



Running The Option In Twenty Lakes Basin

California's Twenty Lakes Basin is a trout destination, and then some.

by Don Vachini

Approaching a remote trio of headwater lakes nestled near massive Conness Glacier, my son, Jason, and I paused to catch our breath in the thin air. Despite the previous winter's heavy snowpack, we managed to scramble cross-country and traverse an exposed ridgeline to reach these lofty lakes and a chance at their glamour prize—the golden trout. Gazing down at the first lake, set like an azure jewel amid white polished granite, a pair of rise forms kept our hearts racing.

During our two-hour session, we stealthily prospected tiny beadhead nymphs through lake and connecting creek structure, releasing over a dozen cookie-cutter, 6- to 8-inchers. Stunningly attired in vivid lemon yellows and flaming orange, each set the crystalline water ablaze as they battled against 7X tippet.

What was truly amazing, however, was that we were a mere 40-minute climb from the trailhead, an almost unheard of short jaunt for pursuing this glittering prize!

This particular late-July morning found us on a boulder-strewn bench tucked between Mt. Conness (12,556

feet) and North Peak (12,256 feet) plying the remote Conness lakes, which make up a segment of concentrated waters known as the Twenty Lakes Basin. Snow and ice melt from these jagged spires, plus other lesser sentinels, creates a series of 20 stillwaters just outside Yosemite National Park's northern boundary. Tucked between 10,200-11,000 feet amid stark granite and stunted, sub-alpine timber, these high-elevation waters not only provide the basin's moniker but varying angling options as well. A half-dozen of these nestled in the Hoover Wilderness drain through Saddlebag and El-lery lakes and into Lee Vining Creek while 14 feed Lundy Lake through the Mill Creek drainage.

THE QUARRY

According to Curtis Milliron, a Department of Fish and Game (DFG) fisheries biologist specializing in backcountry trout, brook trout are the dominant species throughout this lofty drainage with rainbow, Lahontan cutthroat and golden present in selected lakes. In addition to planted rainbows and native brookies, nearby Saddle-

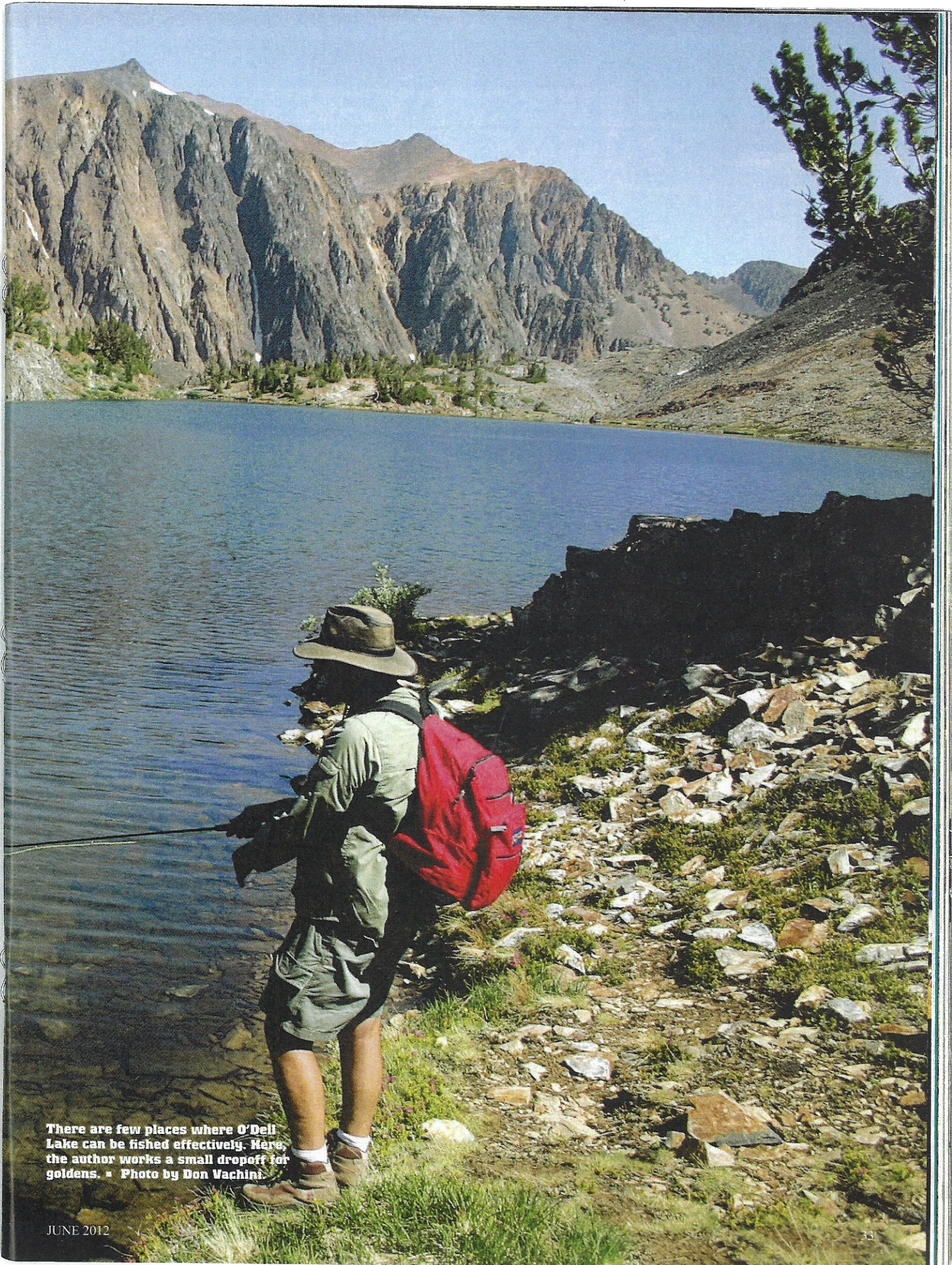
bag Lake holds a small population of brown trout—further enhancing the possibility of a Sierra Slam!

For the most part, basin trout remain self-sustaining, the progeny of initial stockings from years past. However, goldens and cutthroat numbers are occasionally bolstered by fingerling air plants with the DFG managing both species under a put-and-grow philosophy. "Recent surveys indicate 7-10 inches as the normal size range, with individual specimens approaching 12-14 inches fairly common."

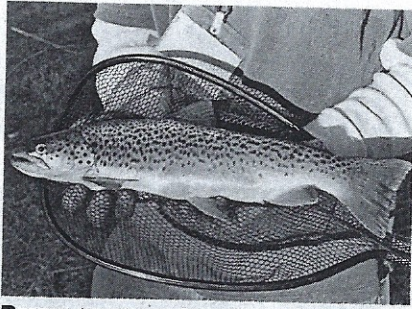
TARGET LAKES

The gateway to the Twenty Lakes Basin is 339-acre Saddlebag Lake, which presents two avenues of backcountry entry. One is an hour-long hike along the eastern bank of the lake; the other via a 15-minute water taxi ride, which brings visitors to the north shore of the lake where an 8-mile trail loop begins.

Most of the target waters, which are between 4- to 15-acres in size, sit one-half to 3 miles from the trailhead. From here, the easily-negotiated trail with minimal altitude gain connects the majority of the lakes with



There are few places where O'Dell Lake can be fished effectively. Here, the author works a small dropoff for goldens. ■ Photo by Don Vachini.



Brown trout are found in Saddlebag Lake, offering five trout species in the Basin. ■ Photo by Don Vachini.

many others attained by gentle, cross-country routes. Towering, snow-pated peaks and contrasting reddish-brown slopes across the canyon reveal the juxtaposition of geologic forces.

I find the counter-clockwise pathway gets me to more productive waters quicker. However, I don't attempt to fish all of the lakes in one trip, instead dividing them into manageable day-hike destinations.

Milliron believes that the combination of nutrients and spawning habitat often dictates the type of fishery to be expected.

The residents of Hummingbird, Helen, Shamrock, Little Steelhead and Conness #1 and #2 are blessed with abundant spawning habitat, but produce excessive numbers of stunted 5- to 7-inch specimens. On the other hand, Wasco, Potter, Excelsior, Greenstone and Steelhead have limited spawning to match an adequate food supply and generally contain slightly larger 8- to 10-inchers. Cascade, Towser, Conness # 3 and O'Dell are rock-bound with minuscule recruitment and house small numbers ranging up to 12 inches or more on occasion. "Thinner densities usually equate to larger fish," he explained.

While brook trout co-exist with goldens at Helen, Excelsior, Potter and Cascade lakes, they are the sole inhabitants of Hummingbird, Twin, Shamrock, Z, Wasco and Little Steelhead. Expansive Steelhead and Greenstone lakes contain a mix of brookies, cutthroat and rainbows, whereas Cascade, Towser, Potter, Conness 1-3 and O'Dell pose solid choices for goldens.

LAY OF THE LAND

The odds of catching trout from these windswept venues can be improved

by understanding their basic needs of nutrition, protective cover and oxygen, then addressing locations that offer them.

Scouting from on high is advantageous for seeking inlets, outlets, points of land, submerged boulder fields, shoals and shelf lines, which provide fish with one or more of their primary needs. While polarized glasses assist in seeing beneath the surface, careful observation cannot only pinpoint individual fish but reveal their cruising pattern as well.

While a variety of terrestrials are present in the sparsely wooded slopes around most of the lakes, caddis, mayflies, damselflies and midges are key elements in their residents' food chain.

Upslope blow-in, a phenomenon in which afternoon updrafts lift winged insects from lower elevations then deposit them on the water, greatly benefits the Twenty Lakes basin. Identifying the windward side of the lake can be worthwhile as zephyrs push the struggling bugs toward the shore. Casting patterns into the wind and retrieving them across a forming foam line often sparks the interest of opportunistic feeders as late-afternoon gusts die down.

When ice-out commences, the water's temperature warms slightly, its oxygen content increases and fish eat more ravenously as their metabolism increases. Fishing along the ice edges can often be worthwhile.

MINING OFF-TRAIL TREASURES

While the main loop skirts several lakes, better results are often achieved on less-visited waters where hungry and willing, pan-sized *Salveninus fontinalis* pervade. A pathway from Wasco leads past Hidden to Z and ends up at Hummingbird. Yet another side trail, this one from Steelhead, climbs briefly to Little Steelhead, past Shamrock and finally, Twin before culminating near O'Dell.

When goldens are on the agenda, my favorite loop route involves climbing above Greenstone Lake to the Conness lakes. From there, I trek cross-country to Cascade, Potter and Towser lakes, before catching the main trail back to Greenstone. Landing rainbow and cutthroat at Steelhead has enabled me to

complete two slam quests while finishing this circuit.

Although reputed for growing trophy-sized *Oncorhynchus aqua-bonita*, 13-acre O'Dell gives up its fish grudgingly. Despite numerous pilgrimages, I have managed only a 16-inch granddaddy, dredging a Wooly Bugger along an ebony drop-off, in 1995. With an extremely steep shoreline, depths approaching 80 feet and plenty of inaccessible structure, Milliron hints that the golden's propensity to become reclusive enables them to achieve size while finning in anonymity. He suggests a non-consumptive attitude to help this lake maintain its trophy reputation.

CREEKS

Although housing truncated trout, the lively arteriole streams provide a more vibrant, action-packed venue. Tiny Conness Creek is loaded with gaudily-attired goldens in the meadow sections above and below its namesake lakes. Here, crawling stalks and dainty presentations often reward me with nimble 7- or 8-inchers, although they battle like fish twice their size.

Plenty of willing brookies, plus an occasional golden, can be found in the bouncy flows of Mill Creek, which tumble gently through an open, brush-lined course below Shamrock Lake. Short-lining imitations through its friendly, scaled-down pools and small pockets routinely provokes an ambush.

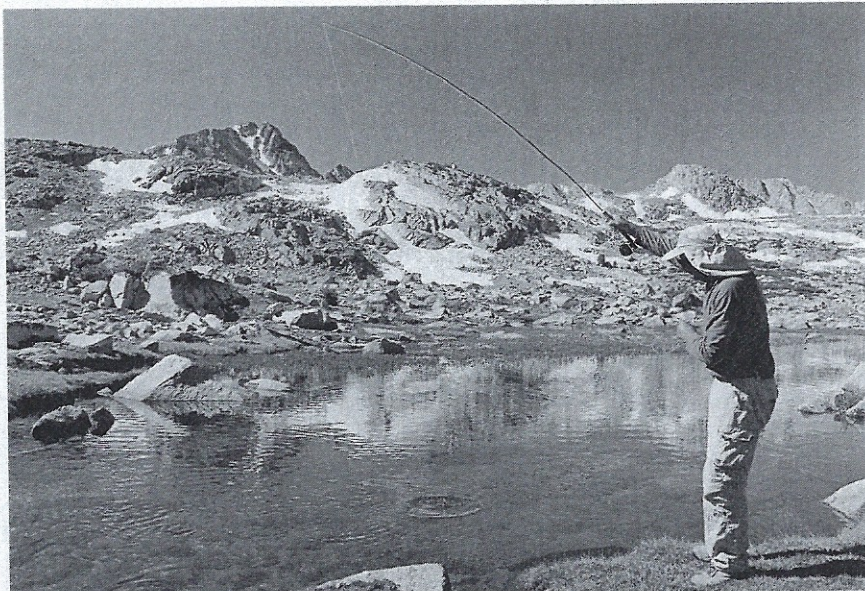
SPIN TECHNIQUES

A 6- to 7-foot, ultra-light spinning rod and reel loaded with 2- to 4-pound monofilament and a smooth-operating drag is a very effective, efficient and sporting setup for hardware anglers.

Small, bright, in-line spinners such as Panther Martin, Vibrax, Mepps and Rooster Tail work well as fish become active near the surface, while heavier spoons such as Phoebe, Crippures, Thomas Bouyant, Needlefish, Little Cleos and Wob-L-Rites allow for lengthier casts and deep probes.

Since alpine trout usually prefer to ambush their prey along the edges of shallows or in steep transition zones, a lure's presentation and retrieve helps determine success. While towing lures parallel to shore is always a solid ploy,

Continued on page 52...



The author battles a lively brookie from Z Lake. ■ Photo by Don Vachini.

imparting additional action to them can prove deadly. On deep still waters, I commonly make a lengthy cast to either the 11 o'clock or 2 o'clock position and allow the lure to settle on bottom. Retrieving erratically, I commence sweeping the rod tip vigorously from side to side as the offering approaches a drop-off. Probably imitating a wounded baitfish, this maneuver often results in a violent smash.

A fly/bubble setup allows for lengthy casts and slow retrieves over deep structure and is very effective for dealing with swirling winds. Another highly productive setup is a mini-jig secured 3 or so feet under a bobber. The turbulent waters create an enticing, up and down movement to the jig, often causing fish to identify it as a food form.

My favorite spin tactic on deeper lakes involves a clear bubble filled with water and attached to a weighty spoon or plug. Not only can longer distances be attained, but the float prevents the lure from snagging bottom while allowing a unique retrieval sequence through the water column.

Soaking nightcrawlers, salmon eggs or Power Worms on a sliding sinker tips the odds slightly at O'Dell, while a float tube allows exploration of its previously unreachable haunts.

FLY TACTICS

Although windy conditions can make

fly-casting challenging at times, a 3- to 5-weight, 8- to 9-foot system with matching floating or sinking line remains a top choice.

Although various stages of insects are the preferred form of nourishment at these basin waters, there is no need to be technical. Standard Sierra-issue selections include size 10-16, dry Elk Hair Caddis, Humpy, Rubberlegs, Compara-dun, Stimulator, Light Cahill and Black Gnat and nymphal, size 14-16, silver, tungsten or copper bead head Hare's Ear, Prince, Flashback Pheasant Tail, Zug Bug, Serendipity and Bird's Nest patterns, ranging between tan, brown, olive, and brown and black shades.

In addition, a size 14-16 Brassie, Copper John or Disco Midge tied a few feet below a size 10 Carey Special, Wulff or Sofa Pillow are popular dry/dropper tandems.

Imitation Beetle, Joe's Hopper, Madame X, Spider and Flying Ant replicate common terrestrial life forms imprisoned in the surface by winds. Methodically stripping size 10 Matuka, conehead Woolly Bugger or Crystal Bugger streamers through varying depths will sometimes coax a resident into striking.

While I favor a 9-foot rod with a 9- to 12-foot leader to reach the moving water near lake inlets/outlets, around boulders or along littoral zones, success often hinges more on presentation

than selection. Whenever feasible, I allow surface offerings to drift naturally from moving into quiet water then gently twitch every 5-10 seconds or so. I prefer probing subsurface offerings on a sink-tip line, bouncing them across the bottom of gravelly or sandy sills. Imparting slow, strip retrieves produces enticing rising and dropping action.

Residents usually let down their guards a bit during morning and evening shadows or immediately after thunderstorms, which are prime times to fish.

When plying the effervescent creeks, I prefer an 8-foot fly-rod, floating line and a 6-foot leader to flick short, accurate casts. Willing stream residents are often duped dapping high-riding, size 16 Mosquito, Sierra Bright Dot or Parachute Adams over eddies, seams or along brush lines.

GETTING THERE

To reach the trailhead from Lee Vining, follow Highway 120 for 12 miles. Turn onto Saddlebag Lake Road and drive 3 miles to the lake. Saddlebag Lake Resort (www.saddlebaglakeresort.com) provides a water shuttle, food and general services. Contact Richard Ernst at staff@saddlebaglakeresort.com for timely trail and backcountry angling advice prior to going.

Unless backpacking with an extended stay (a wilderness permit is required for overnight visitors), a small daypack generally fits most needs. Proper-fitting footwear, insect repellent, sunscreen, raingear and water are musts, while adjustable walking staffs make it easier on the knees.

Numerous forest service campgrounds are available in the area and diverse lodging and dining accommodations are abundant in Lee Vining, www.leevining.com or (760) 647-6629. ■

FIND FISH NEAR YOU!

Discover the best hotspots in your state, plus great local tactics that catch more fish.

CaliforniaGameandFish.com