

Ebbetts Pass Trout

“A handful of high-elevation waters offer a pleasant variety of trout opportunities located near the car or via easy hikes.”

Don Vachini



Tiny nymphs are often successful on Silver Creek.

Although a designated National Scenic Byway, Highway 4 is not for the inattentive driver, especially as it ascends toward Ebbetts Pass. Indeed, tight hairpin turns, switchbacks, sections of 23-degree gradients, sheer cliffs and steep canyons collaborate to make this one of the less-traveled trans-Sierra roadways. However, despite its treacherous reputation, this narrow strip of macadam dutifully delivers anglers to a variety of creeks and lakes housing five species of trout. While most waters are found near the road's shoulders, a trio require short hikes, while still others are most effectively reached by backpacking.

Bisecting the Mokelumne Wilderness to the north and the Carson-Iceberg Wilderness to the south, Ebbetts Pass sits approximately 40 miles south of Lake Tahoe along the forested Sierra Nevada Crest. Though surveyed by Major John Ebbetts as a site for a trans-Sierra railroad route during the late 1850s, his final assessment revealed the site was unsuitable, due to the ruggedness of the surrounding terrain and heavy snow, which typically plagues the crest well into the spring. This very snowpack, however, provides promising conditions for trout while the harsh landscape helps keep the area somewhat isolated.

Indeed, summit visitors are within a four-mile radius of productive rainbow, brook, brown, cutthroat and golden trout waters. Separate headwater basins originate on either side of Ebbetts' 8,731-foot high point, with those meandering west forming the Mokelumne River system while easterly-cascading waters become part of the vast Carson River drainage.

Highland Lakes

Nestled among a scenic, wildflower-studded meadow and overlooked by spectacular Highland Peak, a pair of lakes sit at the top of the drainage a mere five miles off Highway 4. Lower Highland serves as



Lacing hiking boots and donning a daypack allows one to reach less-pressured lakes.

the feeder for the North Fork Mokelumne River while neighboring Upper Highland drains the opposite direction into Highland Creek, which eventually meanders through Spicer Reservoir and into the Stanislaus River drainage.

Less than a decade ago, both waters were consistent venues for put-and-grow brook trout, the annual infusion of fingerlings ensuring a healthy fishery for the colorful holdover char, which often ranged up to 13 inches. However, when DFG surveys during the late '90s revealed the presence of the Yosemite toad, all plants ceased to avoid ecological conflicts. Despite the cessation of plants, *Salvelinus fontinalis* continues to maintain self-sustaining populations thanks to adequate spawning habitat, sanctuary and abundant nutrients, although fish size has noticeably dropped into the 6-9-inch range. Now, keeping a few for the pan can only help improve the stunting problem.

While using a canoe to troll tiny, in-line Rooster Tail, Vibrax or Panther Martin spinners or a flasher/crawler combination down the deeper, middle sections of either lake during the day will occasionally pay dividends, I find both perfect for a 2-weight fly system in the evenings when winds die down and trout feed in rain-like dimples in the twilight's last gleaming.

Mokelumne River (NF)

Gushing from 8,884-foot Lower Highland Lake, the North Fork courses high alpine terrain over a moderate gradient as it collects additional runoff from springs and snowmelt. Carrying the reputation of an excellent early season fishery in its headwater sections, this Stanislaus National Forest river more resembles a creek as it averages between 10-20 feet wide while sustaining high numbers of pan-sized, native brook and rainbow trout per mile. In

addition, the DFG infuses large numbers of catchable 'bows near roadside turnouts and campgrounds throughout the season.

As in working any-sized river or creek, I attempt to read the water first, looking for trout holding in backwater eddies near white water, behind boulders and in soft seams below fallen logs. With an ultra-light spinning rod and reel loaded with 4- to 6-pound monofilament as ideal tools, the plentiful 12- to 14-inch planters are easily fooled retrieving silvery spinners through pools or dredging salmon eggs through small pockets, runs or seams.

The brookies are more-commonly found in the less-pressured, brushy areas where early summer anglers often fool them by bouncing worms along the bottom. With much of the stream shielded by brushy willows, my favorite tactic is challenging them with a matching 4-weight outfit. Carefully stalking to stream's edge, I daintily dap a size-16 attractor or emerger pattern over the top of streamside brush, then watch attentively as gaudy, 5- to 9-inch residents ravenously envelop the fly with authority, especially during early or late-day shadows.

Kinney Reservoir

Formed by a dam on Kinney Creek and guarded by chocolate-hued Ebbetts Peak, this 33-acre reservoir sits a few hundred feet below the east side of the pass, adjacent to a popular turnout. Although a puppet to water drawdowns later in the season, Kinney Reservoir is not only planted regularly by the DFG but supplemented generously as part of a special enhancement agreement with Alpine County. For this reason, the 8,353-foot-elevation water is usually a solid bet for 11- to 14-inch rainbows, although some 1- to 2-pound holdovers are commonly taken, usually early in the season.

Since springtime trout are normally found near the surface on this small water, car-toppers trolling nightcrawler-tipped lures behind a dodger is both a common and productive tactic.

Patient shore anglers prefer the deeper dam section where trout usually concentrate, drifting an array of natural and putty baits, twitching mini-jigs under a bobber or plying a fly/bubble set-up. Those possessing a two-rod stamp can soak bait while fan-casting lures from the bank. Fish-attracting scents applied to bait or hardware sends out an effective scent trail which helps entice hungry planters.

Short-Hike Lakes

I often prefer to don a daypack, lace up my boots and use bipedal locomotion to



The Highland lakes contain a healthy, self-sustaining population of brookies in the six-to nine-inch range.

seek less-visited bodies of water in search of native trout. Upper and Lower Kinney, a pair of naturally occurring lakes which form the headwaters of Silver Creek, are reached by an easy one-mile hike from Kinney Reservoir.

While visiting on a recent July afternoon, the sky turned ebony and thunder rumbled among nearby peaks as I continued stripping my orange Woolly Bugger tantalizingly along the bottom. Of the four silvery specimens released before the storm drove me to cover, all possessed well-defined torsos, sparse black spots and flaming orange slash marks, with two notable backcountry specimens measuring between 12 and 13 inches!

As part of the federal Lahontan Cutthroat Recovery Plan, designed to re-introduce this subspecies back into its historic range, sub-catchable specimens are planted in these and a few other backcountry lakes where they thrive. Benefiting from excellent productivity and adequate spawning habitat, self-sustaining populations of this fast-growing, long-living cutthroat range between pan-size to 14 inches on these 15-acre lakes.

Although both lakes' shorelines offer productive fishing, I have pinpointed several deeper coves with steep dropoffs and deep channels that appear to be favored haunts for the Lahontans, which tend to be deep dwellers. A float tube comes in very handy to access offshore structure. For best results, allow the offering to sink near bottom, then use fins to propel slow retrieves while moving along the finger channels. I prefer a 4-weight fly rod matched with a 5-weight sinking line and 6 feet of 3X

fluorocarbon leader. Overloading the rod makes casting easier and strip retrieving the sinking line is the perfect way to present Leeches or Woolly Buggers.

Guarded Lakes

The Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) crosses Highway 4 near Ebbetts Pass, providing a well-maintained pathway toward a few north/south options of varying distances. Raymond and Nobel lakes are strictly backpack-to waters, requiring a more demanding trudge to trout. Establishing a nearby base camp allows their residents to be effectively tempted during first and last light.

Reached by traveling four miles south from the pass, Nobel sits at the head of a wide canyon adjacent to the PCT and contains brook and cutthroat.

After a five-mile march northward along the PCT, then ascending a steep, poorly-marked spur trail tucked against 10,000-foot Raymond Peak, rockbound Raymond houses thin densities of self-sustaining golden trout up to 10 inches. Although the trip is long and undulates through several canyons, I feel the kaleidoscopic jewel is enough reward for the strenuous trek to reach it.

A fly/bubble allows for lengthy casts in this oft-windy lake with the outlet area or the submerged talus field providing the best bets for prospecting gold.

Silver Creek

On its nine-mile journey alongside Highway 4, Silver Creek stepladders briskly through thick willows and overhanging pine-forest canopy before joining the

East Carson River. To augment its native rainbows and browns, this Toiyabe National Forest water is liberally stocked by both the DFG and Alpine County, especially at Silver Creek Camp and anywhere it flows under bridges.

Scarcely 10 feet wide with very few large pools in the upper sections, this healthy tributary makes for some aesthetic challenges. I usually end up wading through secluded portions within sight of the road, often honing my small-stream skills by attempting to keep out of the trout's window while poking bait or flies into tight quarters.

Further down the canyon where the gradient decreases, some larger pools provide occasional surprises for unsuspecting anglers, as friend Terry Donahoe found out a few seasons back. Retrieving a small, brown Rooster Tail across a shaded tailout, he instinctively set the hook on what he expected to be a nimble 10-incher. Instead, he was fast to a burly behemoth more than twice that size! However, before I could assist with the net, the broodstock Lahontan cutthroat haughtily rolled in the shallows, broke free and finned to safety.

Shortly after spawning, surplus broodstock from nearby Heenan Lake are commonly scattered throughout local waters. Certainly, battling a 20-inch behemoth on this tiny water can prove to be an adrenaline-inducing challenge.

Best approached with a non-consumptive mindset, incoming rivulets such as Nobel, Kinney, Eagle, Raymond Meadows and Pennsylvania creeks often necessitate accurate casts and creative presentations from fetal positions for a chance at wily, scaled-down trout.

Appropriate Tackle & Tactics

All Ebbetts stillwaters are best fished with a floating craft, especially where shore access is limited or difficult. A long fly rod comes in handy to lift line off the water when dealing with wind, while a floating line and a full-sinking #3 fly line will handle most lake situations. Leaders should be 9 to 12 feet long with thin-diameter fluorocarbon tippets.

Insects in this locale are standard Sierra issue. Meat-and-potato imitations should replicate size-12-18 caddis, damsel, mosquitoes and mayflies. While subsurface choices include black, chartreuse and olive Woolly Buggers, purple or black Leeches, red Copper Johns, Flashback Pheasant Tails, Prince Nymphs, Sparkle Pupas, Bird's Nests and olive Scuds. Highly successful surface patterns include Parachute Adams'

Elk Hair Caddis, Rubber Legs, Flying Ants, Callibaetis Mayflies and Blue Damsels, plus terrestrials Boatmans, Foam Beetles and Joe's Hoppers.

When fish are actively collecting groceries at or just below the surface, rig a large attractor fly in tandem with a trailing nymph three to four feet underneath. Basically just heave it and leave it, twitching every so often. Ninety percent of the time, the nymph will be taken.

When surface activity disappears, a pair of float-tube techniques often increase chances of success. Cast a subsurface offering toward shore and begin retrieving in a strip-pause sequence. If fish don't hit right away, be creative, varying fly speed, length of strip and duration of the pause until trout reveal their preference.

The second tip involves taking a position 20 feet from shore and kicking parallel to land, keeping the line pinched tightly against the cork grip and rod tip under water. Vary speed and course while float-tube trolling.

Visitors to the Ebbetts Pass high country will experience a landscape dominated by volcanic peaks, native wildflowers and magnificent canyon views. In addition, anglers will find each cascading stream or pristine alpine lake to be both distinct in character and angling approach—and a worthy destination!

If You Go

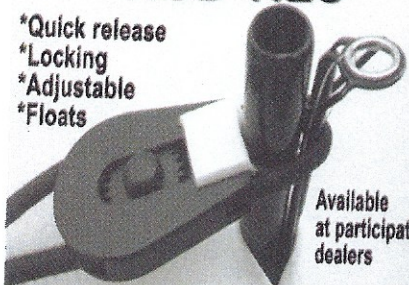
Forest Service campgrounds are adjacent to the Mokelumne River and along Silver Creek. Nearest west slope services are available in Arnold (Calaveras County Visitors Bureau (209) 736-0049; www.gocalaveras.travel).

On the east side near Markleeville, Woodfords Inn (530) 694-2410; www.woodfordsinn.net and Coleville's Meadowcliff Resort (530) 495-2255; www.meadowcliff.com offer fisherman-friendly amenities and rates.

Meadowcliff's Tim Fesco provides timely angling information. Permits are required for overnight stays in either the Mokelumne or Carson-Iceberg wildernesses. Contact Stanislaus National Forest headquarters (209) 532-3671; www.fs.fed.us/r5/stanislaus/visitor/mokelumne.shtml.

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