

Notes, News & Reviews



PHOTO BY DON VACHINI

Marie Lake, California

By Don Vachini

Sitting at the 10,595-foot elevation, California's Marie Lake is one of the largest still waters astride the 211-mile-long John Muir Trail, a section of the Pacific Crest Trail. Occupying a granitic bench just below Selden Pass in the rugged John Muir Wilderness, it gathers glacial meltwater from towering, 12,286-foot Mount Senger while forming the headwaters of the West Fork of Bear Creek, itself a productive golden trout stream. However, this exposed, lightly fished, 92-acre lake is also noted for some above-average-size golden and brook trout, which reward anglers willing to make the long hike there.

Hefty and high spirited, Marie's brilliantly-attired residents have certainly managed to overcome the harsh alpine living conditions, according

to Curtis Milliron, a California Department of Fish and Game biologist in the Bishop office. The fish routinely approach 12 inches, with specimens between 13 and 16 inches and ranging up to 2 pounds fairly common. Milliron exclaims these are "mighty impressive fish for a high-elevation lake!"

Benefiting from a combination of suitable nutrients and structure, plus a relative lack of fishing pressure, the trout here attain larger-than-expected proportions. Thin stands of stunted conifers and scrub willows surround much of the lake, providing habitat for black caddisflies, green midges, stoneflies, and mos-

quitoes, while fortuitous upslope breezes augment this ample food source by air-dropping beetles and other winged insects, creating an exceptional backcountry banquet.

Milliron notes that the finned residents here exhibit a reclusive tendency as they put on heft, heading deep and becoming inaccessible to shore-bound anglers. "Because there is only fair spawning potential, stunting is excluded from the equation, [fish] densities are kept thin, and there is more weight gain per fish," he explains.

While the grandeur of Mount Senger, Mount

Hooper, and the Mono Divide compete for attention from visitors to Marie, the main angling challenge becomes isolating holding structure on this expansive lake. Both trout species seem to prefer the moving outlet channel; bouncing a tan, black, green, or olive size-12 through -16 bead-head nymph along the bottom of the channel often rings their dinner bell. Goldens and brookies also frequent submerged points of land jutting into deep water, as well as transition zones and shelf lines between shallow-to-deep water. Dwelling in anonymity along deep finger coves and bays during midday, the fish



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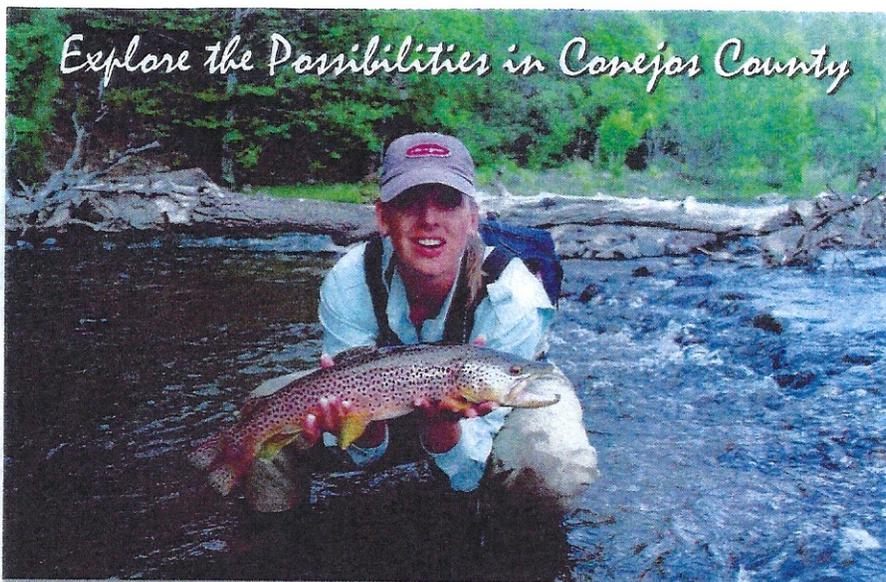
warily reveal themselves near shore at dawn and dusk, dictating size-10 through -14 dry flies. My personal favorites for this glass-off period include the Madame-X, ant patterns, E/C Caddis, Parachute Adams, and hopper patterns.

Other worthwhile options include walking the open, turf-lined shore—use stepping stones to protect the fragile alpine plants—to stalk individual fish, fan casting to intercept cruisers, or flipping terrestrial patterns near scum lines. Additionally, I have found feeders to recklessly ambush offerings from the safety of the barely-submerged rock field along the isolated, northeast corner of the lake.

A 9-foot, 4- or 5-weight rod with a floating line, 9- to 12-foot leader, and 5X tippet is the perfect setup for short-range casts, while an intermediate line is necessary for fishing farther offshore.

The best times to visit are from mid-July to September. While sun-screen, wide-brimmed hats, and polarized sunglasses deal with sun issues, insect repellent and face netting help reduce blood donations to mosquitoes. Trail information and wilderness permits are available at the Pineridge Ranger District in Prather, (559) 855-5360. Marie sits 11 or 14 miles away from either Florence or Edison lakes connecting trailheads, respectively. From Fresno, follow California Highway 168 for 3 hours to either trail. For those wishing to trade burning boot leather for saddle sores, the High Sierra Pack Station, (559) 299-8297, services this back-country from either trailhead.

More focused on summiting Mount Whitney or achieving Yosemite completion goals, most hikers never leave the trail to explore Marie. However, those who have the perseverance to prospect it will realize a solid chance to strike it rich on gold... and brookies, too!



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