winter, the real sustenance comes from abundant, privately stocked trout, courtesy of the Urban Park Concessionaires, with double-digit holdovers factoring into the plot.

Regular plants mark the ramp and marina cove as ground zero for the trout. Although some eventually scatter, more of the salmonids will be cornered here than in any place on the lake. Shore anglers or anchored boaters alike seem to score on the large numbers of circulating 'bows. As on all waters, a variety of proven baits take most of the fish, although egg/marshmallow combinations and worms/Power Grubs or worms/Power Nuggets are less common combinations that work under muddy conditions.

Heron Bay and along the dam are also excellent spots.

Trollers should use dodgers and drag flashy, contrasting red, flaming orange and green-hued Humdingers, flecked Crippures, rainbow Thomas Buoyants, blue/silver Kastmasters, frog and fire-tiger Needlefish, or yellow, white or orange Bingo Bugs. Since the fish are right on top, most bites will occur there, although sunny days sometimes necessitate downriggers to be lowered 20 to 25 feet to be successful.

The Narrows is another productive locale because, as its name implies, the fish are squeezed into this thin area and anglers can present numerous temptations in a concentrated region. While boaters spend a lot of productive winter moments here, bank anglers also find success. One particular early February afternoon, a storm was brewing and a fair ripple developed on the surface. On this shorebound occasion, I used a casting bubble with a size 6 Woolly Bugger to

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OTHER BAY AREA TROUT WATERS

For those who seek pan-sized trout or less costly endeavors, the Bay Area has a few notable fisheries where anglers can expect to have a realistic chance at catching fish for dinner. Supported entirely by DFG plants, these waters receive a proportional number of fish to their size and are at their absolute best right after bi-weekly plants.

Though more confined than the area's larger waters, 143-acre **Shadow Cliffs Reservoir** (east of Pleasanton), 81-acre **Contra Loma** (near Antioch), **Walnut Creek's Lafayette Reservoir** (53 acres) and **Oakland Hills' Temescal Reservoir** (15 acres) are managed by the East Bay Regional Park District and fall within a 30-mile radius of over 2 million people. A recorded fishing hotline is available for Contra Loma and Shadow Cliffs by phoning 510-248-3474. Angling information from the East Bay Regional Parks District can be obtained by calling 510-562-PARK or 510-635-0135, ext. 2342. No boats are allowed on Temescal.

Marin County's 140-acre **Bon Tempe Lake**, which sits on the coniferous eastern slope of Mount Tamalpais and does not allow boats, receives abundant February plants. Controlled by the Marin Municipal Water District, current fishing and access information can be obtained from the Western Boat Shop (415-454-4177).

On the rebound from diminishing water problems and loss of the lake concessionaire, San Francisco's **Merced Lakes** are regularly planted when water conditions are right. For up-to-the-minute information, contact the Merced Bait Shop (415-753-1101).

Anglers 16 years of age and older must have a valid 2005 fishing license. A two-rod stamp is well worth the extra dollars. —Don Vachini

catch a trio of sleek rainbows. All of them seemed to let down their guard and hit aggressively after brief retrieves.

I have also found size 8 to 10 Copper John, beadhead caddis or size 6 to 8 leeches, Matuka or Zonkers in black, brown, purple or green shades to work their magic, especially when predictable gusts kick up.

In addition to a six-lane boat ramp, Del Valle offers boat rentals, a snack shack and tackle shop. For additional information contact the Lake Del Valle Marina 925-449-5201 or the Del Valle Regional Park 925-373-032.

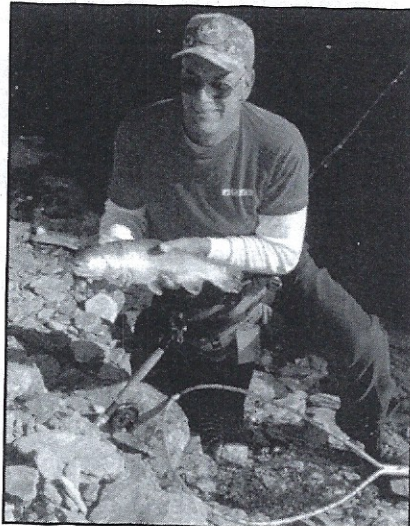
LOS VAQUEROS RESERVOIR

Formerly an old Spanish ranch in the rolling hills between Brentwood and Livermore, this celebrated new 1,500-acre impoundment has been offering fantastic winter angling for the past two seasons. Obviously, as it enters its third season, the anticipation continues to grow.

To initially attract anglers, the DFG planted more than 80,000 rainbow trout in the 10- to 14-inch range during 2000 and 2001, Contra Costa County added 100,000 'bows and the lake concessionaire another 14,500 pounds of trout the season prior to the lake opening. With each agency adding smaller numbers in the interim, this forage-rich water allowed for phenomenal growth rates, and when the lake opened to fishing in 2003, numerous fish in the 15-inch, 2-pound range were landed with enough up to 6 pounds to keep anglers happy.

Despite the lake's expansive surface, trout here seem to cling near the shoreline and are really accessible to bank anglers. During the lake's opening season, Ben Leech and I visited several times, using ultra-light rods and reels, 2-pound line and tiny white and yellow 1/32-ounce minitube jigs fished about 5 feet under small bobbers. During the typical windy conditions, we twitched our jigs slowly, pausing after each upward twitch and then allowing them to fall and flutter like an injured minnow. Most hits occurred on the drop.

With the exception of worms and night crawlers, live bait is prohibited.



Author Don Vachini stripped a yellow Woolly Bugger along the shoreline to entice this hefty Lake Berryessa rainbow. Photo courtesy of Don Vachini.

Bankers often use half a night crawler with a gob of Power Bait suspended 18 to 20 inches off the bottom.

Roads only go partway around the lake; hiking is an aerobic option.

While the west and north shorelines are accessible, the eastern shoreline is a sensitive natural habitat and off-limits to foot traffic although boats allow further exploration. Since persistent winds are a caveat, always wear flotation devices and pay attention to the zephyrs.

No bodily contact is permitted at Los Vaqueros, nor are private boats or float tubes allowed. However, there are four fishing piers, including one with wheelchair access. Electric motor boats are available for rent. For more information, contact the Los Vaqueros Recreation Area 925-371-2628 or visit <www.ccwater.com>.

LAKE BERRYESSA

The tiny threadfin shad is the catalyst transforming 21,000-acre Lake Berryessa into an amazing winter trout destination for northern Bay Area anglers. Under a unique put-and-grow philosophy, some 115,000 foot-long Eagle Lake and Coleman-strain rainbows are allowed to acclimate in strategically placed floating pens and released during late spring. By December, they range between 13 and 16 inches and average 1 to 2 pounds, with holdovers regularly pushing 4 pounds.

The thermocline turnover flip-flops

cold water and huge concentrations of shad to the surface of this wine-country impoundment. Since the trout gorge prodigiously on these tiny plankton eaters, the winter key to success is locating them. Allowing flexibility to pursue cruising trout, a boat is almost a necessity.

Undoubtedly, the drifted minnow technique is the most effective way of taking "turnover" trout. Hooked beneath the dorsal fin, the minnow resembles a wounded baitfish, and since it can swim naturally, its flashing action is very attractive. Whether letting the minnow swim freely or using a clear plastic bobber to keep it at the desired depth, leaving the bail open and holding the line between two fingers to detect minnow movement is a sensible ploy. Feeling less resistance, the trout will often ingest the bait, making for a solid hookup.

Topline trolling at dawn can also be a very successful wintertime endeavor, maneuvering 1- to 3-inch shad-imitating lures along the fringes of baitfish concentrations or crowding the shoreline and moving relatively fast, around 2 mph. The trout must decide quickly in the diminished light and usually smash the offering with vengeance. Varying speeds, altering directions and turning will often coerce a strike, and a loosely set drag definitely helps prevent breakoffs.

Hotspots for winter anglers, centralized in the lower third of the lake nearest the dam, include Skier's Cove, Peekaboo Point and Markley Cove, plus points of land that drop into deep water such as the Farmhouse, the mouth of Cappel Cove, Steele Park, the Island and Spanish Flat.

Bank fishermen are successful in the Oak Shore Day Use, Cappel Cove Launch, Spanish Flat, Markley, Portuguese and Putah coves.

Several full-service marinas, which include boat launching and bait and tackle, are found along the west shore. They include Rancho Monticello (707-966-2188); Steele Park Resort (707-966-2330); Spanish Flat Resort (707-966-7700), which also offers a gas dock, boat rentals and camping; and Markley Cove Resort (707-966-2134), which also includes a guide service in addition to boat rentals and gas dock. □