

The beautiful thing about pinks is that they're the least moody and persnickety of all the salmon species. Unlike the coy, often impossible, always unpredictable disposition of chinook and coho, pink salmon are refreshingly uncomplicated creatures. And some years they come into the estuaries in stupefying numbers, gracing places like Echo Cove with biological exuberance. Furthermore, it's a place where—by my brother's reckoning, not to mention the shared viewpoint of a certain ex-governor from Wasilla—you can always count on the pinks way outnumbering the pinkos.

### Red Lake, CA

By Don Vachini

Squinting for rising trout in the early dawn light, I momentarily gazed upward from Red Lake to Carson Pass, imagining daring Pony Express riders who traversed this steep route a century and a half prior. Indeed, I remember reading about the life-and-death struggles these young postal employees endured on their frenetic mail deliveries between Saint Joseph, Missouri, and Sacramento, California, in 1860 and 1861. However, before becoming too immersed in Old West history, concentric rings on the water reestablished my primary focus.

Approximately 30 miles south of the neon flash of Lake Tahoe's casinos, 38-acre Red Lake (8,200 feet elevation) sits amid mixed conifers, sagebrush, and granitic vistas in the Toiyabe National Forest. Although situated alongside well-traveled California Highway 88, this east-slope Sierra Nevada stillwater routinely produces fine trout.

Reserved solely for brook and Lahontan cutthroat trout, Red Lake is stocked annually by California Department of Fish and Game with 7,500 half-pound brookies and 3,000 fingerling cutts. Additionally, an agree-

ment between Alpine County and the South Lake Tahoe Public Utilities District provides funding for bonus private concessionaire infusions of 5,000 pounds of brook trout and 200 to 400 surplus brood-stock Lahontans that weigh from 3 to 8 pounds apiece.

While plenty of the less-wary planters are liberally culled by consumptive bait anglers, a significant number scatter throughout the lake and become less accessible. Red Lake's snow-fed, nutri-

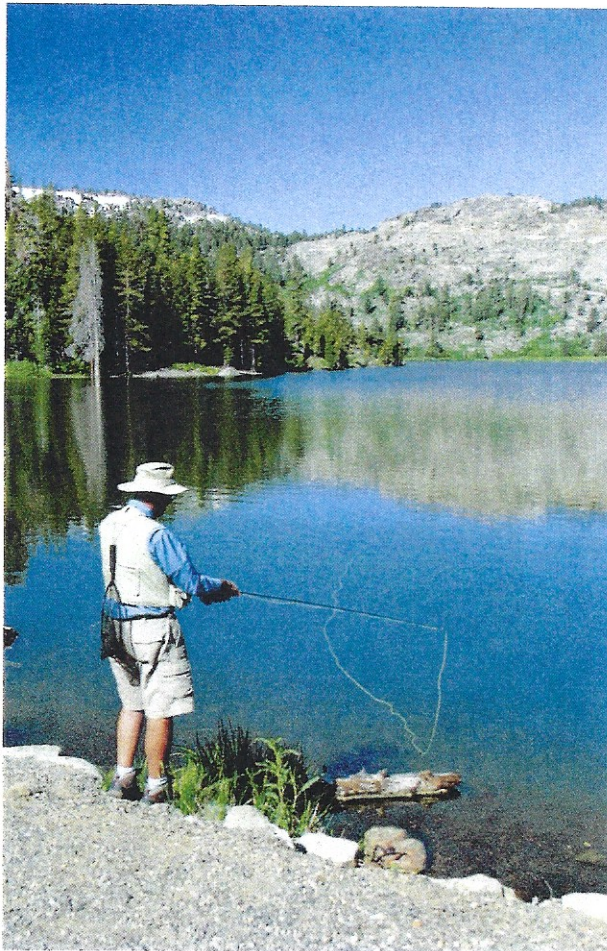


PHOTO BY DON VACHINI

ent-rich water supports a substantial aquatic food base, including tui chub, while the encircling timber provides the trout with a buffet of terrestrial insects, enabling fingerling fish and holdovers alike to achieve growth rates of a half pound or more per year.

To have a realistic chance at these plump trout, fly anglers must overcome a trio of caveats. While persistent afternoon winds dictate short leaders and shooting lines, the cloudy, olive-shaded waters add to the puzzle by making flies difficult for trout to see, and midsum-

mer algae bloom necessitates frequent weed removal from flies. On the positive side, stiff breezes not only deposit insects on the water and concentrate them along the windward shoreline, but also help reduce the wariness of the trout. Meticulously probing a foam line or locating a blustery point and fan casting are highly effective strategies.

No motorized boats are permitted. Although bank access is plentiful, float tubers or kayakers can advantageously ply the deeper, midlake creek channel or the inner edge of the half-moon-shaped dam area, where solitary residents often cruise in wide circles.

Anglers targeting the bottom-hugging, leviathan Lahontans need to experiment with presentations and depths. A 5-weight outfit with a sinking-tip or sinking line is ideal for dredging size-8 and -10 cone head Woolly Buggers and Marabou Leech patterns in white, green, or purple shades. The key is keeping the streamer moving just enough to prevent it from snagging bottom, yet darting erratically to entice a taker. Also, don't give up on a cast, as curious fish will often pursue a fly right to the shoreline.

A floating fly line combined with a dry fly/dropper setup or nymph under a strike indicator often tempts shy residents to make a brief surface appearance early or late in the day. A size-12 or -14, titanium-beaded Copper John, Bird's Nest, or Brassie worked alone or under size-10 Elk Hair Caddis, Parachute Adams, or Griffith's Gnat is reliably productive.

No services are available at the lake. Dave Kirby of nearby Woodford's Station, (866) 694-2930, [www.woodfordsstation.com](http://www.woodfordsstation.com), is a solid local source of information. For those pondering a visit, Kirby assures there are far fewer dangers on the old Pony Express trail today, and the odds of a hefty, piscatorial connection are much better than the odds of scoring big at South Lake Tahoe casinos.