

Back to Bass-less in Miramonte

Colorado is whippin' up a kick in the bass at one of the West's top trout lakes. Late this summer, says Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW), bass-infested water will be drained from Miramonte Reservoir and the residual hit with the organic killer chemical rotenone in an all-out effort to rid the mega-popular western Colorado reservoir of illegally introduced smallmouth bass. The reservoir, located 10 miles south of Norwood, had a national reputation for huge rainbow and brown trout until a few years ago when a midnight bucket biologist illegally dumped bass. In two years, smallmouth accounted for 44 percent of the fish in the reservoir and are now the top predator. Killing all fish in Miramonte is a last resort, says Renzo Del Piccolo, area wildlife manager, but unchecked, bass will devastate Miramonte's famous trout fishery. The fix will cost about \$100,000 plus staff time.

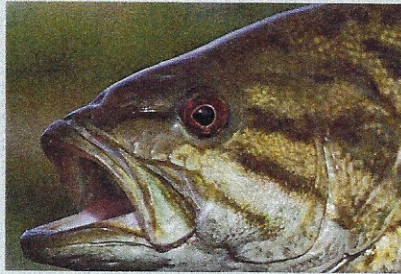


PHOTO BY JON LUKE

Sheep Creek Rehab

An ambitious rehab effort is underway in Utah's Uinta Mountains to chemically purge 8.7 miles of tributaries, nine lakes, and a section of the Middle Fork of Sheep Creek. The targets are rainbows, Yellowstone cutthroat, brookies, and cutbows. The goal, says Utah Division of Wildlife Resource fish managers, is to restock the Colorado River drainage with Colorado River cutthroat trout, the only trout native to the Uinta Mountains and the Colorado River. As



PHOTO BY RON STEWART/UTAH DIVISION OF WILDLIFE RESOURCES

interim sport fill, sterile tiger trout will be added to the lakes and tributaries to supplement sport fishing. Fisheries experts believe the Colorado River cutts will naturally repopulate the Sheep Creek drainage. This subspecies of cutthroat has been twice nominated for endangered species status but denied because of recovery efforts.

Open Again—At Last

It had been almost two decades since fly fishers dropped a legal line in Silver Creek in California's Eastern Sierra—until last fall, when the California Department of Fish and Game (DFG) gave the Southwest Council Federation of Fly Fishers the okay for a special brook trout annihilation. The opening came with a mandatory brook trout catch-and-kill caveat with no limits and no exceptions; DFG's motive was to rid the stream of brookies in order to grow Lahontan cutthroat exclusively. Any brookies fly rodders missed in the clear, shallow, stream were zapped with electroshocking equipment and bucketed. No word on when Silver Creek might rebound as a Lahontan fishery.

Backcasting into Texas Traffic

From February to April, when white bass are running in the Neches River above Texas's Lake Palestine, cars line both sides of Texas Route 31 east of Chandler, and a battalion of anglers scramble through traffic to cross the busy four-lane road to reach the water. "It's dangerous. Someone could get killed," says Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) inland fisheries biologist Richard Ott. The problem was private property that limited parking and access. But no more. The property owner has agreed to give anglers access to the river edge and work is underway on a new access area with an acre of parking north of the highway that will connect with the existing parking lot, boat ramp, and park on the south side. The \$25,000 funding came from a federal habitat incentive program and the East Texas Woods and Waters Foundation. Next step for TPWD is to find a partner with deep pockets to help pay for a walkway.



PHOTO BY MICHAEL BANKS

Laurel Lakes, CA

By Don Vachini

Strictly a high-altitude trout, the golden is often insulated from anglers by wilderness, pervading the headwater streams and lakes tucked against the precipitous ridgelines of the Sierra Nevada crest, usually accessible only by foot or horseback.

But exceptions do exist. For anglers committed to driving in search of outsize goldens, few locations equal the Laurel Lakes, located just south of the town of Mammoth Lakes, in the Inyo National Forest. Four-acre Lower Laurel sits right at 10,000 feet, while Upper Laurel is a few feet higher and covers 9 acres. Once brood-stock waters for golden trout, the lakes normally thaw by early July, and remain open to angling until mid-November.

The lakes once produced goldens over 3 pounds, with 14- to 18-inchers being common, but overzealous, consumptive anglers hammered the fishery. To save the dwindling population of goldens, in 1992, the California Department of Fish and Game initiated a limit of two trout at least 14 inches long. Barbless hooks were also stipulated. Blessed with deep water, limited spawning, and a solid aquatic and terrestrial food base, the golden trout population rebounded. Though not abundant, healthy 12- to 15-inch fish now occupy the lakes, with even larger specimens finning the depths.

However, anglers expecting easy targets after completing the rigorous drive to the lakes will find these fish extremely wary and deserving of their reputation of being difficult to catch. They are most vulnerable right after ice-out, when amorous intent compels them to gather in the shallow inlets or outlets to prepare for spawning. At this time, orange or red egg patterns bounced among concentrated fish can be effective.

After spawning, the larger goldens scatter, become loners, and forage on scuds and phytoplankton in the sanctuary of deep, protective cover. While potential exists along any structure,

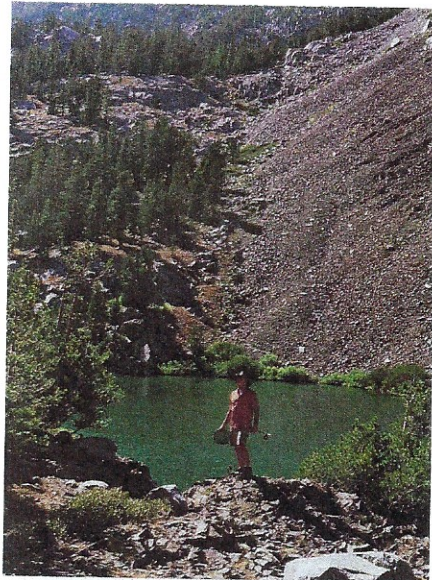


PHOTO BY DON VACHINI

White Mountain Wilderness, NM By Devon Fletcher

I consider the creeks of the White Mountain Wilderness near Ruidoso, New Mexico, to be my home waters. I know they're more than 100 miles north of my house in Las Cruces, but that's just a fact of life here in New Mexico: most of us live and work in the desert valleys, but we play and fish in the mountains.

A two-hour drive takes me to Three Rivers. Its name notwithstanding, Three Rivers is a very small, steep creek on the western flank of the 11,981-foot Sierra Blanca, the "white mountain" for which the wilderness is named. The peak—which is not actually in the wilderness but on the Mescalero Apache Reservation—towers 7,000 feet above the desert floor, high enough to make its own weather and provide enough moisture to sustain several small trout streams, including Three Rivers.

The creek flows into a closed desert basin, disappearing beneath the sand. To fish this stream successfully, you must hide behind boulders, stumble down steep banks, and frequently resort to bow-and-arrow casts. The quarry is mostly 6- to 8-inch brook trout, but the occasional 10- or 11-incher provides quite a thrill in this tiny fishery. Take your shortest, lightest rod, possibly some kneepads, and you'll have a lot of fun.

Directly across the White Mountains Crest to the east are the Rio Bonito drainages, about 15 miles northeast of the resort town of Ruidoso. Passing by heavily stocked Bonito Lake (open April through November) takes you first to South Fork Bonito Creek and then to the permanent stretch of the Bonito main stem 7 miles farther down Forest Road 107. The reliable water on the main-stem Bonito, and the best fishing, is in the wilderness, but even there, the stream can get frighteningly low in dry years.

Up high, the South Fork has more fish—small rainbows, brookies, and even a few cuttbows. Even in dry years, the South Fork also has reliable water in late spring and early summer before the monsoon starts, usually July and August unless it's a drought year. This water clears much more quickly than the main stem. The nearby Ruidoso River may run as brown as chocolate milk for a week or more after a heavy summer rain, while the South Fork will clear in a day or two.

The only problem with the South Fork is the developed and popular Forest Service campground of the same name that sits beside the creek, assuring a steady supply of backpackers, picnickers, and hikers all along the stream every weekend in the spring. Once school lets out, they'll be there every day all summer long. Walking in a couple of miles leaves most of them behind, but you'll need lots of luck to enjoy the inviting pools less than a mile from the trailhead. If they don't have kids jumping into them, they're frequently fished out by mid-July.

Small tributaries of both forks hold brook trout. Some, such as Argentina Canyon—because it's really difficult to fish and also looks highly unlikely to contain trout—have grown some fairly large brookies in the past, bigger than in either branch. Argentina was silted in and had little habitat the last time I visited, but the brookies should return.

In July 2008, the remnants of Hurricane Dolly brought excessive precipitation into the area. Sierra Blanca received 9 inches of rain in one



night, and the resulting floods heavily eroded streams in the wilderness. Despite these lingering problems, the waters of the Sierra Blanca bear remembering: they should offer plenty of fun for intrepid anglers who keep their ears to the ground.

ledges, submerged boulder fields, and huge talus slabs provide opportunities for the goldens to ambush prey. Size 14 or 16 copper or tungsten beadhead Prince, Pheasant Tail, and Hare's Ear Nymphs danced vertically through the water column are always reasonable choices, but size 8 or 10 yellow, olive, or purple beadhead Woolly Buggers or Matukas seem to provoke more aggressive strikes. Adding a midge trailer often provides the pièce de résistance.

Float tubes or canoes are ideal for the Laurel lakes; shoreline anglers are often frustrated, unable to achieve the distances needed to reach the deep dwellers. Lay out 40 to 50 feet of fast-sinking line, let it descend to around 30 feet, and slowly begin a retrieve. Stripping or trolling your fly through shallow-to-deeper "money" zones can pique the interest of reclusive trout.

To reach the lakes from Mammoth Lakes, follow Mammoth Creek Road downstream for 2 miles past Sherwin Creek Campground and turn right onto a four-wheel-drive road. Susceptible to erosion, and marked in places by deep ruts and exposed boulders, it winds steeply for 5 miles up picturesque Laurel Canyon. A high-clearance vehicle is mandatory. Rick's Sport Center (760) 934-3416, provides friendly angling information, and Mammoth Lakes Visitors Bureau, (760) 934-2712, www.visitmammoth.com, can help with local information.