




Mammoth Lakes, ENORMOUS OPPORTUNITY

The Eastern Sierras' Mammoth Lakes feature a slew of waters packed with five subspecies of trout.

by Don Vachini

Crystal Lake is nestled below Crystal Crag. Here, the author plies the outlet for rising goldens. ■ Photo by Don Vachini.



Whether approaching the town of Mammoth Lakes via Highway

203 or its Scenic Loop, the hulking prominence of Mammoth Mountain dominates the landscape. Once an active volcano, it still shrugs its shoulders, causing mild tremors and belches carbon dioxide and steam from geo-thermal fissures to remind us of its violent past.

Extremely popular as a winter ski destination, this Eastern Sierra monolith, located 30 miles north of Bishop off Highway 395, also provides sustenance to a multitude of waters brimming with trout. In fact, depending on the season, it can rightfully be referred to as a ski resort with trout options or a trout venue with ski opportunities.

A TROUT FACTORY

Piscatorially speaking, the Mammoth Lakes Basin (MLB) is truly a bonafide angling mecca. With close to 20 productive lakes and streams concentrated within a 6-mile radius of the town's center and boasting five trout subspecies, there is virtually something for everyone. Indeed, anglers can opt for hatchery rainbows from highly accessible and heavily-planted lakes and streams; strap on a day pack and hike to nearby lofty tarns for gaudily-attired brook, cutthroat and goldens or take on exceedingly wary browns, 'bows or goldens on a pair of challenging, PhD-type waters. Of course, the possibility of completing a "Sierra Slam" always beckons!

Geologically, the region's relatively low Mammoth Pass helps channel westerly storms toward the mountain, creating heavier winter snowfall on its slopes. While cherished by ski enthusiasts, this abundant snowpack also has a beneficial effect on the area's fishery, according to longtime resident Brad Beckering, owner of Brookie Brad's Guide Service (760-221-2575; info@brookiebrad.com). Its meltage filters through a network of subterranean vents from the ancient volcano. Here, leached minerals from deep in the bowels of this mountain seep into aquifers to help create prodigious

aquatic plant life throughout the watershed. "This weed growth accounts for a healthy and varied insect food base for resident trout," says Beckering, "helping to nurture an ongoing trout factory."

THE CORE WATERS

Sitting within the Inyo National Forest boundary just outside city limits, Twin, George, Mamie and Mary lakes are linked by Lake Mary Road. The focus of many campers, car-bound anglers and locals looking for a trout dinner, these drinking-supply waters are recipients of bountiful Department of Fish and Game (DFG)-stocked rainbows of varying size. They also house some elusive browns plus an occasional brook trout.

While over 90,000 DFG rainbows in the 10- to 12-inch range make up the bulk of the "loop's" trout, Beckering believes that it is the private, supplemental infusion of nearly 9,000 pounds of what is known locally as Alpers trout that makes these lakes so attractive.

Developed by local aquaculturist Tim Alpers, this aesthetic rainbow strain is not only noted for its robust size (ranging from 3 to 12 pounds) but its ferocious pugnacity, which often manifests as a violently pulsating rod and screeching reel. "A mighty good reason for the annual contract to augment MLB waters with this extremely popular bonus trout!" proclaims Alpers.

The largest of this quartet, 140-acre Lake Mary forms the headwaters of Mammoth Creek while the deepest, 38-acre George Lake, is very popular with both shore and floating anglers. Just downstream from Mary, 19-acre Mamie Lake tumbles 300 feet straight down into Twin Lakes, (actually three small connected lakes). Here, during late-June through mid-July, lake-born Callibaetis mayfly hatches take place, and in-the-know fly-anglers working from a float tube or pram can meticulously ply small openings in Twin's weedbeds to meet some impressive browns and brookies.

After departing Twin Lakes, largely overlooked Mammoth Creek crashes steeply down slope before meandering through town as a cold, freestone

stream. Regularly stocked, it crosses under Highway 395 where parking areas provide additional access. As its gradient slows greatly and thermal springs warm its temperature near the valley floor, its moniker changes to Hot Creek (see "Other Area Options").

UPPER BASIN STILLWATERS

Cutthroat and golden reside in two lakes but brook trout are the dominant species in the MLB's higher-elevation lakes, which compete for attention with the grandeur of Crystal Crag and the Mammoth Crest. All require a hike or climb of some sort to try for their exotic prizes.

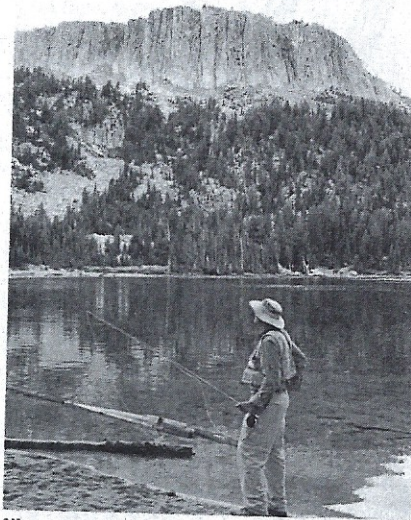
Horseshoe Lake can be reached by following the Lake Mary Road to its turnabout, then walking 1/8 mile. An easy, half-mile trail from the George Lake parking area brings hikers to popular, albeit heavily fished, T.J. and Barrett lakes. The pair of Sherwin lakes and their connecting creek and ponds are achieved via a one-hour, 2-mile hike. Driving south from town .8 mile on Old Mammoth Road, follow the turnoff to the trailhead parking.

All of the above destinations house healthy and varying densities of native *Salvelinus fontinalis* up to 11 inches.

Three-quarters of a mile from the Horseshoe Lake trailhead, 9-acre McLeod Lake (9,250-foot elev.) offers a quick escape from crowds and a picturesque setting. As part of an ongoing 1984 Cal Trout project (dubbed Martis II), it also maintains a special fishery solely for Lahontan cutthroat trout, which are protected by barbless-hook and zero-limit regulations.

The cutts here commonly range between 10 to 12 inches. Erratically darting a purple Marabou Leech across a sandy shoal, I set the hook on a subtle tap, expecting a nimble, pan-sized scrapper. However, to my utter amazement, a dogged, bottom-hugging battle ensued and after a few tense moments, a sleek, silvery 16-incher was soon recovering in the shallows!

Steadily ascending the steep, one-mile trail from George Lake to 9,600-foot Crystal Lake will leave you huffing and puffing, but the 45-minute, sweat-equity effort is definitely worth



Nine-acre McLeod Lake offers scenery, solitude and Lahontan cutthroat. ■ Photo by Don Vachini.

it. Nestled between the Mammoth Crest and 10,400-foot Crystal Crag, this 8-acre gem is home to kaleidoscopic golden trout, the basin's glamorous species.

Indeed, during the magical light of early day, I've often marveled at iridescent individuals; their thrashing seemingly setting the translucent water on fire with flaming orange hues as they attempt to unbutton the fly that betrayed them.

OTHER AREA OPTIONS

Park at the Mammoth Mountain Ski Lodge and proceed over Minaret Summit via a required shuttle service to visit the Middle Fork of the San Joaquin River. Heavily planted in the vicinity of Soda Springs Campground, it is also subject to heavy pressure from campers and day-users bouncing red salmon eggs. However, Beckering suggests hiking well upstream where a lovely combination of meadow meanders, pocket water, pools and riffles provide a more intimate setting for its scaled-down brook, brown and rainbows along with an occasional golden/rainbow hybrid. "Fine leaders and precise presentations of tiny nymphs or dries are necessary, but you'll find solitude."

Home to thin densities of trophy goldens in the 12- to 16-inch range, the in-tandem Laurel lakes sit amid

talus slopes and glacial moraine at the 10,000-foot elevation between Laurel (11,812 feet) and Bloody (12,544 feet) mountains. From Old Mammoth Road, they are reached by 5 miles of tedious, four-wheel-drive road, which is definitely not for the faint of heart (or vehicle).

Self-sustaining populations are maintained thanks to a two-fish limit, 14-inch minimum size and barbless hooks regulations. However, anglers expecting easy targets after completing the rigorous drive will find these fish reclusive with a reputation for being difficult-to-catch, according to guide Scott Flint (530-412-1638; fishwithflint@yahoo.com).

While indicator nymphing with midge and scud patterns danced vertically through the gently moving inlet channel will produce, a float tube or floating craft is mandatory for a more advantageous exploration. Stripping or trolling size 8-10, yellow-, olive- or purple-shaded beadhead Woolly Buggers or Matukas through deeper "money zones" can stir aggressive tendencies.

Flint recommends a 10-foot, 5- or 6-weight rod matched with an intermediate or high-density sinking line. "Twelve-15 foot leaders are standard and stouter, 2X-4X fluorocarbon tippet help absorb the golden's jolting strikes and deter them from reaching jagged obstacles."

Hot Creek is an almost mystical destination for serious fly-anglers. Governed by zero-take and barbless-fly regulations and no-wading restrictions, this special fishery is open all year. However, to realistically pursue the wild rainbows and browns on its slow-moving, gin-clear waters, Beckering cautions that anglers will need mastery of spring-creek fly-fishing techniques and sophisticated line handling skills to get dead drifts in the conflicting currents. "A floating line, 10- to 12-foot leader and 6X tippet will best present size 18-22 Baetis, micro caddis, midges, PMD's and Tricos, which duplicate life stages of the insects present."

SPIN GEAR

As their numbers get thinned by a gauntlet of anglers tossing lures and baits at them, Beckering feels the re-

maining "educated" trout need to visualize something they haven't seen or have it presented in a different way. His preferred choice when working the MLB's core lakes is a 7 1/2- to 9-foot, light-action spinning rod and reel loaded with thin-diameter, 6-pound monofilament and a smooth-functioning drag. While great for distance casting and imparting sharp directional changes in deep-running Little Cleos, Crippures or Phoebe spoons, the longer rod is also very efficient for absorbing the high-voltage runs of hyper-kinetic Alpers with attitude.

Another of his "secret weapons" is towing a rainbow- or brown-finished Thomas Bouyant or silver/blue Kastmaster spoon, doused in scent, 4-5 feet behind a clear plastic bubble filled with water. In keeping the spoon off bottom, this setup helps the lure attain an erratic, disoriented baitfish motion while laying a scent trail through the water column.

Instead of soaking live worms or nightcrawlers, Beckering prefers the newer, life-like Power Grubs or Power Worms bathed in krill scent and rigged on a sliding sinker.

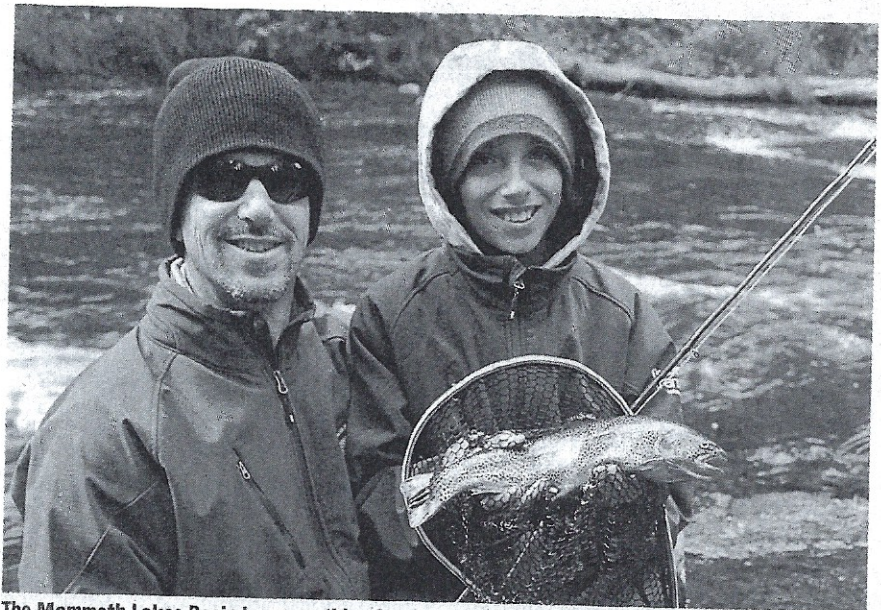
For the scaled-down residents in the smaller, upper basin stillwaters, a 6- to 7-foot, ultra-light spinning rod and reel with 2- to 4-pound monofilament is perfect for either retrieving shiny, size 0, in-line Vibrax, Panther Martin, Mepps or Rooster Tail spinners with barbless hooks or a fly/bubble setup.

If using a tiny spinner, tie a nymph 3 feet behind it or, if using a fly/bubble, attach a pair of flies in tandem to help entice action.

Whether massive or small, study the stillwaters' underwater topography. Most residents establish cruise patterns near drop-off zones and moving water where they can easily ambush prey yet retreat to the safety of deeper structure. Strategically, lengthy casts and slow, fluttering retrieves parallel to darker-shaded shelflines often provide a payoff combination.

FLY TACKLE

While timber surrounds these lakes and predictable hatches of black caddis, green midges and stoneflies provide solid nourishment, fortuitous afternoon upslope zephyrs from nearby



The Mammoth Lakes Basin has something for everyone. The author's son, Chris, and grandson, Domenic, combined to fool this handsome rainbow by drifting a nymph on Mammoth Creek. ■ Photo by Don Vachini.

Mammoth Pass often air-drop additional varieties of winged insects and terrestrials. During these deposits, trout will routinely stalk the choppy shoreline and twitching Ant, Beetle and Hopper terrestrials will usually ring their dinner bell.

A nine-foot, 2- to 4-weight rod combined with either a floating or sinking line is well-suited for the MLB. Most dark, nymphal forgeries work here with size 14-18 bead-head Psycho Prince, Flashback Pheasant-Tail and Bird's Nest being the top choices. For tempting rising fish, cast Madame-X, Parachute Adams, E/C Caddis or Calibaetis dries or offer size 14-18 Copper John, Brassie or Zebra Midge patterns looped under a size 12 Elk Hair Caddis, Rubberlegs or Light Cahill in a dry/dropper combination.

Waders can effectively flick offerings across littoral zones but float tubes are more effective for slowly stripping size 10-12 Woolly Bugger or Leech streamers from shallow through deep water.

Whether visiting early in May, throughout the summer or arriving when fall paints the hardwoods yellow and orange, Beckering firmly believes that the Lakes Basin, "... truly, offers something for everyone!"

HELPFUL RESOURCES

Numerous U.S. Forest Service camp-

sites adorn the Basin Lakes along with basic services to include boat rentals, launches and groceries. Call (760) 924-5529 or visit the Mammoth Visitors Center, off Highway 203 at the entrance to town.

For lodging and dining services from fine to frugal, contact the Mammoth Lakes Visitors Bureau, (760) 934-2712 or visit www.visitmammoth.com.

Three sport shops in town, each catering to anglers of all preferences, offer reliable information, tackle and guide services. Contact Kittredge Sports (760) 934-7566; Rick's Sport Shop (760) 934-3416, www.rickssportcenter.com; or The Troutfitter (760) 934-2517, www.thetroudfitter.com.

The Mammoth Lakes Pack Outfit (888-475-8747; www.mammothpack.com), will ably assist with backcountry travel. ■

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