

LAKE AMADOR'S CUTBOW CONSORTIUM

Once noted for its lunker largemouth bass, this Mother Lode lake is now home to a unique strain of cutbows that have steelhead genes in their lineage.

by Don Vachini

Within five minutes of stringing my fly rod, I saw four hefty trout cruising a mere 10 feet from shore. I flicked an offering at them. One leviathan aimed straight for my Woolly Bugger, snapped at it, then launched itself like a rocket for parts unknown when the sting of steel struck. A trio of rapid leaps within 15 seconds, and it was gone.

Remarkably, the other three fish seemed undisturbed, so I focused my attention back on them.

I was plying Lake Amador for its unique strain of cutbows on a crisp, late-winter morning. This water's reputation for feisty trout exceeding five pounds seemed remarkably accurate, and I was definitely craving more of this exotic fish!

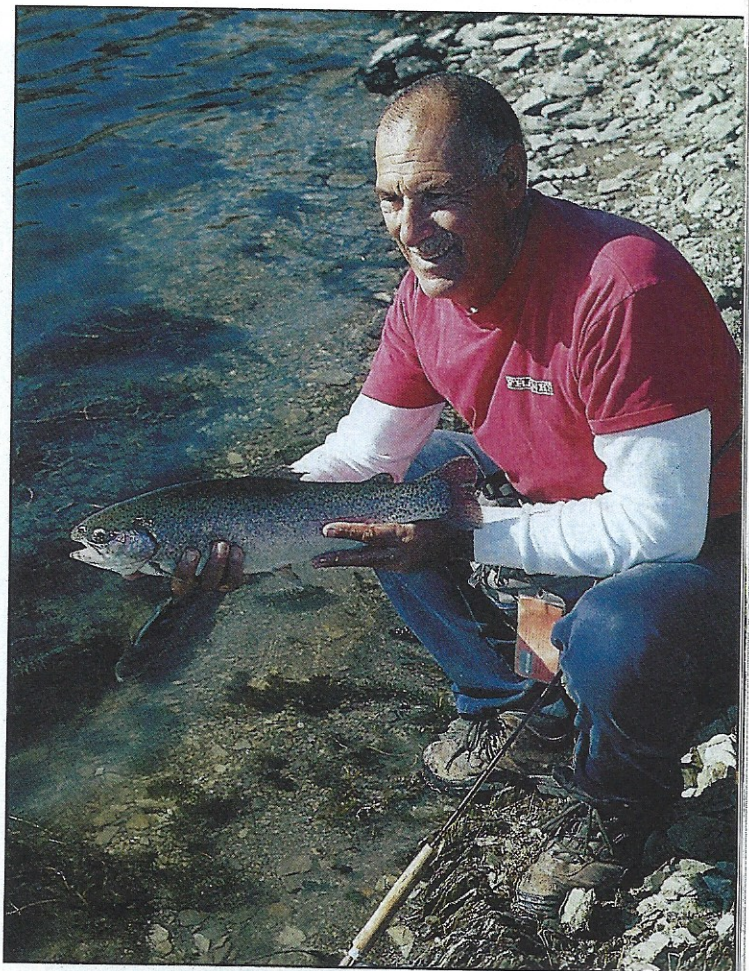
Tucked in the Mother Lode foothills near Ione, Amador covers 425 surface acres, encompasses 13.5 miles of shoreline and sits at an elevation of 485 feet. Surrounded by oak and digger pine forest, it is quite simply one of the state's prime trout fisheries. "We grow our own trout at our own hatchery, and there is no harder fighting fish you'll find," explains Robert Lockhart, manager of the private Lake Amador Fish Hatchery.

About 10 tons of trout are planted annually, the majority of them running between two and five pounds apiece, with individuals ranging up to 12 pounds. Weekly plants total about 5,500 pounds of trout, and over the course of a season, nearly 70,000 pounds are released.

Amador has gained its reputation for producing giant Donaldson-strain cutbow salmonids. Lockhart says that more than 50 years of research went into producing this fish, which is 30 percent steelhead, 50 percent rainbow and 20 percent cutthroat. "Hard fighting and acrobatic, they are raised on site, are well acclimated to Amador's waters and possess qualities you'd expect from a holdover fish," he adds.

Since the Donaldson strain is basically a surface-dweller,

anglers here need to use special techniques to adapt to this subspecies' mannerisms. Contrary to many lakes where deep water, thermocline variances and structure factor into an angler's success, Lockhart believes the key to fishing Amador is depth — or, more accurately, the lack of it. "The cutbows are very active on top," he said. "It's their nature



Lake Amador's cutbows carry a reputation for size, speed and tenacity. The author prepares to release a bright 4-pounder, while yet another cutbow swims in the water (below his hand). Photo courtesy of Don Vachini.

to hold within the top few feet of the surface, often at depths under a foot, especially if there's dim light or it's cloudy. They will typically cut V-wakes, tipping off their presence as they cruise along the shore or the middle of the lake."

While boaters, float-tubers and shore-bound anglers score consistent catches, one common factor to their success is a shallow presentation. "If you're not getting bit, you're probably too deep. You'll want to be no deeper than the upper three feet of water," Lockhart advises.

TIMELY OBSERVATIONS

It took me the better part of a season to figure out another cutbow tendency at Amador. While retrieving either hardware or flies, I would commonly receive jolting strikes but time after time would miss setting the hook. On one particularly clear, windless morning, I got to see what was happening. Most of the fish were striking short or being indecisive. They would slash at the lure or fly in from odd directions, or bump the offering with their head or body, then turn away. It was also evident that the

trout weren't pursuing for long distances, but only reacting to the lure when it approached their space.

Things were starting to make sense. I adjusted my presentation to perform 10 o'clock or 2 o'clock casts accompanied by slow, herky-jerky, zigzag retrieves. The erratic retrieval has served not only to trigger more strikes, but increase landing rates as well.

SHOREBOUND SPIN TACTICS

Lockhart says that at Amador, shore anglers usually out-fish boaters. I believe it. My observations confirm that most trout cruise within 50 feet of the bank. Fittingly, it has been my preference to work the shoreline.

The section from the spillway to the floating docks contains the most trout. After all, that's where they are released. Light-action, 7- to 8-foot spinning rods and reels, loaded with thin-diameter 6- to 8-pound monofilament and a smooth drag, are ideal for casting rainbow Thomas Buoyant, silver/blue Kastmasters, Wob-L-Rite and silver Little Cleo spoons. Fly/bubble combinations are also effective, since the fly is kept within

the surface strike zone. White or yellow crappie mini-jigs and half night crawlers twitched a foot or so behind a clear bobber also prove deadly without the need for long casts.

Patient shore anglers will also score using inflated night crawlers or chartreuse, rainbow or yellow Power Baits. Avoid using sliding sinkers, to keep the offering at the surface. The baits should be worked without weight and floated no more than 10 to 12 inches below a fluorescent orange and red pencil bobber — which reacts to the slightest nibble by tipping straight up and sinking. Since these cutbows are quick strikers and lightning-fast on their initial run, Lockhart advises hand-holding your rod to be able to feel the initial take and set the hook quickly. And don't forget to bring a large, long-handled landing net.

Top shore-fishing areas are along the face of the dam, the spillway and Launch Cove, Rock Creek Cove, Cat Cove, the Jackson Creek arm, Big Bay and Mountain Springs.

FLY OPTIONS

Fly anglers will need a 6- or 7-

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weight outfit matched with floating line and strong tippets to work a wide color selection of size 6 or 8 Woolly Buggers, Beadhead Pheasant Tails and Copper Johns, Matukas or other gaudy imitations. Black, yellow or chartreuse Woolly Buggers are my favorites.

LINE-CLASS RECORD

Prior to one of my visits, I set my sights on a tippet class vacancy with the National Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame. After parting connections with the first massive trout of the morning, I focused on the next potential target, maybe 10 feet offshore, a foot or so above a submerged weed bed and equally as large as the first.

After a trio of retrieves proved unsuccessful, I deftly maneuvered the Woolly Bugger past its nose, watched it turn slightly, and then open its mouth to engulf my fly. The rest, however, was a blur. It ripped off line in head-shaking bursts and aerial displays, antics that typified steelhead ancestry. Testing tackle, 48-pound tippet and my nerves for about five frantic minutes, I finally netted the strong fish. Barely visible under its mandible

were the faint yellow-orange slash marks characteristic of this subspecies. In addition to being a valiant warrior, the 4-pound, 2-ounce cutthroat claimed the hall's vacant unlimited tippet class — a fitting specimen for this honor!

BOATING TACTICS

Since concentrations of these surface-loving fish inhabit the middle of the lake as well as its shorelines, boaters often find top-line trolling an effective way to entice them. Surface-running a spoon, spinner or plug 50 to 75 feet behind a boat at a slow crawl of about 1/2 to 3/4 mph helps keep the lure near the top; and S-turn patterns offer an enticing action that commonly invites strikes. Jointed minnow-imitating lures, such as the J7 Rapala or Rebels in perch or black with gold, can be productive. But black, white or green Bingo Bugs, Sep's Pro Secrets, Rooster Tails and Uncle Larry's spinners in fire tiger, red, chartreuse or perch, along with Kastmaster, Needlefish, Humdingers and Rainbow Runners with a worm or a Wedding ring/flasher combination are all equally effective. Some boaters

prefer to use side planers to keep their lures away from the boat's wake.

The best scenario for large numbers of trout involves trolling in front of the dam, along Construction Point, Rock Creek, the Sunken Island and the Jackson Creek arm. Many boaters troll from the spillway to the middle of the lake, then work down the Carson arm and back.

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

Amador does not allow waterskiing or personal watercraft. Amenities include a campground, picnic area, boat ramp, boat rentals, fish-cleaning station, bait, groceries and a café. Fees are charged for day-use, fishing permits and boat launching.

For current angling information or conditions, contact the Lake Amador Resort at (209) 274-4739. Lodging is available in Jackson, 10 miles north on Highway 88. Reliable guides are Gill's Guide Service at (209) 481-8645, Dale's Foothill Fishing at (530) 295-0488, and Rod Bender's Guide Service at (916) 354-3333. □

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