

Chris Vachini, the author's son, nets a nice holdover rainbow at Lake Hennessey. Fish here aren't huge, like at Berryessa, but neither are the crowds. Photo by Don Vachini.

TOAST LAKE HENNESSEY

While the crowds taste Napa wines, drink up the solitude at an overlooked lake continually stocked with thousands of catchable rainbows.

BY DON VACHINI

Napa Valley's a renowned producer of chardonnay, cabernet and zinfandel varietals. People flock there to sample its fruit of the vine. Recently, tiny towns and hamlets like Calistoga, St. Helena and Rutherford have taken on a frantic pace as the Wine Train and limousine services whisk shoppers, tasters and sightseers to wineries and countless local shops.

One recent February afternoon, I was following my wife through a window-shopping nightmare. I finally brokered a deal, and early the following morning, I was a mere three miles from this frenetic world of shopping and wine-tasting.

I walked by shorelines of oak, bay and pine along a tranquil body of water nestled in Napa's quiet, bucolic hills. The welcome jolt of a trout on the end of my line further added to the enjoyment. Moments later, a glistening 12-inch rainbow helped me forget how close to civilization I really was. All this, and no hangover!

During my two-hour session at Lake Hennessey, I saw only two other anglers, and released seven respectable trout before joining my wife for brunch. In fact, over the years I've rarely encountered crowds. Instead, I marvel at how this impoundment has stayed below the angling radar. You got to love wine country!

Yes, nearby Lake Berryessa offers more variety and larger fish opportunities. But anglers here find an intoxicating serenity plus limits of pan-sized rainbows. And I know for a fact that big ones are out there!

LOCALE

The Napa Valley lies between the Napa and Mayacamas hills. At the head of this 60-mile-long valley sits majestic Mount St. Helena, a former volcano whose hulking prominence not only dominates the skyline, but forms the headwaters of the Napa River. Bisecting rich farmland, this waterway and several noteworthy tributaries flow to thirsty vineyards before entering the San Pablo Bay at Vallejo. The rolling hills provide fertile soils, and the Mediterranean climate is ideal for growing award-winning grapes.

Lake Hennessey was formed by a dam on Conn Creek, a Napa River tributary, and supplies water for Napa County residents. Abundant incoming water offers excellent spawning habitat and baitfish forage to support a solid seasonal fishery. Owned by the City of Napa, and once off-limits to the public, this 850-acre impoundment gains supportive flows from the runoff of Sage, Moore and Chiles creeks.

Often overlooked, it is situated reasonably close to the Bay Area and Sacramento metropolitan centers. In the past decade, Lake Hennessey has become a quiet

favorite for those who don't want to travel far for good trout in an uncrowded setting.

THE PLANT

The lake's 55- to 59-degree water is ideal for trout and allows them to be very active, said Robert Snyder, fisheries biologist with the California Department of Fish and Game.

The state planted 16,000 catchable-sized rainbows in Hennessey last year. Snyder said most trout are now in the 10- to 12-inch range and approach 3/4 pound on average.

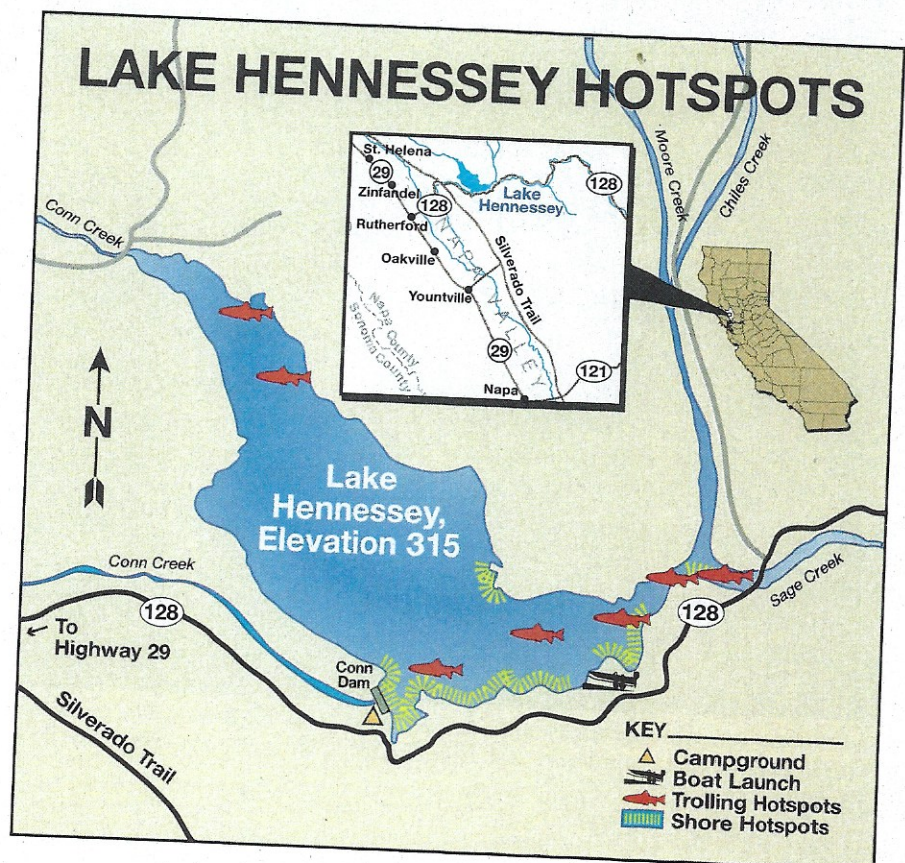
Operating on a biweekly schedule, the fishery is directly tied to the timing of plants. The best results usually occurs a day or so after a plant, said Snyder.

With an abundance of infused trout and relatively light angler pressure, Snyder said that anglers occasionally catch a larger carryover fish.

"Year-round conditions are conducive to allowing specimens to go deep and survive over the summer's warmer months. Though not common, creel surveys have revealed holdovers running up to 2 to 3 pounds," he said.

The contribution of three feeder streams also supplements the lake's food chain, providing an abundance of fresh water along with forms of food washed along with the flows. Since there is a plethora of wooded cover nearby, a solid array of insect life continues to occur during winter. Just after heavy rains, these creeks often provide a bountiful array of earthworms and other terrestrials.

As spring approaches, some native trout use the streams as spawning venues, albeit on a very limited scale. Some planters will also ascend the moving water. To protect spring spawners, Hennessey tributaries are



open to fishing only from the last Saturday in April through Nov. 15.

While a five-fish bag limit applies on both lake and creeks, Snyder recommends releasing native trout in these streams.

TACKLE

Hungry, aggressive trout prowl the surface here, so anglers can keep things simple and still catch fish.

A 5- to 7-foot ultra-light spinning rod and a reel loaded with 4- to 6-pound monofilament is more than adequate, and is a sporting choice for either bait or lures.

For those who prefer the long rod, a 7- to 9-foot, 3- to 4-weight system matched with a floating or sink-tip line is ideal. When used in combination with a float tube or from a boat, a wide selection of dark-bodied flies or streamers will work. The planters aren't selective.

SHORE TACTICS

Most anglers prefer to stay on terra firma, content to patiently bait-and-wait for fish cruising along the shoreline. Gently sloping banks

along the littoral zone provide prime conditions for dunking worms, night crawlers, salmon eggs, marshmallows or a variety of floating PowerBaits while trout patrol the shallows regularly.

Whether using manufactured or natural baits, either soaked on the bottom or suspended under a bobber, movement is your key to success. Offerings routinely twitched or moved slightly seem to attract bites.

This is especially true with the putty-type baits that tend to sink when moved and then continue to slowly rise as movement ceases. This created action seems to be the fatal attraction to the fish here.

Casting and erratically retrieving small Kastmasters, Needle Fish, Hum Dingers, Thomas Bouyant spoons and brassy or silver Panther Martin, Rooster Tails, Vibrax or Mepps spinners parallel to shore is also a solid method, especially during lowlight hours when trout dimple at the surface.

One of my best outings here occurred one afternoon as the sky darkened and the air grew still.

There wasn't a ripple on the glassy surface when I began distance-casting my black Woolly Worm fly and bubble combination. Before the skies erupted and drove me off the lake, I got a hit on almost every cast as the trout suddenly went berserk at the V-wake.

When working the moving water in the vicinity of the inlet creeks, I often favor the use of a 1/2- to 3/8-ounce micro jig worked 2 to 3 feet under a bobber. Whenever possible, I cast into the moving water and let the current deliver the offering into the feeding zone, while imparting a subtle lift-and-drop action. As the offering progresses through the slowly moving water into the quieter flows, I twitch the bobber lightly before letting it settle.

Repeat the seductive twitch-and-settle routine. Watch the bobber for any movement, and gently set the hook when the bobber plunges under. Expect most hits to occur on the drop.

Jig dressings come in tube, paddle tail, hair tail or marabou tail. My favorite is a curlytail in white, yellow or chartreuse shades. I have also found that tipping the jig with half of a worm works very well.

BOATS RULE

Boaters commonly enjoy limits. A floating craft lets you cover water that shoreline anglers can't. And trolling is a very effective method for catching trout here.

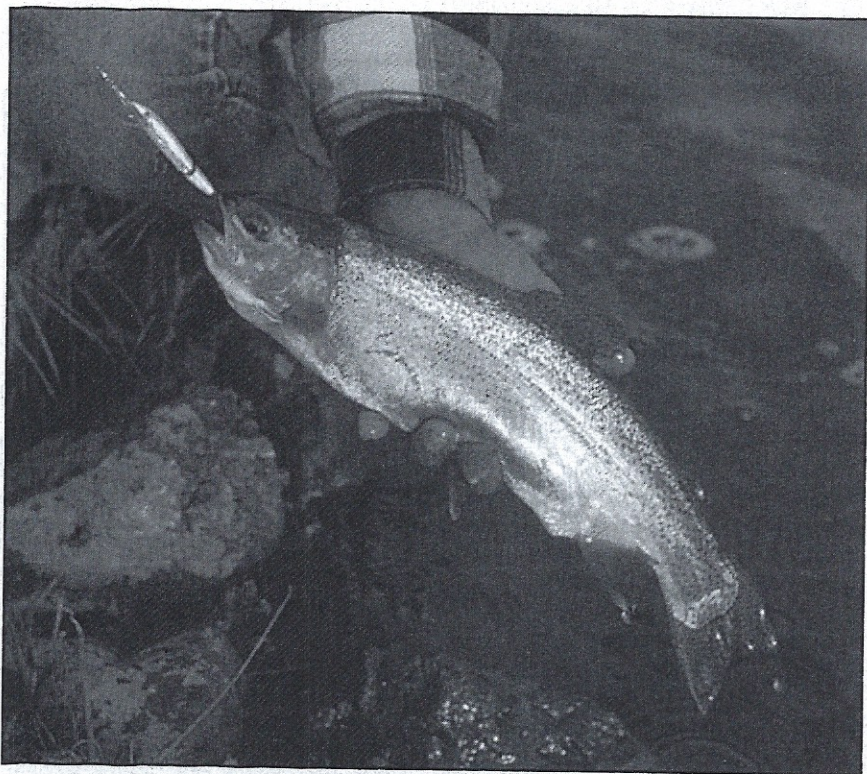
Troll over the submerged Conn and Moore creek channels or along shoreline contours. Fish will normally be within the top 3 to 8 feet during early and late-day periods or whenever skies are extremely dark. You'll find the fish run deeper during sunny, midday hours.

Incoming tributary waters are my all-time favorite hotspots here. A boat allows me to reach these areas, and I can bounce bait along the bottom to be carried naturally by the current.

Just the difference of a slight angle can mean presenting right in front of a trout's snout or missing its lane by a few feet.

Float-tubing is another excellent

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Most trout at Lake Hennessey tape out at about 10 to 12 inches. Occasionally you'll catch a bigger one, like this 16-incher that hit a Rapala. Photo by Don Vachini.

HENNESSEY...Continued

option. Towing a size 10 to 12 olive Matuka streamer, a black, purple or green Woolly Bugger or Brown Leech behind a tube can often be very rewarding. It allows you to get to structure just outside the reach of shoreline anglers. Again, the angle of retrieval can be crucial in the presentation.

BOATING TECHNIQUES

I try to be simplistic in my boating efforts at Hennessey. I use the KISS ("Keep It Simple, Stupid") principle.

To locate fish, isolate physical characteristics that attract fish. Rocky points and dropoffs are good, but as starting points, the inlets are consistently reliable. It never hurts to use sonar to locate fish along with their depth, but key to taking these trout is water temperature.

If the water drops below 52 degrees, you'll find that trout become very lethargic and don't chase offerings. But that's rare at Hennessey because water temps in winter usually range between 55 and 60 degrees.

Planters are routinely found near

the surface. There's no need for downriggers or lead-core line. Rainbows here seem to prefer silvery or brassy lures like Kastmaster, Cripp-lure or Krocodile spoons or Bingo Bug, Frisky Fly or Flatfish plugs. The side-to-side action and vibrations of these flutter-type lures often attract trout from up to 75 feet away.

For anyone who top-lines for trout, the best surface action normally occurs from first light until approximately 10 a.m. Late afternoon until dusk is also prime time. But during dark, cloudy or overcast days, the fish tend to feed all day.

SMALL CRANKBAITS

If you've tried a bunch of baits and lures, and nothing's biting, tie on a small crankbait. Finicky trout will sometimes go crazy over the smallest micro Bomber Long A, D.A.M. Effzett Super Natural and Cotton Cordell Grappler Shad.

Simply let out line behind the boat. Move them over the same structure you would while working any other lures. There is no secret to

trolling these miniscule crankbaits, but the less line you let out, the shallower the bait will run.

Since these lures are designed to run most efficiently on thin-diameter line, 4-pound monofilament seems to be the best for the smaller trout. Troll them at varying speeds between 1/2 to 2 mph, and change direction. That way they'll remain near the surface, which is key. Otherwise, the most productive speeds seem to be about 1/2 or 3/4 mph with exaggerated "S" turns to vary the lure's depth, action and acceleration.

While some highly educated trout might require a spectrum of color shades to fool them, especially at the deeper levels, lure color doesn't really make a difference at Hennessey. The "Silver in bright light, gold in dull light" rule applies here, but my best results have come using the standard rainbow or brown shades in small sizes.

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MAKE SCENTS

Whether fishing from shore or a floating craft, an attractant scent such as Pautzke's Gel Krill or Liquid Krill, Berkley Trout Dip, YUM TroutKrilla, Nitro Gravy or Smelly Jelly smeared on a lure goes a long way to stimulate action. These concoctions mask your human smell and lay out a scent trail that fish will follow.

They also "taste" like what the trout are craving. Trout seem to hold on to the offering longer on their initial bite, making for a surer hookset.

PRODUCTIVE AREAS

Most of the lake's shoreline is easily accessible. Since planters tend to school and cruise the shoreline, any area can be red-hot when fish are there. But one of the areas producing most consistently is along the boat launch. That's where they stock them. Some fish head for other parts of the lake, but most school and patrol in a large loop

near here, especially for a few days after a plant.

Then again, creek mouths this time of year often flow murky from winter storms. Fish them.

A few seasons back, the off-color Moore Creek arm provided a large surprise. Two days after a sizeable rainstorm, my son Jason and I quietly drifted up on its inlet point. He dropped a red salmon egg into the cloudy water and let it tick the bottom of a deep, gouged-out hole. After a subtle tap, he set the hook.

We both expected a nimble 10-inch. But his rod bowed deeply, and a few seconds later, a silvery missile exploded on the surface — a healthy 3-plus-pounder, at least a two-year survivor, obviously intent on using the creek for spawning. It was the largest trout we'd taken from here, but we released it to pursue its natural instincts.

COUNTY PARK FACILITIES

You can get to the lake from Highway 29 north of Napa by taking Rutherford Road, also called Highway 128. Then after crossing

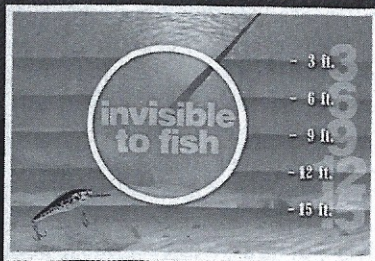
the Silverado Trail, proceed another mile. The shore features a boat launch and picnic area, and much of the shoreline is rimmed by a hiking trail.

You'll need a valid fishing license, and a daily or annual fishing permit. Boaters need a launch permit too. Both are available from the caretaker at the lake. Outboard motors may not exceed 10 horsepower. For up-to-the minute angling conditions, contact Sweeney's Sports (707) 255-5544.

The Napa County Web site, at www.napacounty.us/code2000, also provides helpful information. □

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