

8-weight rod is the usual choice, depending on your preference and even the type of boat. If you're netting your own fish from a small boat, you will appreciate a heavier rod when making the last lift into the net. Traditionally, smaller (size 8 to 10) pink flies retrieved with some fluttering, jigging action are the ticket here, but many anglers find success with a baitfish selection, depending on different factors, such as salinity. Start with a 16-inch strip and count your pauses, varying the speed until you find the rhythm that draws a bite. Once you dial in the rhythm, you, too, will come to respect the pink salmon run on the Duwamish.

Highland Lakes, CA By Don Vachini
 During the late 1850s, Major John Ebbetts surveyed a portion of the Sierra Nevada as a site for a trans-Sierra railroad route. However, his final assessment of the specific locale, approximately 40 miles south of Lake Tahoe, was unfavorable due to the ruggedness of the terrain and the heavy snowfall, which typically plagues the summit late into spring. Today, the harsh landscape still keeps this area somewhat isolated, while its consistent snowpack continues to provide ample cold water for the area's trout.

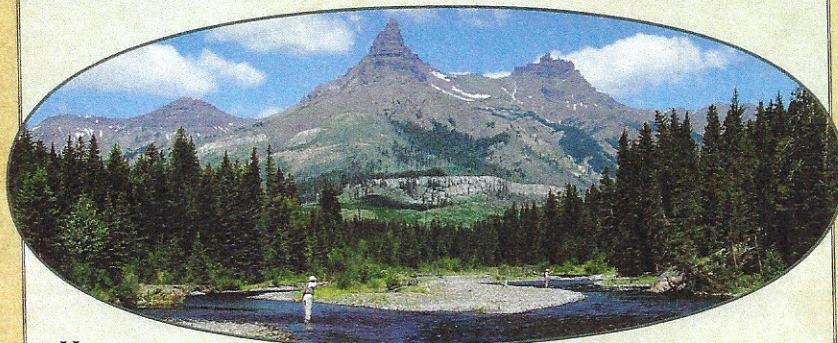
Nestled in a lush, wildflower-studded meadow at 8,600 feet and overlooked by spectacular Hiram Peak, the two Highland Lakes are within shouting distance of the pass named after Ebbetts. Sitting at the top of the drainage, adjacent to the Carson-Iceberg Wilderness boundary, Lower Highland Lake is the headwater feeder for the North Fork Mokelumne River. Neighboring Upper Highland Lake drains the opposite direction, creating Highland Creek, which meanders into Spicer Meadow Reservoir in the Stanislaus River drainage.

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About a decade and a half ago, these two Stanislaus National Forest waters were consistently put-and-grow brook trout fisheries. The annual infusion of fingerlings ensured healthy populations of the brightly attired hold-over char, which often reached 13 inches. However, when California Department of Fish and Game surveys during the late 1990s revealed the presence of Yosemite toads, all stocking ceased to avoid ecological conflicts. Despite the cessa-

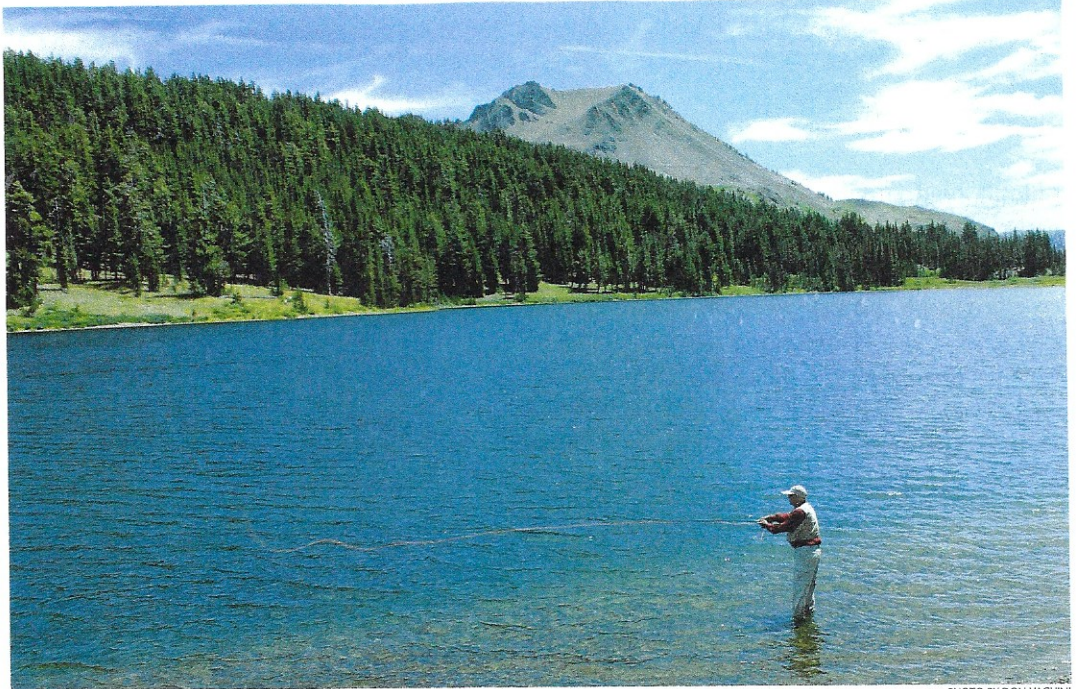


PHOTO BY DON VACHINI

tion of stocking, *Salvelinus fontinalis* continue to maintain self-sustaining populations thanks to adequate spawning habitat, sanctuary, and suitable nutrients. In keeping with their high-altitude environment, though, they aren't present in huge numbers, and their size typically ranges from 7 to 10 inches. However, their pugnacity tends to be pleasantly disproportionate to their size.

Susceptible to daily zephyrs, both tiny lakes remain popular for either wading or float-tubing, although persistent anglers have to work to ring the wary natives' dinner bell. Tubers who back-troll the deepest parts of the lakes during midday will occasionally reap dividends, and patient waders presenting parallel to the drop-off edges can entice cruisers. On 17-acre Lower Highland, dredging deep through a pair of springs or along the inlet channel can yield aggressive takes, while the narrow, moving outlet of the 6-acre upper lake commonly holds active feeders.

Resident trout actively collect food just below the surface during midmorning or late-afternoon fringe times. Gently twitching a dry/dropper tandem every 15 to 20 seconds or so can be effective.

Top-water flies become my favorite when the winds have died down and the trout dimple the surface like rainfall in the twilight's last gleaming. Camping at the Highland Lakes Campground merits consideration because it allows sampling the prime early-and late-day feeding windows.

Both waters are perfect for a 9-foot, 3-weight fly outfit. Due to its versatility, I often favor a floating line and a 9-foot leader matched with a 5X or 6X tippet. Because insects here are standard backcountry issue, meat-and-potatoes

imitations should imitate size 12 to 18 caddisflies, damselflies, mosquitoes, and mayflies. Effective dry patterns include Parachute Adams, orange Humpy, Cutter's Perfect Ant, Callibaetis Mayfly, and Blue Damsel. Nearby timber also makes a Boatman, Foam Beetle, Joe's Hopper, or Rubberleg Spider a worthwhile terrestrial option.

Subsurface choices should include size 12 black, chartreuse, and olive Woolly Buggers; purple or black leech patterns; and size 16 to 18 red Copper Johns, Flashback Pheasant Tails, Prince Nymphs, Bird's Nests, and olive Scuds.

For wilderness permits or camping information, contact Stanislaus National Forest headquarters at (209) 532-3671, www.fs.usda.gov/stanislaus. Limited services are available in Marleeville, Topaz, and Coleville. Meadowcliff Resort owner Tim Fesko, (530) 495-2255, www.meadowcliff.com, is a knowledgeable source of timely and accurate angling information and offers angler-friendly rates.

Although the area is a bit far-fetched for rail travel, anglers who make tracks to the Highland Lakes will usually not be disappointed.



PHOTO BY DON VACHINI