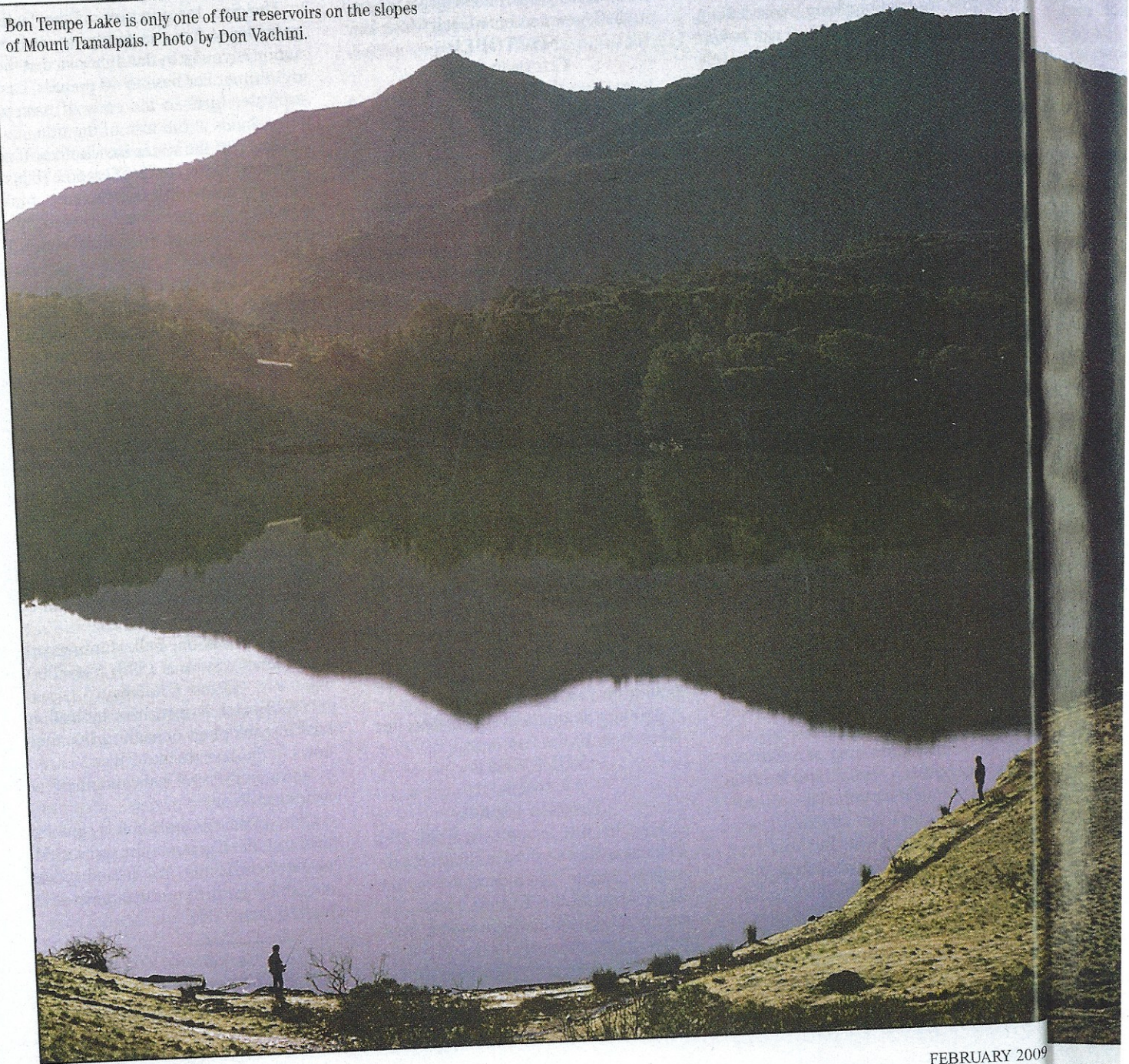


MOUNT TAM

Four reservoirs dot this Marin County mountain, supplying quality trout fishing near big cities.

by **Don Vachini**

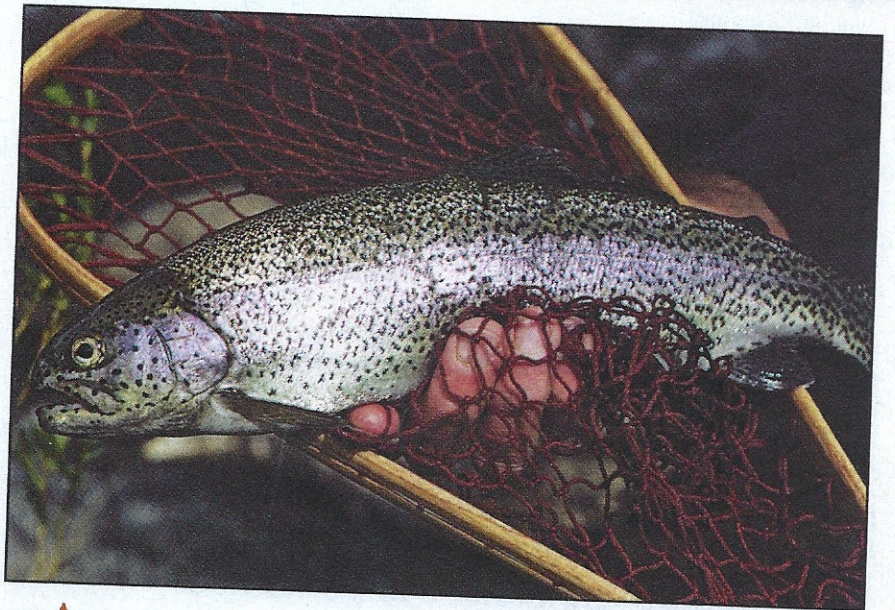
Bon Tempe Lake is only one of four reservoirs on the slopes of Mount Tamalpais. Photo by Don Vachini.



Right: At
within yo

TROUT

Right: At Mount Tam, beautiful rainbows are within your grasp. Photo by Don Vachini.



A low-hanging mist hid Bon Tempe Reservoir's heavily forested hillside. My ultra-light rod jiggled under the strain of a feisty trout. A kingfisher's call broke the morning silence as I slid my second 13-inch rainbow of the day onto shore. This lake looks like some faraway wilderness, but it's only minutes from the bustling cities of Marin County.

MOUNT TAM

At 2,200 feet, the hulking prominence of Mount Tamalpais is the tallest peak in Marin County. Its slopes serve as collecting arterioles for a chain of stepladder reservoirs.

This thickly forested mountain garners up to three times the average rainfall of nearby locations. That rainfall plus runoff from underground springs feed four impoundments that hold trout all year long.

There's a pair of stocked put-and-take fisheries, a third governed by special regulations, while the fourth is a secluded giant that challenges both your physical and angling skills.

The Marin Municipal Water District oversees 26,000 acres of the Mount Tamalpais watershed. Years ago, the district gained control of much of the land

and constructed dams on many of the creek's upper courses as part of an intricate water-catching system. Now, man-made Phoenix, Lagunitas, Bon Tempe, Alpine and Kent lakes are nestled between the densely populated towns of Ross, San Anselmo and Fairfax.

Originally carved out for district travel and firefighting, more than 150 miles of dirt roads and trails link these waters. The network of roads is not open to motor vehicles, but hiking and bicycling are allowed.

The district is managed for water supplies first and foremost, and so it doesn't allow contact with the water.

At all lakes, fishermen are limited to the shoreline.

CITY-SLICHER TROUT

Bill Cox, a California Department of Fish and Game biologist, works with the district and the Lake Lagunitas Watershed Enhancement Program to manage the lakes' fisheries.

Over a decade ago, attempts were abandoned to establish self-sustaining populations of various strains of rainbow trout at Lagunitas, Alpine and Kent lakes. Nevertheless, Cox maintains that at four of those five lakes, trout angling continues to flourish. *(Continued)*

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Currently, anglers are kept satisfied with increased numbers of "generic rainbow" plants in Lagunitas, Bon Tempe and Phoenix.

"Probably the biggest change from past years has been the overall size of the planted fish," said Cox. "Now shipments consist primarily of trout ranging from 12 to 16 inches and weighing over half a pound."

The state puts more than 40,000 fingerlings in Alpine annually. It's a put-and-take lake.

At Kent Lake, thin densities of trout are maintained by natural propagation. No plants occur here, lest any introduced trout wash over the dam and disrupt the genetic integrity of native steelhead in the creek below.

PHOENIX LAKE

Formed by an earthen dam on Ben Williams Gulch, 22-acre Phoenix is just a five-minute walk from Natalie Coffin Greene Park in the city of Ross. It's not part of the Lagunitas Creek system, but this popular lake is very appealing to locals who relish a serene wooded setting — plus the potential to catch a trout or two for dinner.

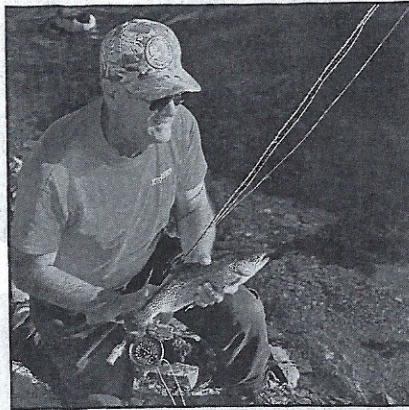
The best fishing comes a few days after the stocking truck drops its load. Trout are caught rather easily, though success rates drop off significantly as the supplies dwindle.

PowerBaits in chartreuse, rainbow or orange glitter are extremely effective, especially when doused with Pautzke's Liquid Krill scent. Since planters can often be fickle regarding their color choices, two-rod stamp holders should offer differing shades on separate rigs.

The most productive areas are along the face of the dam and along the steep wooded southern shoreline where water is pumped up from Alpine Lake.

Most anglers are content to simply sit down and soak bait along the face of the dam, but I have achieved some of my best results along the Ben Williams Gulch inlet.

After rainstorms swell this narrow channel, a fair number of the planters congregate in its murky, moving water. Tempting these schoolers with noisy Vibrax or Rooster Tail spinners, I've also had marked success by bouncing



Can't detect a hatch? Go with a size 10 Woolly Bugger and a size 12 Prince Nymph dropper. Photo by Don Vachini.

red salmon eggs along the bottom of the slow-moving current.

Tie a light dropper weight on the end of your line. Attach a pair of hooks 2 and 3 feet above and maintain light tension while "walking" the offering through the drift.

LAGUNITAS LAKE

An 1873 dam at the confluence of the East, Middle and West forks of Lagunitas Creek created the oldest of the five district lakes.

This 23-acre jewel is managed to provide an urban trophy-trout water with special regulations. Only artificial lures or flies with barbless hooks are permitted. No bait is allowed, and all trout over 14 inches must be released. A two-fish limit is in effect.

In order to maintain a quality experience and ensure a high level of trophy fish, during a three-month window the DFG infuses nearly 6,000 rainbows. Most of them fall into the 13- to 15-inch, 1- to 2-pound range.

In addition, more than 10,000 fingerlings are distributed during winter's optimal water conditions.

An aerator installed during the early 1990s helps ensure there's a high survival ratio. And its anti-stratifying feature keeps fish scattered, according to Joe Hargraves of Western Sport Shop in San Rafael.

Fly-Fishing

A local fishing guru, Hargraves enjoys the fly-fishing challenge that this woody headwater lake presents.

"Since the *Callibaetis* mayfly is the most prevalent insect in the drainage, imitations of their life stages can be very productive," he said. "On the days when

they are visible, size 14-18 Adams, Elk Hair Caddis, Thorax Callibaetis and Olive Comparadun are great surface choices."

However, if hatches are not happening, Hargraves favors indicator fishing with a two-nymph rig.

He's had success with a Size 10 Woolly Bugger matched with a size 12-16 Prince Nymph as a dropper.

Other noteworthy subsurface patterns include size 12-16 Flashback Pheasant Tail, Zug Bug, Beadhead Copper John and Bird's Nest in olive to black shades, plus size 8-10 purple, black and brown-shaded Leech and Woolly Bugger, he said.

Spinning Gear

For spin-anglers, a 6-foot ultra-light rod and reel loaded with 4- to 6-pound mono is a very sporting setup to present an array of spinners, spoons and plugs.

Black and orange-spotted Panther Martin, brown Rooster Tail and bronze Mepps spinners, Kastmaster and Phoebe spoons along with yellow and green Bingo Bug plugs all take their share of trout.

Although a fly-and-bubble setup can yield dividends early and late in the day, a white or yellow micro jig under a bobber is equally effective.

Hotspots

Some of the most productive locales include the holes gouged out at each inlet stream, the sharp dropoffs around their submerged creekbeds and any mild points of land jutting into the lake. The dam area is also a popular holding area for cruisers, especially for a day or two after a shipment of trout has been delivered.

BON TEMPE RESERVOIR

From a nearby parking lot, it's easy to get to this 144-acre impoundment, located about 100 yards downstream from Lagunitas' spillway.

An excellent trail system circles the lake, and there is a handicapped ramp at the entrance road.

Given its large amount of trout planted, Bon Tempe has the most consistent fishing for those who want to keep a five-trout limit for dinner.

You can catch rainbows from just about any point of land that juts into deeper water. But by far the most productive areas are along the face of the dam and along the steep wooded south

ern shoreline where water is pumped up from Alpine Lake.

This well-oxygenated spot, which bubbles quite visibly on the surface, is popular with both anglers and trout.

A light-action rod and reel loaded with thin-diameter 8-pound fluorocarbon line allows leverage for the long casts needed. A broad spectrum of PowerBaits have proven deadly on the hefty planters, but survivors tend to become a bit more selective.

Worms, inflated night crawlers or a combo bait of marshmallow and a red salmon egg rigged on a sliding sinker and suspended three to four feet off bottom, often provide a necessary change of pace.

"Jigging" putty baits sometimes helps capture a trout's attention. After casting, let your offering settle. Take up slack in the line, rapidly reel in two or three cranks, then let it settle again. The floating bait will be pulled rapidly toward the bottom, then slowly rise again. Stay alert, because a take can occur within seconds after the bait has re-settled.

Another tactic involves the use of two rods. Use one rod to present bait and the other to rapidly fan-cast a spoon or spinner in the near proximity of the bait. Douse both lure and bait liberally in scent. At times, the scent trail from the lure attracts trout to the area and triggers a strike on either the lure or bait.

Trailing a worm behind a Kastmaster is a little-used ploy that sometimes stirs action.

ALPINE LAKE

The spillway from Bon Tempe empties directly into this next impoundment. But Alpine's physical structure differs greatly from the two reservoirs above it. A concrete arch dam poured in 1918 backs up water that once flowed through a deep narrow canyon, forming this 219-acre body of water that's 3 1/2 miles long.

According to Cox, this is not the lake to try for a limit. With minimal recruitment, populations are sustained largely by annual plants of fingerlings. These juveniles tend to disperse into the vast unpressured areas, taking advantage of the lake's thermocline to locate adequate food forms while — theoretically — living in isolation.

"Surviving trout typically achieve between 4 and 6 inches of growth per

TREK TO TAMALPAIS

PHOENIX LAKE

Take Highway 101 from San Rafael and turn onto the Sir Francis Drake Boulevard exit.

Go west for 2.7 miles to Ross. Turn left onto Lagunitas Road and travel for 1.1 miles to the park at the end of the road.

BON TEMPE AND LAGUNITAS

Follow Sir Francis Drake Boulevard to Fairfax. Turn left on Pacheco, and then make an immediate right onto Broadway. Travel 0.1 mile to enter Bolinas Road. After 1.5 miles, make a left at the sign to Bon Tempe/Lagunitas lakes.

The Sky Oaks Entrance Station (415-945-1180) is open dawn to dusk. There is a \$7 per day car-entry fee. A seasonal pass is available for \$50 — \$25 for seniors.

ALPINE

From Fairfax, travel 7.7 miles on Bolinas Road to Alpine Dam.

Stop at Western Sport Shop (415-456-5454; www.westernsportshop.com) for the latest reports.

The water district Web site is www.mmwd.org. It has watershed and recreation updates.

year and are referred to as natives," said Cox. "While not a lot of trout are caught from here, specimens reaching 3 to 4 years of age will achieve weights between 2 and 4 pounds or more, in some instances."

Loner Trout

Alpine trout tend to be loners, so locating them can be both mentally and physically challenging. For those willing to hike, a footpath follows the southern bank from the dam all the way to Bon Tempe's spillway. But a thick canopy of oak, redwood trees, bay laurel, ferns, mosses and poison oak along the shoreline makes it difficult to find suitable casting room.

"Simply put," said Cox, "anglers just can't reach the majority of its trout."

Turnover keeps the winter trout within five feet of the surface. But Hargraves hints that larger natives can often be found in the proximity of moving water. It's a hike to get there, but this makes the vibrant, incoming runoff from Swede George and Van Wyck creeks reasonable targets.

"Mature trout commonly hang out near the mouths of these and other trib-

utaries, either intent on spawning or gathering food," said the expert from San Rafael.

One day after a sizeable rainstorm, I parked at the dam to find swollen Cataract Creek pouring briskly into the lake. After I meticulously stripped fly line parallel to the steep channel, something heavy stopped my chartreuse Conehead Woolly Bugger.

A dogged battle began. The nearly 4-pounder proved to be the biggest I've landed at Alpine yet.

Tackle

To fish this lake efficiently, Hargraves suggests locating and exploiting the littoral zone.

Half of a crawler attached to a lure can sometimes pique the interest of a patrolling native. But when you're pursuing the extremely elusive bigger fish, the reliable night crawler seems to produce the best magic, especially in the hard-to-reach secluded coves or their points.

"Some anglers inflate the crawler to keep it just off the bottom," said Hargraves. "Others drape it 3 to 4 feet under a clear-plastic bubble and let it drift."

Use scent liberally. Retrieve erratically. Lures like tiny Little Cleo and Krocodile spoons, Rapala and Rebel plugs or Gulp! swimbaits over transition structure are also effective.

The lake has good numbers of crayfish. In-the-know anglers often capture them for bait. Peel the shell off a crustacean's tail section, impale the white meat onto a No. 6 or 8 baitholder hook, cast the offering into the lake without weight and let it settle. Since this is a food source that occurs naturally, cruising trout will typically mouth the free-drifting bait before ingesting it. Open your bail to prevent detection. □

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