

Notes, News & Reviews



PHOTO BY DON VACHINI

Parker Lake and Parker Creek, CA

By Don Vachini

Anglers visiting the Eastern Sierra's popular June Lake Loop can pursue multiple trout species ranging in size from diminutive to trophy. But be advised: this sweet spot also hosts crowded campsites, busy vacationers, and plenty of traffic from anglers, boats, and cars.

However, nestled in the shadow of the more famous June Lake Loop waters, 23-acre Parker Lake together with its namesake creek just inside the Ansel Adams Wilderness, offer a secluded hike-to alternative. The lake holds hefty, tight-lipped brown trout; the brush-infested stream supports frisky, pan-size versions—a combination that provides a lightly-pressured, under-the-radar fishery with its own unique challenges.

Driving south from Lee Vining on U.S. Highway 395, take the June Lake Loop Road (California Highway 158), proceed 1.5 miles, then turn right at

the Parker Lake sign. Follow the dirt road 1.9 miles to the parking lot/trailhead. From there, the trail crosses the signed wilderness boundary and continues a steady, uphill climb for 2 miles to the creek. Shortly, the lake comes into view at the entrance to a U-shaped canyon, surrounded by thick Jeffrey and lodgepole pine forest and guarded by a trio of majestic, snow-capped sentinels.

Numerous rivulets funnel snow and glacial melt from 12,296-foot Mount Lewis, 12,851-foot Parker Peak, and 12,979-foot Koip Peak into Parker Lake, which sits at 8,100 feet. Spillage from this gouged-out basin

creates Parker Creek, which bounces briskly down the canyon, meets Rush Creek, and eventually enters Mono Lake.

Icy, season-long flows and abundant spawning habitat team with mayflies, caddisflies, and midges; terrestrial insects such as beetles and ants provide further sustenance for healthy wild trout. While the lake serves as a refuge for mature fish, the creek is a spawning site/nursery for fish to gain bulk before taking up still-water residency. Ranging from 15 inches to 5 pounds, Parker Lake's reclusive browns prefer to stay out of sight, holding in depths near submerged boulders and shelves found along the lake's north side. From this structure, they aggressively ambush careless or unlucky fingerlings for much of their caloric intake. Thick shoreline vegetation in this vicinity necessitates careful wading, a fast-sinking line, and a 12- to 15-foot leader. While streamers replicating the fingerling fish are good bets, the wary leviathans will hunker down at the mere hint of a shadow on the water or a sloppy cast.

Although fairly shallow along its fringes and marshy by the inlet, the lake's outlet channel is a good place to enticingly twitch a size-10 olive



PHOTO BY DON VACHINI

Matuka or Clouser Minnow early or late in the day to pique the interest of smaller browns.

The saffron-hued, 6- to 12-inch browns (plus a thin scattering of brook trout) inhabiting the thickly-canopied creek provide some respite for those wishing to ease the humiliation of the lake's high degree of difficulty. As it descends rapidly through dense stands of mixed conifer, cottonwood, and willow to high desert sage, the stream's riparian cover makes overhead casting difficult. However, imaginative techniques, stealthy approaches, and size-14 through -18 ant patterns, Beadhead Zebra Midges, WD-40s, and caddisfly pupa patterns precisely presented into bathtub-size pools, tiny pockets, deep slots, and under tangled lairs are frequently rewarded with eager takes. A 7-foot, 3-weight rod matched with a floating line and 6-foot, 6X leader is perfect for the creek; a 9-foot, 4-weight rod is adequate for presenting meaty lake offerings.

While the season runs from early June through mid-November, fall is my favorite time on these waters. With the landscape splashed in brilliant yellow and orange, the air notably crisp, and early higher-elevation dustings of snow signaling impending winter, Parker residents feed with more urgency. And, as they unknowingly let down their guard, the odds shift a bit more toward the angler.

Middle Fork Gila River, NM

By Devon Fletcher

A strong smell of wet leaves on the trail makes me imagine I could be along any trout stream in the country. The towering, alcove-pocked cliffs of orange volcanic tuff let me know I'm somewhere in the Southwest. But when I catch a Gila trout toward the end of my November fishing day, I know I can only be in the Gila National Forest of southwestern New Mexico—in

this case on the Middle Fork of the Gila River.

I not only caught that Gila trout, a survivor from a stocking done at the Gila forks awhile back, but that same day I also tangled with fair-size browns and a few rainbows.

The Middle Fork of the Gila River offers nearly 40 miles of fishable water, almost all in the Gila Wilderness and accessible only by foot or horseback. Oddly enough, because of several good overland routes to upstream destinations, the stretch directly above the Gila Cliff Dwellings Visitor Center—the only part of the river available for a day trip—may actually receive less fishing pressure than spots deeper in the wilderness. This lower Middle Fork, from its confluence with the West Fork upstream about 8 miles or so, is a peach of stream if you fish it in mid- to late fall. Try it in summer and you may be disappointed, especially if you seek trout. The water warms and you're more likely to see suckers than anything else. There may be bluegill and smallmouth bass, but since I usually avoid the lower-elevation Gila streams in the summer, I'm no expert.

Two things you will definitely see in late spring and early summer are people, and once July 4th rolls around, rain—additional reasons to schedule your trip for October or November when cool mornings, warm afternoons, and blue skies make for perfect conditions. And the solitude that time of year is an added bonus. On my Election Day trip (I voted early) last year, the VW van at the trailhead told me I

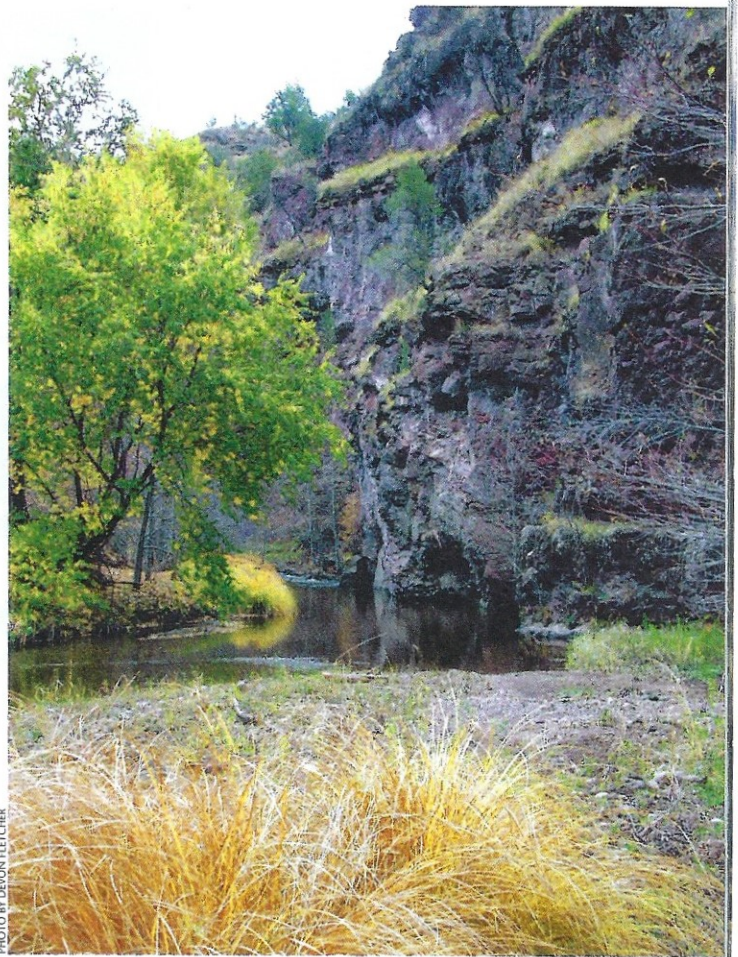


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was likely to encounter a few hippies at the hot spring about .5 miles up the trail. I did, and they were the last people I saw for the next six hours.

I've learned not to waste my time casting below the hot springs. Even where the water and the gravel look good, it's too warm for most trout. Not far above the hot springs, however, are productive holes where the stream runs against the rocks forming the banks. Drop a nymph into the head of the run, the tailout, the slow current on the inside of the bend, or right where the water is deepest, and you'll come up with something. If there are trout there, they usually take flies unhesitatingly.

In places, the lower Middle Fork breaks into smaller channels edged with bear grass and with deeply undercut banks. The water in such places can be 3 feet deep or more and may hold some large browns. You must be extremely stealthy to hook these big fish. In November, the leaves are gone and the undergrowth is crunchy, so you must constantly anticipate and