



A mini-jig under a bobber fooled this sleek char.

California's Top 5 Brook Trout Waters

“A quintet of productive stillwaters contain specimens ranging up to—and over—5 pounds!”

Don Vachini

My heart pounded like a cannon while I admired the 4-pound, 2-ounce specimen overflowing my net. Adrenaline continued to surge as I realized that my biggest-ever brook trout had just claimed the Unlimited tippet class world record with the National Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame (HOF)!

The Right Stuff

Very impressive indeed since most brookies caught in the Golden State will be less than 10 inches, the product of short growing seasons, small food forms and prolific spawning habits. However, in a quintet of exceptional high-elevation Sierra Nevada lakes vectored between Mt. Lassen south to Bishop and nestled between 5,000-11,000', this species has managed to overcome the harsh surrounding escarpment for some startling results. Although Red, Poore, Kirman and Marie lakes plus McCoy Flat Reservoir residents are not as big as the apex predators of Labrador and parts of northern Canada, they enjoy a lucrative,

well-endowed aquatic buffet and commonly fall between 14-16 inches, while averaging over a pound. In addition, many display massive girth, broad shoulders and weights between 2-5 pounds, approaching the likes of their legendary Canadian cousins!

True to form, four of these stillwaters have yielded over a dozen line or tippet class world records to my four children and me during the past decade and a half.

Red Lake

Tucked at the 8,200' elevation just below Carson Pass, this lake is located adjacent to Highway 88 and accurately nicknamed “brook trout central.”

While the DFG stocks the 85-acre lake with 7,500 half-pound brookies per year, it receives additional bonus plants, often ranging from 3/4 to 2 pounds, from a private concessionaire. Courtesy of a 1968 agreement between Alpine County and the South Tahoe Public Utility District, supplementary financing is provided to enhance the county's fishery. Taking full advantage

of bountiful nutritional conditions, hold-overs grow rapidly, commonly attaining over a half pound per year.

No motorized boats are allowed but float tubers or cartoppers can easily explore the deeper, mid-lake creek channel. Although its crescent-shaped dam provides excellent shoreline opportunities and the recently-infused trout tend to cruise in wide circles here, I prefer to hike to the heavily-timbered inlet end of the lake where three tiny, un-named streams contribute flows. Here, access is somewhat restricted by a dense willow canopy and a marshy delta, but son, Jason, and I have tapped this less-pressured section for several quality specimens, including a pair of humpbacked 17-inchers which established HOF line-class records for each of us.

Bank anglers can either opt to soak inflated nightcrawlers or chartreuse, rainbow or orange Crave, Nitro or Power Bait just off the bottom or fan-cast shiny Rooster Tail or Panther Martin spinners or silver/blue Kastmaster, Little Cleo or Humdinger

spoons in the often-cloudy waters. Tubers or rowers "wind-trolling" a flasher/crawler combination or a glittery streamer fly along the fringes of the creek channel can also experience solid results.

Poore Lake

Nestled between a thickly-forested granitic batholith and high-desert sage, 7,400' elevation Poore Lake is reached by a moderate-to-steep 3 1/2-mile hike from the Leavitt Meadows Trailhead off Highway 108.

Gaining a well-earned reputation for gargantuan squaretails up to 4 pounds, the put-and-grow char air-planted annually into this expansive, 120-acre Toiyabe National Forest impoundment dine heavily on a huge population of Lahontan redbreasted suckers and abundant crayfish.

While redbreasted-replicating Fire Tiger Rapala, brown Flatfish plugs or rainbow-finish Gulp swimbaits and brassy Thomas Bouyant, shad-patterned Needlefish or Z-Ray spoons maneuvered slowly across structure early and late in the day are reliable choices, my most productive offering by far has been a size 8-10 brown, orange or cinnamon beadhead Crawdad pattern allowed to settle on the bottom. A slow, inching retrieve likely imitates the crawling motion of a crayfish.

Wide but shallow in its upper reaches, Poore's most productive area is the lower third of the lake which narrows and approaches depths of 80 feet near the dam. Here, wily specks dwell deep, corner baitfish concentrations and grow to prodigious sizes. Sons, Jason, Matt, and I routinely prospect this section for pudgy *Salvelinus fontinalis*, claiming 3 HOF line-class records during the late '90s.

However, my biggest thrill was yet to come in the new millennium. Along a sharply-sloping dropoff, I spotted a large school of redbreasted hugging the bank as they swam and stopped to observe. Suddenly, a huge form emerged from the ebony depths and, as it closed the distance, I instinctively flicked a white Woolly Bugger among the scattering baitfish mass. Unbelievably, the 4-pound, 2-ounce biggie finned directly toward my offering—and into the record book!

Kirman Lake

Reached by an easy 3-mile hike from Highway 108, Kirman is a natural, 70-acre body of water sitting in a bowl-like depression surrounded by open, sage-covered hills.

Located 17 miles north of Bridgeport, this 7,000' elevation water governed by barbless hooks, a 17-inch minimum size and 2-fish limit regulations, separates the men from the boys.

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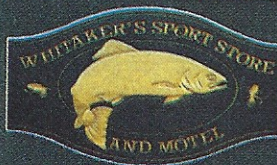
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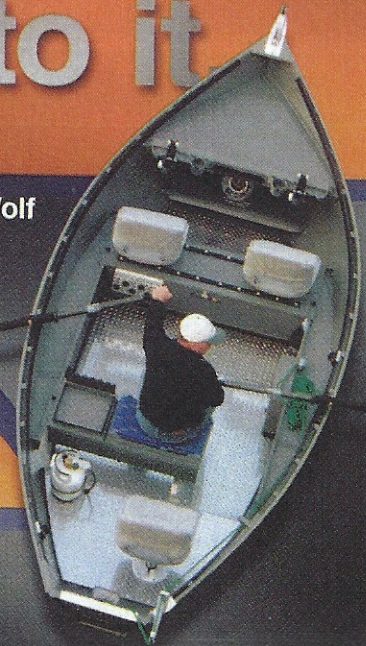
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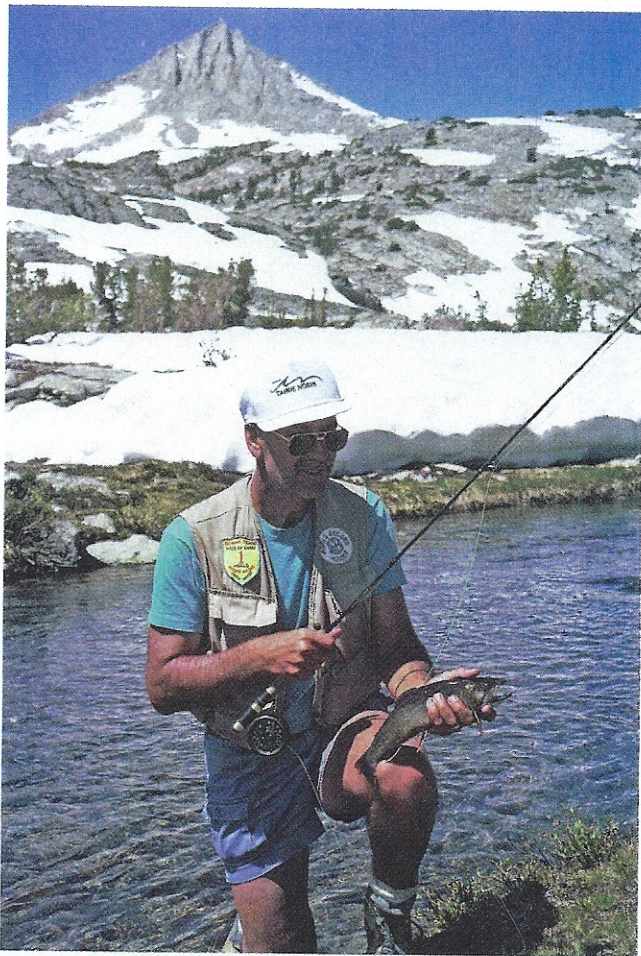
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Nicknamed "footballs" or "bon-bon trout," most residents average 14-16 inches but range between 3-6 pounds with incredible girths, often proportional to their length. While Kirman's brookies tend to max out between 16-18 inches and 4-5 pounds, 6-pounders are relatively common with specimens over 7 not unheard of!

An amazingly dense freshwater shrimp population, estimated at between 200-500 per square foot in some instances, accounts for this prodigious growth pattern. Nonchalantly swimming open-mouthed through thick concentrations of the high-caloric crustacean, these fish feed both

The author admires an ice-out brookie overlooked by Mt. Hooper.

effortlessly and gluttonously.

Despite their eating habits, these portly char can be exasperatingly challenging to entice. Float tubers hold a distinct advantage as they can efficiently work the productive outer edge of the reed growth, which is out of reach from shore. Many patiently pay their dues, drifting weighted size 8-10 Scud, Chironomid and Serendipity patterns in orange, green and olive shades for long periods without action.

Since the shrimp are photophobic, presenting imitations from a light to dark area is a tedious operation usually requiring a high-density sinking line to quickly lower the nymph to around 10 or 20 feet. From there, it should be raised, then lowered ever so slowly. While utilizing a sink-and-draw technique is a productive tactic, submerging the rod tip just under the surface and pointing it at the fly not only detects soft strikes but aids in a more efficient hook-set.

A common Kirman fallacy is attempting to "match the hatch" with scud imitations. Over the years, I have found that offering something different or outlandishly glaring often piques their interest a bit more readily. One cool afternoon following the autumnal equinox, son, Chris and I drifted garish, flaming orange Alaskan Bunny flies three feet under a clear

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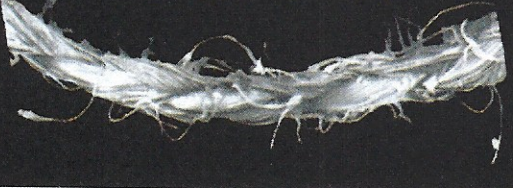
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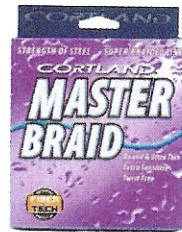


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bobber. Although the takes were barely noticeable, our “experiment” accounted for a trio of rotund 17-inchers before icy snowflakes drove us away. While each more than filled our hands and was adorned with tiny, jewel-like rosettes and blue halos, we continuously marveled at their NFL-type pigskin proportions!

Marie Lake

I first “discovered” this 92-acre lake, tucked at the 10,595’ elevation just below Selden Pass, in my pursuit of trophy golden trout during the early 1980’s. Forming the headwaters of the West Branch of Bear Creek, Marie sits astride the John Muir Trail between Fresno and Bishop, approximately 11-15 miles from the nearest drive-to trailheads. Requiring sturdy legs, stout boots and reached only via bipedal locomotion, it houses small densities of above-average golden and brook trout.

Thin stands of timber surround much of the lake, offering good insect productivity while persistent, up-canyon zephyrs deposit additional terrestrials, creating an exceptional bounty for a high-altitude water. While limited spawning habitat prevents stunting from entering the equation, depths over 25 feet plus a huge array of largely-inaccessible, lengthy finger coves

and bays allows Marie’s specimens to put on weight while avoiding pressure.

Largely remaining out of angler reach, I have found residents to be particularly vulnerable right after ice-out when water temperatures rise and their metabolisms increase. On a pair of separate, early-July visits, sons Matt, Jason and I observed pods of 30-40 trout stacked up in the lengthy Bear Creek outlet channel. Guarded by towering, snow-enshrouded Mt. Hooper, we crouched low and took turns casting between small ice floes. Although a few of the trout vigorously pursued gold Vibrax spinners, the vast majority of the 13- to 16-inch-class brookies and goldens released were taken dredging yellow Woolly Buggers, maroon Leech or orange Sculpin patterns. Utilizing their propensity to forage deep, we would allow the offering to completely settle in the 4-foot-deep, submerged creekbed, then retrieve in short, bottom-stirring bursts to drive them into a frenzy.

When fish retreated to deeper haunts, we had limited success launching Cripple, Apex or Krocodile spoon missles adorned with reflective tape.

McCoy Flat Reservoir

Formed by a dam on the Susan River, which heads on the eastern slope of volcanic Mt.

Lassen, McCoy Flat is tucked in the north-eastern corner of Lassen National Forest at the 5,500’ elevation. Surrounded by thick 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—something tight-lipped locals do their best to avoid mentioning!

According to Paul Chappell, a retired DFG fisheries biologist, the DFG plants both Eagle lake rainbows and brook trout in the 12- to 14-inch, 1/2- to 1-pound class throughout the spring. Shallow by western standards at 8-12 feet deep, light penetrates throughout, creating a bountiful biomass and this bottomless invertebrate banquet is responsible for a phenomenal growth pattern among the trout. “During the height of their growing season, residents average an incredible 2 inches per month from spring through fall!”

The caveat: Water volumes are determined by multi-year water cycles involving a pre-1914 agreement, which allows drastic drawdowns. During extremely dry years or periods of heavy drought (as in 2001, ‘05 and ‘07), agricultural needs routinely reduce the reservoir to a puddle and most fish perish.

However, as spring flows rapidly fill the impoundment, nutrient-loading commences and the DFG resumes planting,

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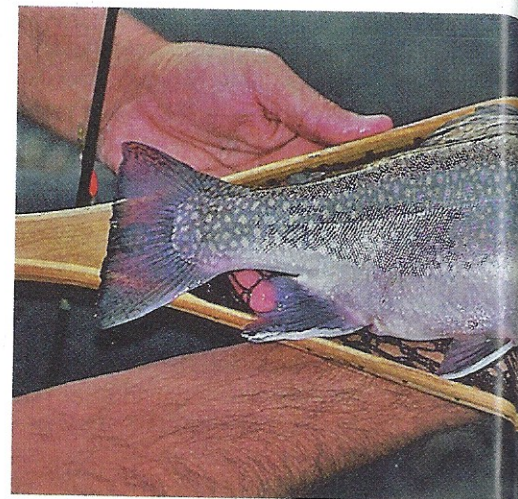
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This Kirman brook resembles

the fishery rises from the ashes like the legendary Phoenix. Though managed as a put-and-take fishery, it is carryover trout that account for plenty of trophy opportunities. "If two heavy winters occur in a row, the surviving fish regularly reach 16-18 inches and 2-3 pounds," Chappell noted. "If the reservoir is allowed to hold significant water for three years, holdovers will achieve 19-24 inches and approach an incredible 4-5 pounds!"

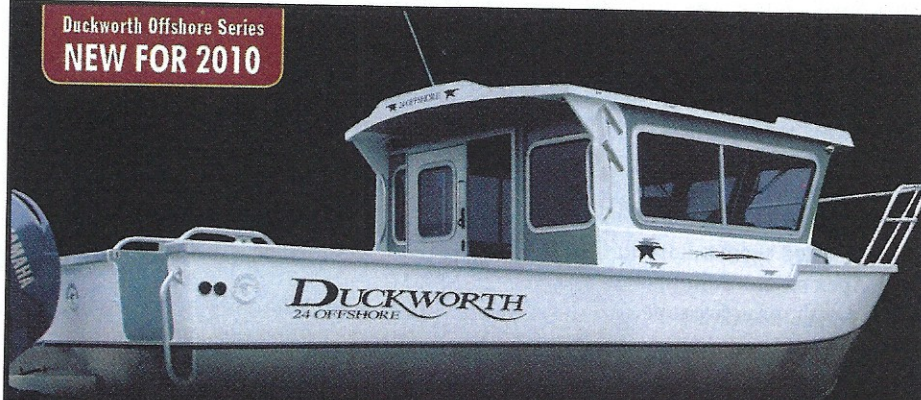
For bankers converging near the dam, an active nightcrawler impaled on a size 8 hook and floated 3-4 feet under a fluorescent pencil bobber is a consistent taker of both brookies and "bows while boats allow the advantage of exploring favored areas to regularly fool dawn or dusk cruisers.

Timely Tackle/Unique Tactics

Besides factoring in violent lightning storms, bone-chilling winds and threats of hypothermia and dehydration, visitors seeking their backcountry trophy residents should also realize that each lake is diverse, often requiring a uniquely different approach for satisfying results. Whether in a floating craft or on shore, seeking and exploiting underwater structure such as points, inlets, outlets, gravel bars, springs, steep banks or shallower to deeper angles along the littoral zone is always a wise plan. Above all, recognizing then imitating the individual lake's primary food source are the main keys to exponentially increasing odds of a hookup.

I find a 6- to 7-foot, ultra-light to light-action spinning rod and reel equipped with a smooth drag and loaded with thin-diameter 6- to 8-pound fluorocarbon line perfect for probing deep-running lures and battling 3- to 5-pound trout. When zephyrs chop the surface, I favor distance casting a micro jig 3-4 feet under a bobber and maintaining a slight tension. As waves grab the float, a lifelike action is imparted

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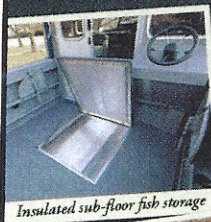
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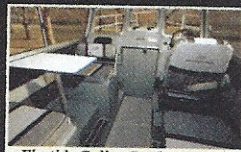
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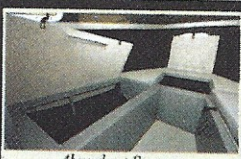
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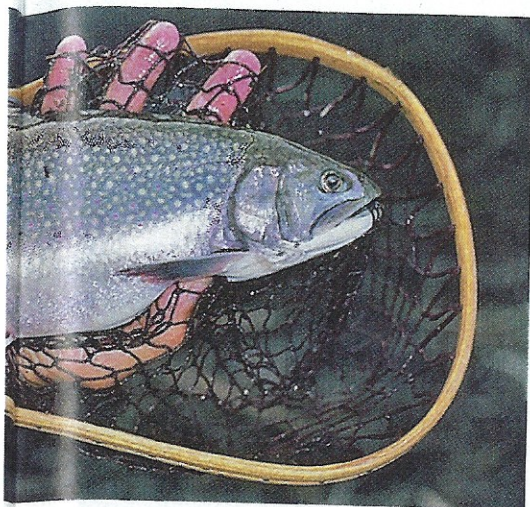
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to the jig or grub beneath, many times provoking a strike reaction.

Another effective trick to tantilize tight-lipped brookies into a long-line connection, especially in murky water, is trailing a fly three feet behind a deep-running spinner. Smearing Pautzke's Liquid Krill, Smelly Jelly or Nitro Gravy scents on both lure and fly will likely improve results.

Fly-tossers are best served with a matching 5- to 8-weight system and floating, intermediate and full sinking lines. When considering trout growth rates and sizes, 3X or 4X fluorocarbon tippets are best to persuade pot-bellied char away from underwater obstacles.

Silvery, size 8-10 Matuka, Marabou Muddler or Woolly Bugger patterns stripped erratically parallel to shore, are my most productive, deep-running streamers. Early in the day and when afternoon gusts subside, lake surfaces are usually smooth as glass. To take advantage of fog-like evening hatches, size 10-14 Foam Ant, Caddis Emerger and Elk Hair Caddis become the most feasible choices. Since these fish normally prefer large mouthfuls, a tandem rig trailing a size 10-12 Beadhead Hare's Ear, Copper John, Tiger Midge or Scud pattern 2-3 feet behind a dry, size 8-10 Rubberleg, Chernobyl Ant or Blue Foam Damsel can also be very productive.

Plumb for Advice

Reliable and detailed current information can be obtained from the following sources:

Red Lake: Dave Kirby of Woodford's Station (866) 694-2930.

Poore, Kirman lakes: Jim Reid of Ken's Alpine Sporting Goods (760) 932-7707; www.kenssport.com.

Marie Lake: Sierra National Forest Headquarters (559) 297-0706.

McCoy Flat Reservoir: Lassen National Forest Headquarters (530) 257-2151 or www.fs.fed.us/r5/lassen/recreation/fishing/reservoirs.



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