

THE TWO FACES OF THE WEST WALKER RIVER

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Author Don Vachini casts to a cruising trout at Long Lake. The more than 9,000-foot elevation takes commitment, but the rewards are native brook trout and rainbows. Photo courtesy of Don Vachini.

This Sierra Nevada legend offers native trout to backcountry anglers and fat stockers along the highway. Take your pick!

BY DON VACHINI

The West Walker is one of those special rivers that can satisfy all types of anglers.

It starts along the Sierra Nevada crest, north of Yosemite National Park, and gathers in a vast catchwater basin. Then it dramatically descends through a vertical gash, gains significant size and courses through high desert sage, meadows and canyons.

In its lower sections, it parallels Highway 395, the major Reno-Los Angeles connector, before part of it diverts into Topaz Lake, with the remainder eventually terminating 60 miles later in Nevada's Walker Lake.

TWO SECTIONS

You could split the river into backcountry and roadside sections.

In its upper reaches, adventuresome anglers could probe small, gin-clear creeks and numerous scenic, sub-alpine still waters. These waters host solid populations of eager rainbow and brook trout, along with cutthroats and goldens.

Farther downstream, roadside warriors have easy access for more than 25 miles. Here they find abundant rainbows in the 12- to 16-inch category. But there's also the chance of catching trout to 8 pounds!

1. BACKCOUNTRY SOLITUDE

You need to walk in or ride horseback to West Walker's headwaters in the Toiyabe National Forest.

From Highway 395, follow Highway 108 west for seven miles to the Leavitt Meadows Pack Station where you can pay for horse-packing services. The elevation is 7,200 feet.

If traveling on foot, stop at the Leavitt Meadows trailhead parking lot, go 200 feet to the Leavitt Meadows Campground, cross the bridge and follow the trail as it slowly ascends a hillside overlooking the meandering West Walker. Continue on the well-marked trail for five miles to the basin. Now you're at 9,200 feet.

Amid vistas of glacier-polished granite, icy snowfields and jumbled talus, an intricate trail system carries you among destinations. It also serves as a Pacific Crest Trail connector.

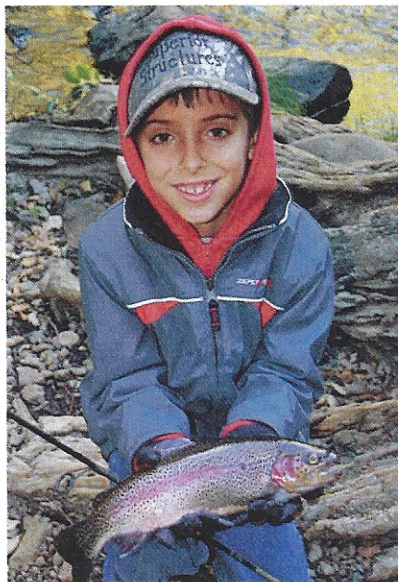
TRIBUTARY CREEKS

Collecting ice and snowmelt from more than 11,000 feet, a network of small creeks above and below the lakes ultimately feeds the main stem of the West Walker. The outflow of lakes Bonnie, Cinko, Harriet and Beartrap create West Fork, Cascade, Kirkwood and Long Canyon creeks.

Many of these, plus other lesser known or nameless rivulets, are terrific producers of scaled-down trout.

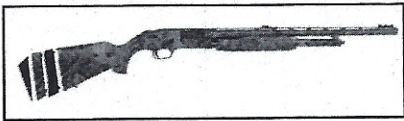
Sam Davidson, California field director for Trout Unlimited, visits the area often and finds the streams perfect for catch-and-release angling.

They range from tiny spring-fed streams to medium-sized cascading freestone waters, and house self-sustaining, brilliantly attired brook trout and rainbows. (Con't)



Dominic Vachini, the author's grandson, drifted salmon eggs through a plunge pool to fool this 14-inch rainbow in the West Walker along Highway 395. Photo by Don Vachini.

Gearing Up



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“Though a medium-sized trout approaching 10 inches might surprise,” he said, “these waters are most likely to produce good numbers of tiny trout in the 6- to 9-inch range.”

A matching 2- to 3-weight fly system or ultralight spinning gear, coupled with a stealthy stalk and low profile, is a healthy approach to success in these slim waters.

“Try to avoid false-casting on these tiny streams,” said Davidson. “Just lay the fly tight to the rocks and avoid drag.”

In this portion of the Sierra Nevada, the insect life is standard issue — mayflies, caddis, midges and stoneflies with terrestrials are well represented. Tiny Size 14-16 Stimulator, Turk’s Tarantula, Rubberlegs or Mosquito patterns are suitable dry imitations. Beadhead Pheasant Tail, Bird’s Nest and Hare’s Ear nymphs are deadly subsurface choices for fooling creek residents.

Fish any hard-to-reach structure. Use a 5- to 6-foot ultralight spinning rod and reel, 2-pound monofilament and a bubble paired with the same selection of flies.

MAIN BASIN LAKES

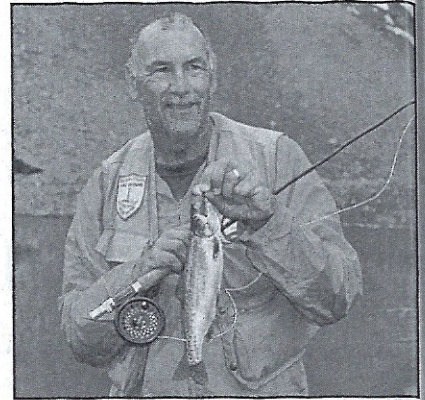
Over the millennia, glaciers left the basin pockmarked with an abundance of mountain gems. While Poore, Secret, Lane and Roosevelt lakes require only a moderate day hike, nine others tucked above 9,200 feet need a more dedicated commitment.

Of these, top-producing Cinko, Fremont, Upper Long and Lower Long lakes along with Chain of Lakes all contain rainbow and brook trout.

Additionally, thanks to the Federal Lahontan Cutthroat Recovery Plan, cutthroat were successfully re-introduced to Fremont, Lane and Roosevelt lakes.

All possess ideal growing conditions, abundant food sources, spawning feeders and sound structure. Residents average from 7 to 14 inches, although some approach 4 pounds.

Their distance from the trailhead helps eliminate heavy pressure. But once there, anglers will still find unique challenges. In many instances, the trout often fin far away from angler’s casts. Other lakes may be bordered by timber that makes casting from shore difficult.



Over the past decade, Lahontan cutthroat have been re-introduced into their native waters. A well-presented Woolly Bugger took this hefty 13-incher. Photo courtesy of Don Vachini.

Nevertheless, Davidson said, solving these high-mountain lakes is not rocket science. A float tube offers the chance to work effectively away from the shoreline and help shift the advantage back to the angler. Besides, the moving water in inlets and outlets always seems to harbor fish.

“Here, the lake-bound trout can take full advantage of increased oxygen levels and the steady influx of food forms funneled to them,” said the trout expert.

Since crayfish inhabit vast Poore and Fremont lakes, I have effectively dredged Size 8-10 orange Sculpin or Crayfish patterns through their depths slowly, on a sinking line. Last summer, along an ebony dropoff at Fremont Lake, a midday forager vanquished my Size 10 Crayfish, commencing a dogged bottom-hugging head-shaking battle.

To my surprise, the sleek 16-incher in my net displayed a lightly spotted body with a silvery cast. Those shades enhanced its flaring, flaming orange mandibles — and firmly identified it as a Lahontan cutthroat!

They’re tough to target due to their bottom-dwelling habits, but these fast-growing cutthroats obviously find conditions to their liking. Indeed, 1- to 2-pounders are becoming more common.

For still-water nymphing, Davidson suggests a floating line with an 8- to 10-foot 6X fluorocarbon tippet. Tie on two flies. Attach the lower one direct-

Continued on page 52

ly to the eye of the top fly for a more natural presentation.

Spin-anglers can efficiently ply these waters with hardware or bait. Rainbow-patterned Thomas Bouyant, Kastmaster and Phoebe spoons, bronze-hued Vibrax, Panther Martin and Rooster Tail spinners or orange, yellow or brown Bingo Bug plugs worked slow and deep are highly effective. Bank-anglers could soak marshmallow-salmon egg combos, chartreuse, rainbow or glitter PowerBait or twitch night crawlers slowly on the bottom. Douse lures and baits in Liquid Krill, Crave or Nitro scents to get more strikes.

When afternoon winds pick up, I favor a light-action 6- to 7-foot spinning rod and reel loaded with 2- to 4-pound-test line to fling a fly-bubble combo or a yellow or white mini-jig under a bobber.

GOLDEN DAY

A few precarious off-trail lakes near 11,000 feet will increase your heart rate. But they also will yield colorful results. Tower, Anna, Beartrap, Stella and Cora all house the trout family's crown jewel — the kaleidoscopic golden!

These are self-sustaining populations, but due to competition with brook trout, the golden densities remain thin.

Although dry flies are taken, the late-afternoon updrafts commonly deliver a bounty of terrestrials. Trout have learned to seek them out, often along foam lines.

These trout routinely prefer Size 12-14 Foam Ant, Beetle, Bee or Joe's Hopper patterns on a 5X tippet.

Another productive tactic is dead-drifting tiny nymphs under a floating strike indicator. The basic setup is a medium Beadhead Copper John, Serendipity or Prince nymph 4 to 6 feet under a Styrofoam corky held in place with a toothpick.

2. ROADSIDE ATTRACTION

After plummeting sharply over the falls, the Walker serpentine through verdant Leavitt Meadow for two miles, with wily wild trout dwelling along flat slicks, braids and undercut banks. Then, approaching the Leavitt Meadows Campground next to Highway 108, the Walker begins its roadside phase.

Racing past the popular and pro-

WEST WALKER RIVER AREA CONTACTS

• **LODGING:** Walker and Bridgeport both have plenty of lodging and dining. Call the Bridgeport Chamber of Commerce at (760) 932-7500 or visit www.bridgeportcalifornia.com. Also contact the Toiyabe National Forest, Bridgeport Ranger District, at (619) 932-7070 for camping information, wilderness permits and local updates.

• **TACKLE:** Ken's Sporting Goods is the local place for all types of current information, guide services and angling supplies. You can reach them at (760) 932-7707, or check out www.kenssport.com.

• **HORSE-PACKING:** Leavitt Meadows Pack Station provides reliable trail information and pack service. Call (530) 495-2257 or go online to www.leavittmeadows.com.

ductive Pickle Meadows, the river crosses the roadway and proceeds through "the gorge" before meeting Highway 395. There it gathers hefty flows from the Little Walker River as well as smaller Leavitt, Silver, Little Wolf, Poore and Mill creek tributaries. It roars briskly through the arid landscape of the Eastern Sierra, from the Highway 395 bridge downstream for 20 miles to the tiny towns of Walker and Coleville.

The river is shadowed by willow, aspen, cottonwood and pine canopies and is subject to near-constant "hit-and-run" tactics by highway-bound anglers.

The river runs the gamut between flood-plain water, stepladder falls and narrow canyon-style structure.

STOUT STOCKERS

Jim Reid, owner of Ken's Sporting Goods in Bridgeport and a frequent river guide, said that this is one of the most productive sections along the 395 corridor.

"Water and trout are never far from this well-traveled strip of roadway," he said. "Usually planted weekly, it offers a well-used put-and-take fishery." Native and holdover trout are always there too, said Reid — especially in less-pressured areas.

The river gets a lot of planter trout in this section because of the pressure. The Pickle Meadow, Sonora Bridge

and Chris Flat campground areas, plus a plethora of never-ending turnouts, get the bulk of them.

The DFG routinely plants 1 to 1 1/2-pound rainbows as part of an agreement that provides larger trout to area waters. Mono County also purchases supplemental plants of Alpers.

Normally in the 3- to 4-pound range — but with many approaching 8 pounds — these trophy 'bows are not easily duped. Once hooked, they require plenty of skill to land and are always in the back of in-the-know anglers' minds!

Whether you're seeking gullible planters, reclusive Alpers or wily natives on the West Walker, Reid said that basic water-reading skills must come into play.

Try to observe from above. Identify breaks such as seams, pockets, plunge pools or underwater obstacles. Trout will be holding in back eddies near white water, behind exposed boulders and in soft seams below fallen logs.

WADING STRATEGY

Look wherever current-breaking features can allow trout to isolate food without expending their energy in faster water.

Early-season flows can be heavy. Midsummer flows offer a more pleasant option. The turbulent nature of the canyon sections often requires aggressive, albeit careful, wading and stealth. Reid recommends a 5- to 7-weight system with either a floating line or sink-tip line for fishing the variety of heavy water types.

By wading upstream, he utilizes a systematic approach. "Define and target holding water," he said.

"Simply flip the nymph into it, then let the offering hang naturally in the current."

Nymphing with a tandem outfit is one of the most productive methods. Reid's meat-and-potatoes rig is a Humpy or Royal Coachman that serves as an attractor and a Brassie or other nymph swinging freely 15 to 20 inches below. "In deep pocket water," he said, "eliminate the strike indicator and fish with a tight line."

Since planters favor eggs, use kiwi-colored egg patterns such as Glo-Bug or Milking Egg under a pair of split shot, or rapidly strip weighted Marabou Muddlers or Peacock Lady

streamers along the bottom of large pools.

Spin-anglers are also highly successful when exploiting differing structures. A suitable setup for this large-flow type of water is a 6- to 7-foot light-action rod and reel loaded with 4- to 8-pound thin-diameter fluorocarbon line.

Some anglers retrieve yellow, white and brown-shaded in-line spinners through seams and changing flows with an erratic side-to-side action. Others rapidly rake the bottom of deep holes with silvery spoons to nail willing stocker 'bows.

After the sun has left the water, flinging a meaty fly three feet behind a clear bubble sometimes fools a surface trout on an upstream retrieve.

However, Reid hints that the most common and effective method is drifting red salmon eggs through pockets, runs, or riffles just out of the main current, with just enough split shot to let the offering tick bottom.

"Maintaining a slight tension on their line, most veterans systematically drift their bait from the head of a plunge pool on through its shallow tail, then move to the next hole, repeating the routine," he said.

In order to efficiently secure hefty trout in the brawling flows, a quality landing net is often necessary.

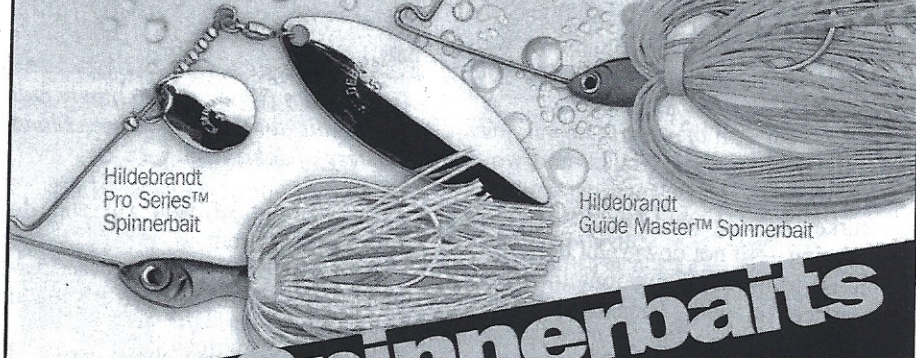
OUR SECRET

When anglers speak of the West Walker, they're not really divulging specific information. They could be referring to a network of tiny headwater creeks, or a rugged boulder-strewn canyon section or a gentle meadow stretch.

The choice is yours. Select and seek the type of water and trout you feel is keyed to your liking. You will most certainly find it here. □

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