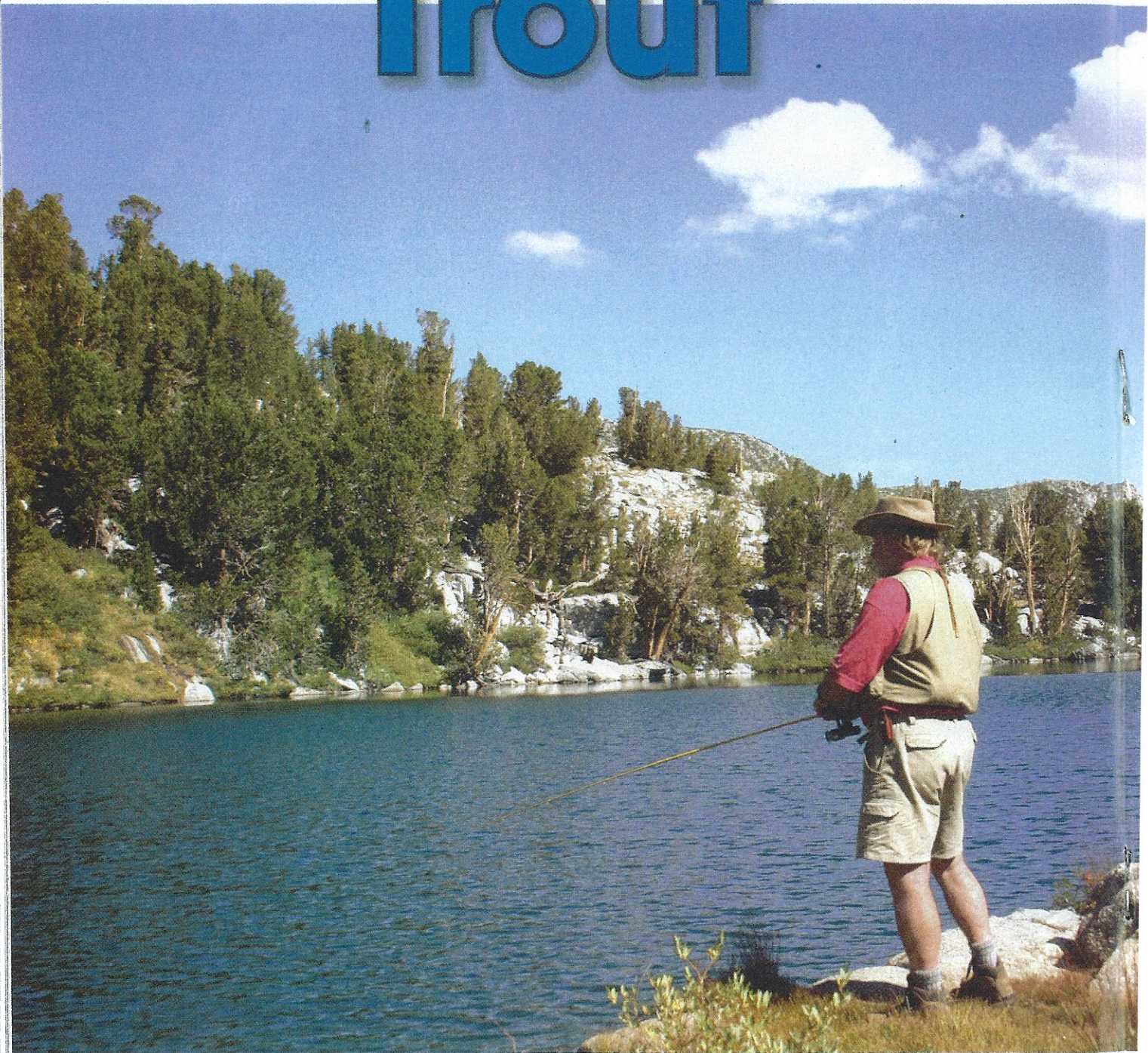


High Adventure Trout



These high elevation trout destinations have all proven to be well worth the trip.

■ by Don Vachini ■

While there are plenty of roadside waters in Northern California, I am always willing to hike as long as trout are at the end of the trail. In fact, I have found some of the best stillwater angling to occur in less-visited destinations that require a two- to three-mile hike to reach.

Among my favorite Sierra Nevada Range walk-to venues, the Caribou Wilderness, Woods Lake Loop, Ebbetts Pass and the Toiyabe lakes are nestled between Mt. Lassen and the northern boundary of Yosemite National Park. All offer scenic vistas, a chance to breathe ethereal air and some very feasible brook, cutthroat and rainbow trout options. In addition to containing a spectrum of pan-size to trophy specimens, a few have yielded tippet class world records as well.

CARIBOU WILDERNESS

Degree of Difficulty: 3

Fishing Quality: 4

Located just east of Lassen Volcanic National Park, the 20,500-acre Caribou Wilderness measures approximately 9 miles long by 5 miles wide and contains a chain of 16 fishable lakes. Those intent on sampling Beauty, Betty, Black, Cypress, Eleanor, Emerald, Evelyn, Gem, Hidden 1-5, Jewel, Posey, Rim, Triangle and Turnaround lakes for eager rainbow or brook trout will find the heavily-forested plateau to be very accessible.

Hay Meadows (via Road A-13 from Highway 36) provides the southern en-

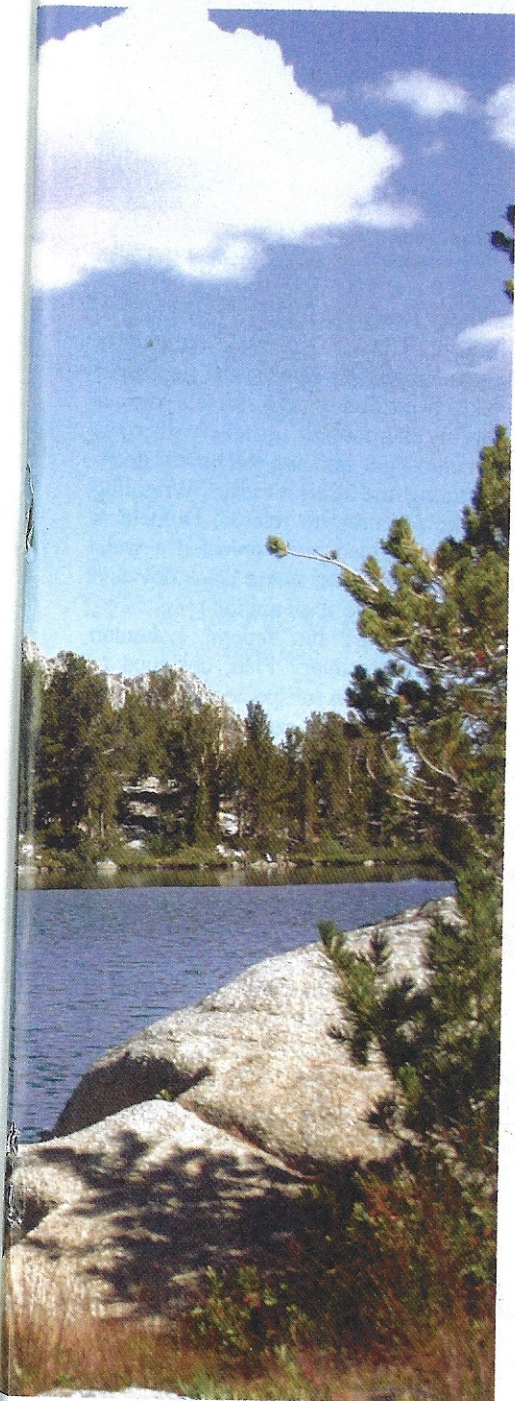
try trailhead, Silver Lake provides the eastern gateway (via Road A-21) while the northern trailhead begins from Cone Lake (via Highway 44).

Initially steady, uphill climbs are the norm from any of the three trailheads until the plateau is reached. From here, day hikers or backpackers will find that defined trails and loop routes abound and most tightly-clustered lakes can be visited without too much variation in elevation.

Popular, minimal-effort loop trails include the five Hidden lakes and Beauty/Posey and Long lakes from the Hay Meadows gateway and Jewel, Eleanor, Black, Turnaround, Twin and Triangle from the north entrances.

According to Mike Dean, wild trout biologist with the Redding office, the DFG air-plants many of these waters on a yearly or bi-yearly basis. As part of a put-and-grow philosophy, between 1,000-2,500, 4-6 inch Eagle Lake rainbow and brook trout make up the numbers for each water. "Fingerlings planted in the fall will be 7-10 inches by spring, 11-12 inches by the following fall with holdovers exhibiting thick girth and approaching 12-14 inches."

Since timber encircles most Caribou



◀ The Caribou Wilderness offers 16 fishable lakes, most via easy hikes.
■ Photo by Don Vachini.

▲ The Caribou Wilderness lakes produce healthy Eagle Lake rainbows.
■ Photo by Don Vachini.

lakes, a float tube allows more advantageous presentations. When fish are actively collecting groceries at the surface, rig a large attractor fly in tandem with a trailing nymph 2-3 feet underneath. Basically just heave it and leave it, twitching every so often. Ninety percent of the time, the nymph will be taken.

When topside activity disappears, cast a subsurface offering toward shore and begin retrieving in a strip-pause sequence. Be creative, varying fly speed, length of strip and duration of the pause until trout reveal their preference.

Tubers also find trolling small, silvery spoons or size 8-10 Joe's Hopper, Flying Ant or Maribou Muddler patterns through the slight afternoon chop to be productive.

Dean hints that anglers in search of trophy-sized 14-17 inch fish will find Turnaround and Triangle lakes to be worth visiting. On a fall, 2009 trek to Turnaround, 9-year old grandson, Domenic, drifted a yellow micro-jig under a bobber. As a slight breeze imparted action, the jig was inhaled by a rotund brookie well over a pound.

WOODS LAKE LOOP

Degree of difficulty: 4

Fishing Quality: 3

This popular loop combines a fairly strenuous uphill climb, scenic displays and some fair angling for pan-sized rainbow, brook and cutthroat trout. Traveling east on Highway 88, take the Woods Lake turnoff 1 mile past Caples Lake. From the Woods Lake (8,200 feet elevation) trailhead, ascend the steep trail, cross the signed Mokelumne Wilderness boundary, and continue for 3/4 mile to Winnemucca Lake (8,980 feet elevation).

Sitting in an open bowl in the shadow of massive Elephant Back Peak, this 30 acre water is deep and difficult to fish from shore during the day. The heaviest concentration of fish is usually found along the sheer rock headwall on the south side of the lake which can only be reached by float tube.

The DFG air-plants 1,500 rainbow and brook fingerlings annually to maintain numbers, according to Curtis Million, a DFG fisheries biologist in the Bishop office. "Brookies are the predominant species, with holdover residents usually maxing out around 12 inches."

While *Salvelinus fontinalis* prefer



Plenty of popular fishing tactics work in the high country. As you might expect, a floating fly line is perfect for early and late day shadows. ■ Photo by Don Vachini.

worms soaked deep on a sliding sinker during mid-day, size 10-14 black, purple or green beadhead Leech, olive/yellow Newbury Wiggle Damsel or Woolly Bugger patterns on a sinking line occasionally fool fish cruising along the steeper dropoffs of this intimate lake. During low light, any dark, size 12-14 nymph towed behind a clear bubble is the secret.

Crossing the outlet, hikers commence a steep, 3/4-mile ascent to Round Top Lake (9,341 feet elevation), which sits just below the saddle. Courtesy of DFG air deposits, brook and Lahontan cutthroat reside here and typically fall between 7-10 inches, but will grow up to 14 inches.

The best place to work this shallow, 5-acre, crystal-clear stillwater is near its moving outlet with a fly/bubble setup.

EBBETTS PASS

Degree of Difficulty: 2

Fishing Quality: 3

Bisecting the Mokelumne Wilderness to the north and the Carson-Iceberg Wilderness to the south, Highway 4 intersects the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) near Ebbetts Pass (8,450' elev.). This well-maintained pathway provides access to a few north/south angling options of varying distances.

Upper and Lower Kinney, a pair of naturally occurring lakes that form the headwaters of Silver Creek, are reached by an easy, 1 mile jaunt north from

Kinney Reservoir.

Son, Chris, 7-year-old grandson, Domenic and I visited these stepladder lakes two summers ago. On this particular July afternoon, he squealed with joy as his ultra-light spinning rod bowed deeply during one of his retrieves. Wriggling in the net prior to release, Domenic's silvery, 14-inch prize revealed a well-defined torso with sparse black dots and flaming orange slash marks!

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 nearby backcountry lakes where they thrive. Benefiting from excellent productivity and adequate spawning habitat, self-sustaining populations of this fast-growing, long-living cutthroat range up to 14 inches on these 15 -acre lakes.

Since *Oncorhynchus clarki henshawi* tend to be deep dwellers, I attach a Beadhead nymph 3 feet behind a silvery spoon then allow the offering to sink to the bottom of finger coves or deep channels. Quick, stuttering "burst retrieves" create an attractive, up-and-down darting action to the fly.

Reached by traveling 4 miles south from the pass, Nobel and Bull lakes require a more demanding trudge to trout. Nobel sits at the head of a wide canyon adjacent to the PCT and contains eager, pan-sized brookies. From here, hikers

Continued on page 52...

TROUT...Continued

can scramble cross-country to reach tiny Bull Lake and its wary, 9- to 11-inch cutthroat. Establishing a nearby base camp allows anglers to effectively tempt residents during first and last light.

Although fly-tossers will find a selection of wet and dry flies, including size 12-18 Renegade, PMD Sparkle Dun, Stimulator and X Caddis to be effective here, a fly/bubble setup allows for lengthy casts in these oft-windy lakes.

TOIYABE'S TROPHY TROUT LOOP

Degree of Difficulty: 4

Fishing Quality: 5

Roosevelt, Lane, Secret and Poore lakes are accessed via a 3 1/2-mile trek from the Leavitt Meadows Trailhead off Highway 108. Tucked along a hogback ridge in the Toiyabe National Forest amid stands of Jeffrey and lodgepole pine and high-desert sage, this quartet separates the men from the boys as they uphold a reputation for producing larger-than-average cutthroat and brook trout.

According to Curtis Milliron, a significant proportion of their residents fall between 13-15 inches and average over a pound, while a healthy share, sporting broad shoulders and massive girth, top the 2-plus pound category.

"These four waters enjoy a richer-than-usual mix of nutrients. Their residents prosper greatly from leeches, scuds, crayfish and Lahontan redbreasted suckers, which are indicators of rapid growth and make these waters well-suited for trophy management," he said.

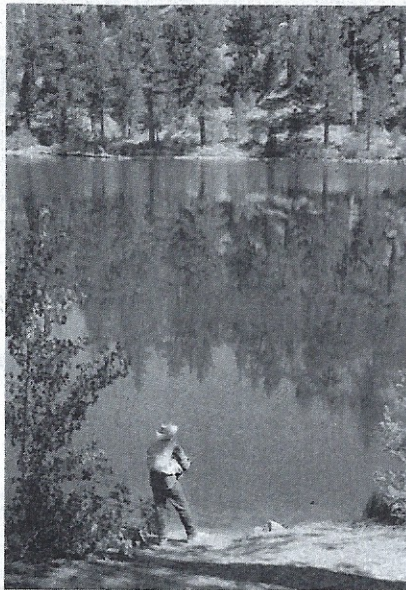
Fingerlings air-planted after the season closure augment populations and allow for growth over the winter.

Both 8-acre Roosevelt and Lane lakes (7,300 feet elevation) sit alongside the main trail and house fair densities of brook and cutthroat. Roosevelt hotspots include the inlet, the steeply sloping dropoff along the trail and the log-jammed outlet. It was from this tangled setting in 1999 that I maneuvered a 2-pound, 2-ounce Lahontan cutt to net, which still holds the National Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame's unlimited tippet class world record.

Lane is more rockbound than its neighbor, and its most productive area features a deep, rock-laden channel and a gouged out hole near the slowly-moving outlet. While the cutts tend to hunker deep during evening or early light, resident char seem to relish Foam Beetle,

Turk Tarantula and Caddis Emerger patterns as they feed with abandon in the shallow, brush-shaded fringes along the shoreline.

Located astride the sketchy trail toward Poore, tiny, 7-acre Secret Lake (7,550 feet elevation) houses a moderate density of 8- to 12-inch Lahontan cutthroat. While weed beds on either side of the lake help create a solid aquatic food base, they greatly restrict shoreline access. Float tubers working the center of the lake, which is over 20 feet deep, enjoy the most success.



An angler plies the brushy shoreline of Roosevelt Lake. ■ Photo by Don Vachini.

A steep, downhill scramble from Secret, expansive, 100-acre Poore Lake, sits in an open, windswept canyon at the 7,000' elevation. Relatively shallow in its upper reaches, its most productive structure is located in the lower third of the reservoir where it narrows significantly and approaches depths of 85 feet near the dam.

Resident brook trout will often attain weights over 2 pounds thanks to their high-caloric forage. A decade ago, a massive, 4-pound, 2-ounce behemoth inhaled my white Woolly Bugger, greatly increasing my heart rate and establishing the HOF unlimited tippet class global standard!

A prodigious population of crayfish inhabit Poore and its always-hungry char pursue them avidly. Spin anglers rig a half-nightcrawler 3 feet below a sliding sinker while fly anglers use a weighted,

size 8-10 orange Crayfish or Leech pattern. Both offerings should be allowed to settle on the bottom before imparting a tediously slow retrieve. Movement is the key here, and the pickup is usually very light, but noticeable.

Overloading a 4-weight fly rod with a 5-weight sinking line and 6 feet of 3X fluorocarbon leader makes casting easier. Strip-retrieving the sinking line is a perfect way to present bottom-hugging presentations. A rainbow-hued Thomas Bouyant gradually yo-yoed through the depths also proves deadly.

TIMELY TACKLE

A multi-piece, 3- or 4-weight fly rod and reel and a 6-foot ultra-light or light action spinning rod and reel loaded with 4-pound test are perfect for these higher elevation destinations.

While productive subsurface choices include black, chartreuse and olive Woolly Bugger, purple or black Leech, red Copper John, Flashback Pheasant Tail, Prince Nymph, Sparkle Pupa, Bird's Nest and olive Scuds, highly successful surface patterns include Parachute Adams, Humpies, Elk Hair Caddis, Rubberlegs, Flying Ant and Callibaetis Mayfly. Boatman, Foam Beetle and Joe's Hopper are wise terrestrial choices.

A floating line and a full-sinking No. 3 fly line coupled with 9- to 12-foot leaders and thin diameter, 3X or 4X fluorocarbon tippet material will handle most lake situations.

A selection of small, size 0-2 Worden's Rooster Tail, Vibrax, Panther Panther Martin or Mepps spinners, brassy or silvery Kastmaster, Krocodile, Phoebe or red/gold Thomas Bouyant spoons and tiny yellow or white micro-jigs should accompany spin anglers.

If you can't carry in a float tube, lightweight waders help reach deeper water. Polarized glasses assist in fish location. ■

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