



*The majority of Lake Amador's cutbow are between two and five pounds.*

## Lake Amador's Trophy Cutbow Trout

"A unique strain of super-sized trout provides a challenging winter quarry."

Don Vachini

**I**magine, if you would, a trout engineered for large size, brute strength and rapid maturity. Well, all daydreaming aside, such a salmonid currently exists, combining the pugnacity of a steelhead, the temperament of a wild rainbow and the fast growth of a cutthroat!

Over 60 years ago, Swiss scientist Lauren Donaldson culminated a major breakthrough, successfully crossbreeding wild rainbow trout with Alaskan coastal cutthroat. Well-recognized among fish culturists and fisheries biologists alike, the resultant trout is 30% steelhead, 50% rainbow and 20% cutthroat. While rightfully known as the Donaldson strain to scientists, anglers most commonly refer to this genetic model as cutbow.

Donaldson's accomplishment is also of special interest to lake concessionaires seeking a source of large trout for their clients. While trout in nature tend to mature in approximately four years while attaining about a pound in weight, Donaldson's "super trout" reach maturity in less than two years

while potentially ranging up to 10 pounds during that time.

Now, picture a scenario involving an easily accessible lake brim-full of these giants, cruising like a marauding street gang within a few feet of shore. On a particularly crisp, winter morning, I was plying California's Lake Amador and came upon this very scene. Indeed, the water's reputation for producing feisty trout in the 5-plus-pound range had grabbed my attention and I was literally salivating as I looked forward to tangling with this exotic hybrid.

### The Fishery

Tucked in the Mother Lode foothills near the town of Ione, this man-made lake covers 425 surface acres,

encompasses 13.5 miles of shoreline and sits at an elevation of 485 feet while surrounded by oak and digger pine forest. When first filled in 1968, the DFG stocked it with numerous gamefish species along with various baitfish. When the Lockhart family took over operation of the lake in 1973, they initiated their vision to develop a distinguished trout factory for anglers. They not only constructed their own on-site hatchery facilities but purchased and cultivated Donaldson-strain eggs.

While Florida-strain largemouth bass, catfish, crappie and sunfish reproduce naturally in the lake, the amazing trout implants have placed Amador on the map. According to Robert Lockhart, manager of the private Lake Amador Fish Hatchery, this water

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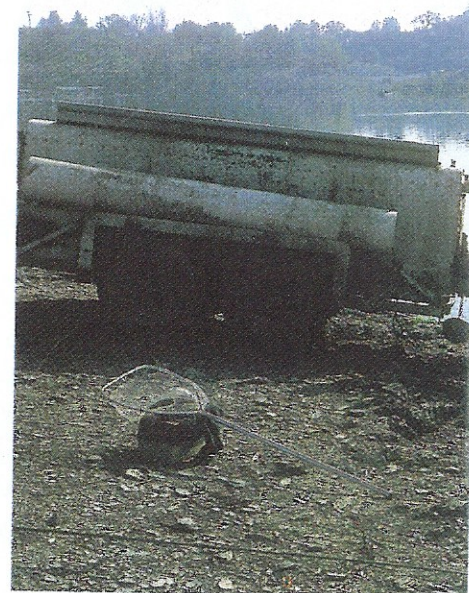
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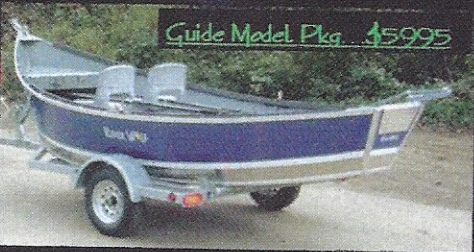
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stands out as one of the state's prime winter trout fisheries, probably producing more fish per square mile than any other. "We grow our own trout at our own hatchery and there is no harder fighting fish you'll find," he proudly mentions. "Approximately 10 tons of trout are planted annually; the vast majority running between 2 to 5 pounds with individuals ranging up to 12 pounds," he continues.

It is apparent where the lake's slogan, "Where the lunkers lurk," comes from. With the lake record at 16 pounds, 8 ounces, Lockhart reveals regular weekly plants total about 5,500 pounds of trout and over the course of the season nearly 125,000 pounds are released into the lake. In addition to infusing huge numbers of sizeable specimens, Amador has indeed gained a reputation as a factory for these distinctive cutbows. "Hard fighting and acrobatic by nature, they are raised on site, have well-defined fins, are well acclimated to Amador's waters and possess qualities you'd expect from a holdover fish," he adds. "While the lake average is close to three pounds, surviving holdovers feed heavily on the abundant threadfin shad and become 'pigs', often nearing 10 pounds!"

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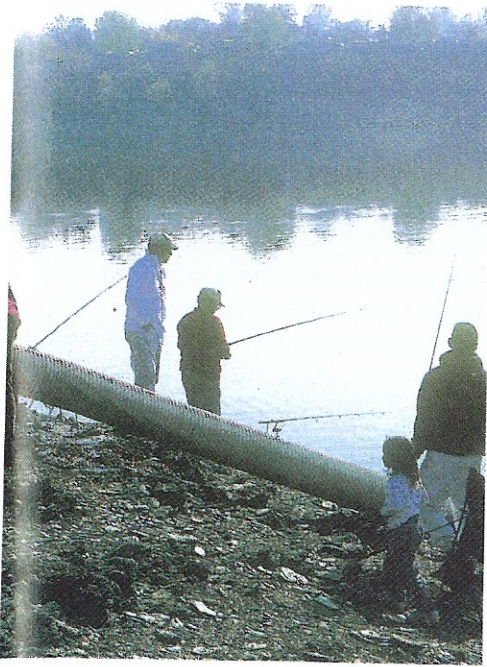
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**TOP SECRET**

While the size and pugnacity of the stocks are mind boggling, this lake requires a specific learning curve to fish it effectively. Since the Donaldson-strain is basically a surface dweller, anglers here will need to use special techniques to adapt to this unique sub-species' mannerisms. Contrary to many other lakes and reservoirs where deep water, thermocline variances and structure are prime ingredients for success, Lockhart feels the absolute key to fishing Amador is depth—or, more appropriately, the lack of depth. "True surface feeders, the cutbows are very active on top. It is their nature to hold within the top few feet of the surface,



pounds comes from Amador's own hatchery.

of the surface, often at depths under a foot, especially if there is dim light or it's cloudy. They will typically cut v-wakes, tipping off their presence as they methodically cruise either along the shore or middle of the lake."

While boaters, float tubers and shore bound anglers all score consistently, the one common factor enabling them to corral fish is a very shallow presentation. "If you're not getting bit, you are probably too deep. You'll want to be no deeper than the upper 3 feet of water," he advises.

### Timely Observations

I was somewhat overconfident when a friend and I first visited Amador several seasons ago. Trout were plainly visible, finning back and forth along shore, seemingly unfazed by nearby anglers. Rationalizing that these were, after all, planted trout and thus, rather gullible, I anticipated steady action. However, after a full day of hard fishing, we managed to land just one while long-line-releasing seven others. The "super-trout" certainly made a believer out of me.

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 frustratingly miss setting the hook. On other occasions, fish would spit the hook seconds after hookup. However, one particularly clear, windless morning offered a visual perspective as to what was happening. In a constant cruising pattern, most of the fish observed were short-striking or indecisive in their attack tactic; slashing at odd directions, bumping the offering with their head or body then indignantly turning away. It was also evident that in most cases, the trout weren't pursuing for long distances but reacting to the lure when it approached or closely crossed their space.

Adjusting my presentation a bit, I now perform 10 o'clock or 2 o'clock casts, accompanied by slow,

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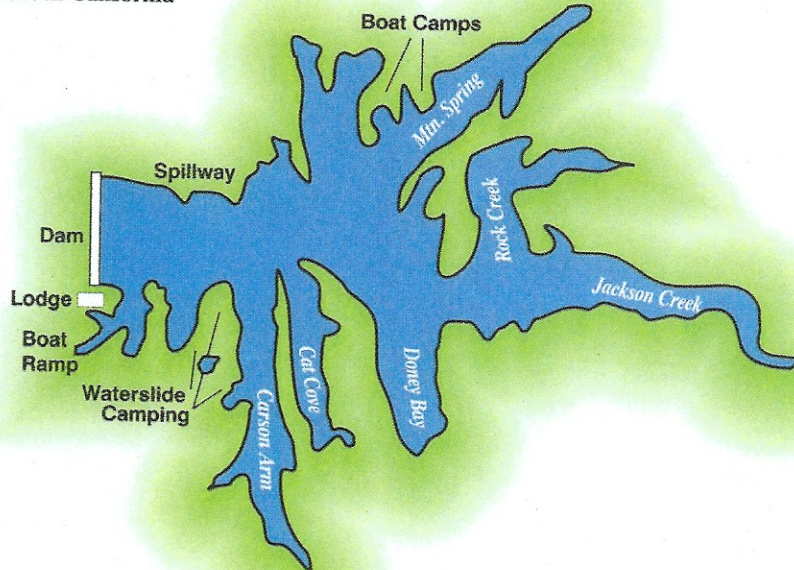
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# Lake Amador

Northern California



herky-jerky, zig-zag retrieves which parallel the fishes main travel route. With my rod probably resembling a dueling foil, I often completely reverse the direction of the offering, then rapidly correct again in an attempt to provoke a take. Implementing these erratic forms of retrieval has obviously served to not only trigger more energetic strikes but increase my landing rates as well.

## Shorebound Spin Tactics

Lockhart firmly stresses that shore anglers usually outfish the boaters. Since my own personal observations confirm most of the trout are content to cruise within 5-50 feet of the bank, it has been my preference to diligently work here. No doubt the section from the spillway to the floating docks probably contains the heaviest concentrations of trout since they are released here.

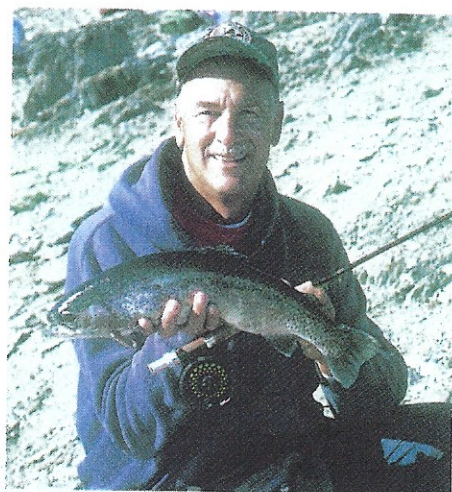
A light-action 7-8 foot spinning rod and reel loaded with thin-diameter 6- to 8-pound monofilament and a smooth operating drag is ideal for casting silver/blue Kastmasters, rainbow Thomas Bouyant, Wob-L-Rite and silver Little Cleo spoons or maneuvering 4- to 6-inch rainbow or brown patterned swimbaits like Castaic Soft Trout or Mega Bait Charlie. A fly/bubble combination also draws plenty of hits since the fly is kept within the surface strike zone while white or yellow crappie mini-jigs and half nightcrawlers twitched a foot or so behind a clear bobber also prove deadly.

Lengthy casts are not necessary but the use of Pautzke's Liquid Krill or other scented concoctions often stimulates a feeding urge.

While patient shore anglers will also score using inflated nightcrawlers, worms or chartreuse, rainbow or yellow Power Baits, the traditional slid-

ing sinkers must be avoided to keep the offering at the surface. The baits should be worked without weight and floated no more than 10-12 inches below a fluorescent orange and red pencil bobber, which reacts to the slightest nibble by tipping straight up and sinking-perfect for the visually challenged. 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. A large, long-handled landing net is practically a necessity to finalize these ballistic steelhead relatives along steep banks.

While top shore areas include along the face of the dam, the docks, the spillway and Launch Cove, Big Bay and Mountain Springs are also productive land locales.



The author proudly poses with a four-pound, two-ounce cutbow which currently holds the unlimited tippet class world record with the National Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame.

## Boating Tactics

Since concentrations of fish inhabit the middle of the lake as well, boaters often find topline trolling an effective way to entice Amador residents. Surface running a spoon, spinner or plug 50-75 feet behind the boat at a slow crawl of about  $\frac{1}{2}$  to  $\frac{3}{4}$  mph helps keep the lure near the top while S-turn patterns offer an enticing action that commonly invites strikes. Although jointed minnow-imitating lures like J7 Rapalas or Rebels in perch or black with gold can be productive, 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, Crippulures, 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 the lure away from the boats wake.

The best scenario for large numbers of trout involves trolling across the dam, along Construction Point, Rock Creek, Cat Cove, the Sunken Island and the Jackson Creek arm. Many informed boaters after double-digit trout troll from the spillway to the middle of the lake then work straight down the Carson channel and back while others successfully patrol across the Rock and Jackson creek inlets for solid catches.

## Fly Options

Within five minutes of stringing my fly rod, I located a quartet of hefty trout patrolling languidly a mere dozen feet off shore. A green Woolly Bugger flicked in front of them was the catalyst for one leviathan which violently snapped at it then launched itself like a rocket for parts unknown. However, a trio of heart-accelerating leaps within the span of 15 seconds and it was gone. Remarkably, the other fish were seemingly undisturbed, non-chalantly swimming back and forth, so after regaining my composure, I directed my attention on them.

Fly anglers will need an 8-9-foot, 6-7-weight outfit matched with floating or medium sink-tip line and strong tippets to work a wide color selection of size 8-10 Beadhead Pheasant Tail, Beadhead Copper John, AP or other nymphal imitations. Black, yellow or chartreuse Woolly Buggers, Matuka, Zonkers, Bunny-Skin or Leech are my favorites with threadfin shad-look-alikes Clouser Minnow, Lefty's Deceiver and Burke's Hot Flash Shad patterns a close second.

Prior to one of my visits, I had become aware of an *Oncorhynchus mykiss x Oncorhynchus clarki* tippet class vacancy with the National Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame and I set my sights on this opening. After parting connections with the first massive trout of the morning, I zoned in on the next potential target, maybe 10 feet offshore, a foot or so above a submerged weedbed and equally as large as the first. Deftly maneuvering the Woolly Bugger tantalizingly past its nose, I watched it turn slightly, open its mouth and then engulf my fly. The rest, however, was a blur

BRAD BAKER

## If You Go Information

Amador is located approximately 1 1/2 hours from the San Francisco and Sacramento metro areas. The lake is reached by taking Jackson Valley Road off Highway 88 east of Clement.

Fees are charged for day use, fishing permits and boat launching. While 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. There are 100 campsites and 73 sites with full hookups and lodging is also available in the town of Jackson 10 miles north on Highway 88.

For current angling information or up to the minute conditions, contact the Lake Amador Resort (209) 274-4739 or [www.lakeamador.com](http://www.lakeamador.com). Gill's Guide Service (209) 481-8645, Dale's Foothill Fishing (530) 295-0488 and Rod Bender's Guide Service (916) 354-3333 are reliable guide choices.

as it ripped off line in head-shaking bursts and aerial displays, antics which typified its steelhead ancestry. Testing tackle, 18-pound tippet and nerves for maybe 5-7 frantic minutes, I finally persuaded it network. While filling both hands, the gasping, silver-sheened leviathan still exuded raw power; barely visible were the faint yellow-orange slash marks under its mandible, symbolic of this subspecies. In addition to being a valiant warrior, the 4-pound, 2-ounce specimen managed to claim the Hall's vacant Unlimited tippet class—a fitting representative for this honor.

## Best Times

Late-November through February is a very active period for these transplants since surface temperatures are ideal. However, mid-winter is my favorite visiting time and over the past decade I have had some of my most productive days when the mercury has dropped, skies are ebony and rain is falling. Indeed, the rain-drop-induced splashes breaking the surface probably resemble Purina pellets to the hatchery-reared trout. In-the-know anglers can really take advantage of this "hatch" phenomenon which frequently triggers a hectic feeding impulse.

Exhibiting positive traits from each of their genetic contributors, I have found Amador's cutbow trophies to be both aesthetically pleasing and extremely worthy adversaries. Giving up their freedom grudgingly, utilizing wild, airborne ferocity, electricity-charged runs and frenetic rolls, I rank them to be one of the hardest fighting strains of non-native trout. And, with a 5 fish limit easily exceeding 15 pounds, it certainly appears to me that the Lockhart family's dream of a notable trout facility has truly materialized!

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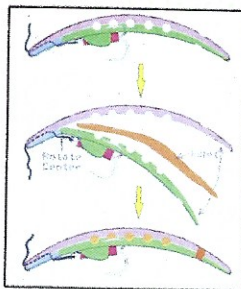
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