

The Real McCoy

by Don Vachini

McCoy Flat Reservoir locals don't want you to read this story. Fishing here for 4- to 5-pound brook trout and rainbows is that good. But now the secret's out!

Anglers love finding less-famous waters that produce great fisheries. Indeed, McCoy Flat Reservoir is one of those well-kept secrets that no one likes to mention for fear of letting the cat out of the bag.

Formed by a dam on the Susan River, which heads on the eastern slope of volcanic Mount Lassen, McCoy Flat is tucked in the northeastern corner of Lassen National Forest at 5,500 feet above sea level. Surrounded by pine forest and covering a whopping 1,800 acres at maximum pool, this impoundment harbors some impressive trout in the 3- to 5-pound class. No wonder tight-lipped locals do their best to point visitors toward Eagle Lake 15 miles to the north!

THE QUARRY

In early spring, the California Department of Fish and Game usually stocks 3,800 1/2- to 1-pound brook trout and 1,800 1/2-pound Eagle Lake-strain rainbows in the lake. Well-adapted to the alkaline conditions of the high-desert sage country, the Eagle Lake 'bows are a hardy strain, and their pugilistic qualities are second to none.

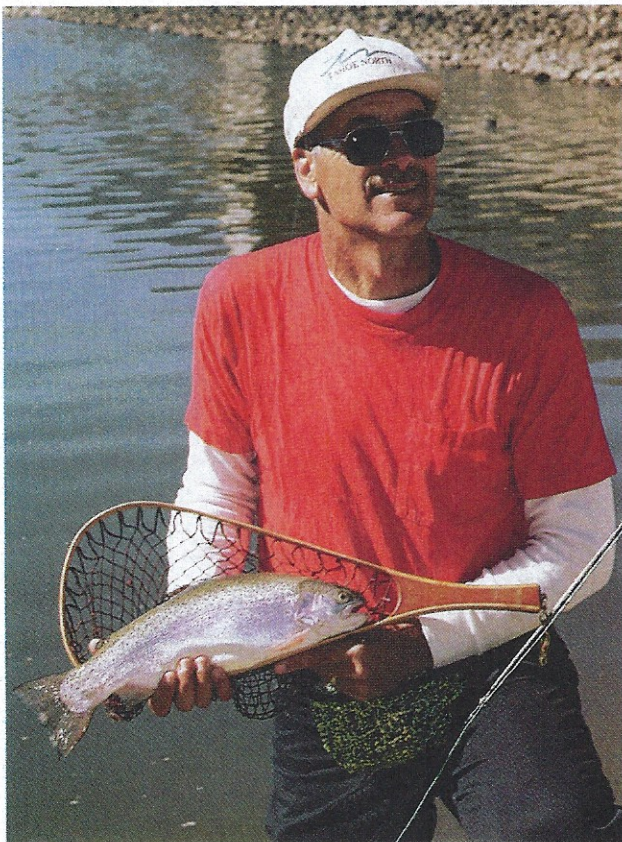
"Both species thrive, attaining hefty proportions despite water fluctuations," said DFG fisheries biologist Paul Chappell.

WHY SO BIG?

To say that McCoy possesses an incredible nutrient-rich environment is a huge understatement. Since the lake is only 8 to 12 feet deep, sunlight penetrates throughout, accounting for prolific aquatic growth.

Leeches, snails and freshwater shrimp exist in abundance, and damselfly, chironomid and *Callibaetis* mayflies are the prevalent insects. The thick stands of timber encircling the reservoir also add terrestrials, like flying ants, carpenter ants, flying termites and grasshoppers.

Worms inhabit the moist soil as waters recede. In spring when the lake levels rise rapidly,



Author Don Vachini nailed this plump 4-pounder while stripping a streamer along the McCoy Flat Reservoir dam. Photo courtesy of Don Vachini.

flooding areas loaded with the annelids, trout opportunistically gorge on them.

This bountiful biomass equates to a phenomenal growth pattern among surviving trout.

"During the height of their growing season, residents average an incredible 2 inches per month from spring through fall!" said Chappell.

THE FACTORY

As a product of the Honey Lake Irrigation District, the reservoir is shackled by pre-1914 water agreements. Drastic drawdowns are an annual occurrence. During extremely dry years or periods of heavy drought, agricultural needs often reduce the reservoir to a big muddy puddle by summer's end. Suffering from low oxygen content, warm-water temperatures, predators and — later — wintertkill, many, if not all, fish perish.

But whenever McCoy's stores are depleted, Chappell is amazed at its propensity for rejuvenation. As spring flows satisfy water dependency, nutrient loading begins, and the DFG resumes planting. The fishery rises from the ashes like the legendary Phoenix.

Though the reservoir is managed as a put-and-take fishery, the hearty carry-over trout with their prodigious growth tendencies provide plenty of trophy opportunities.

"If two heavy winters occur in a row, the surviving fish regularly reach 16 to 18 inches and 2 to 3 pounds," said Chappell. "If the reservoir is allowed to hold significant water for three years, holdovers will achieve 19 to 24 inches and approach an incredible 4 to 5 pounds!"

HOW TO FIND 'EM

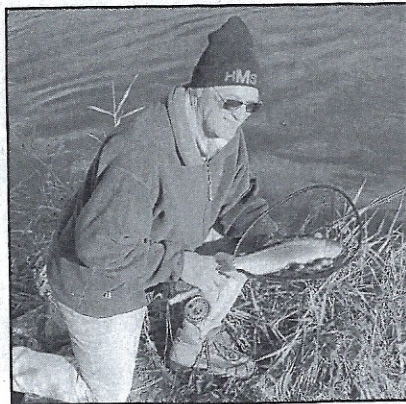
With trout scattered so widely, it's wise to break this expansive, albeit shallow still water down into manageable components, then decode areas with greater fish potential.

While the dam and nearby finger coves in the lower third of the lake can be worked effectively from shore, the submerged river channel and inlet are best plied from a floating craft.

Although fall feeding frenzies do occur, April and May are historically the best time to pursue red-hot surface action.

SPIN TACTICS

Shore techniques pretty much



McCoy Flat Reservoir occasionally produces a good fall bite. But April and May are the best months to target brookies and 'bows at this lake near Susanville. Photo courtesy of Don Vachini.

involve casting bait and exhibiting patience, or else trying to intercept a cruising trout with a variety of lures. A 6- to 7-foot ultralight to light-action spinning rod and reel equipped with a smooth drag and loaded with thin-diameter 6- to 8-pound fluorocarbon line is perfect for battling 3- to 5-pound trout.

Probably the most consistent taker of trout is a night crawler impaled on a size 8 hook and floated three to four feet under a clear bubble or fluorescent pencil bobber.

I remember walking along the dam in 2006, and seeing a trio of cruising trout. Instinctively I heaved my 'crawler 30 feet ahead of them. Before it settled, my bobber went upright, then disappeared, leading to an invigorating give-and-take tussle. However, upon coaxing the sleek 23-inch rainbow into the shallows, I found it too long for my net.

Instead, I used the wooden frame to unceremoniously flip the 4-pounder onto shore!

Another favorite tactic involves the use of a 1/32-ounce, yellow or white micro-jig or 2- to 3-inch white, black, brown or chartreuse-shaded curlytail grub fixed three feet under a clear bobber. Create a gentle twitch every 30 seconds or so, and remain focused on the bobber. Also, when winds put a chop on the surface, waves grab the bobber, producing a lifelike action to the jig or grub beneath. Many times that will prompt a healthy strike.

FLY TECHNIQUES

Fly-tossers are best served with a matching 5- to 8-weight fly system with floating, intermediate and sink-tip lines. When you consider trout growth rates and sizes, 3X or 4X fluorocarbon tippets are best to handle big trout. Shoreline timber makes casting difficult in many areas, but open areas can be located.

Early in the day, before afternoon winds gust, the lake's surface is usually smooth as glass and the water very clear — a perfect time to search for quarry with Polaroid glasses. Stripping streamers near visible fish will often reward you. But when fog-like evening hatches take place, size 10 to 14 Foam Ants, Caddis Emerger and Elk Hair Caddis become the most feasible choices.

These fish normally prefer large mouthfuls, so a tandem rig trailing a size 10 to 12 Beadhead Hare's Ear, Copper John, Tiger Midge or Scud pattern two to three feet behind a dry, size 8 to 10 Rubberleg, Chernobyl Ant or Blue Foam Damsel can also be very productive.

During spring, big rainbows tend to concentrate where the Susan River enters. These fish will attempt to spawn in the channel. As they clear nests in the gravelly substrate, cruise in pairs and tangle competitively to defend their territory, they are often agitated into striking an Egg-Sucking Leech, Milky Egg or Glo Bug in red, flaming orange and kiwi shades, as well as red San Juan Worms drifted or stripped through the moving water.

FLOATING CRAFT

Floating anglers have the distinct advantage of covering more productive territory and better positioning while presenting from shore to deeper water

IF YOU GO

McCoy Flat is open all year, with five-fish daily limit and no gear restrictions. However, no baitfish, live or dead, may be used.

Supplies and lodging are available in Susanville. When planning a trip be sure to check ahead to inquire about water levels and conditions. For angling, camping or lodging information, ask the Lassen National Forest Headquarters at (530) 257-2151, or www.fs.fed.us/r5/lassen/recreation/fishing/reservoirs. □