

# California Trout Preview

*Here's a primer on the best waters for California trout this year.*

BY DON VACHINI



An angler battles a feisty rainbow from North Lake amid the serrated backdrop of the Eastern Sierra. ■ Photo by Don Vachini.





Surviving holdover planters can grow to hefty size in most still waters, as this Big Bear Lake resident attests. ■ Photo by Don Vachini.

**G**olden State anglers are truly blessed. One can pretty much place a finger on the state's map and be near a body of water holding trout. With a plethora of lake and stream options existing among abundant public lands, visitors can pursue brook, brown, cutthroat, golden, mackinaw and rainbows among myriad destinations, ranging from low-elevation impoundments to physically challenging waters near the clouds.

Whether young or old, tossing a spinner or flicking flies, operating from a chair (or wheelchair), trolling in a boat, wading a stream or donning a daypack in search of solitude, there is room for every preference and method as well.

Despite the state's ongoing budget crisis, the Department of Fish and Game's (DFG) regional hatcheries continue to be more efficient at infusing huge numbers on a regular basis. Privately-funded facilities provide supplemental "bonus" fish, ensuring a solid chance at success. Barring unforeseen circumstances, fisheries biologists, guides and lake managers are optimistic about the upcoming trout season. The following is a crystal ball look at some of the more productive 2013 hotspots statewide.

#### **SOUTHERN CAL**

Based on their geography, the state's southern-most reservoirs are considered warm-water fisheries. However, when winter's chill significantly lowers their temperatures, conditions be-

come prime for trout plants, which usually occur from late November through March.

In the San Diego area, Lake Morena and Lake Cuyamaca provide great spring angling while to the north, anglers should visit Lake Poway, Escondido's Dixon and Wohlford lakes and Lake Jennings in Lakeside. All of these impoundments are noted for bass in the summer months but double as excellent winter/early-spring trout holes. Visit [www.sdfish.com](http://www.sdfish.com) for updated information.

Inland Empire waters that should also be solid through spring include Lake Hemut, Lake Gregory and Lake Silverwood, which often allow for holdovers to survive.

While the well-known, pay-to-play Santa Ana River Lakes always contain sizeable trout, the regions top-producing water is Diamond Valley Reservoir, the largest reservoir in Southern California. Although browns were introduced here in 2007, DFG rainbows make up the bulk of the catch. With shoreline access restricted, boat or kayak anglers enjoy chasing trout all over this select water.

Higher up in the mountains of San Bernardino National Forest, count on Big Bear Lake to remain a first-rate rainbow fishery from spring through fall, according to its director of marketing, Dan McKernan. "In addition to 2,000 pounds of bi-weekly plants, aggressive, pink-meat holdover trout from past derbies always seem to make





DFG plants account for many happy excursions. Here, the author's son, Chris, and grandson, Domenic, share a "rainbow" moment. ■ Photo by Don Vachini.

for some exciting action."

### CENTRAL CAL

Several dammed rivers have created noteworthy reservoirs along the west slope of the Sierra Nevada. Although designed with agricultural irrigation needs in mind, they have also become popular trout destinations for both planted rainbows and hefty carryovers.

Since it drains a vast backcountry, the Kern River's early-season water levels can be dangerously high. A specially designated "wild trout" water above the Johnsondale Bridge, it will continue to be one of the state's more heavily stocked river fisheries below. Best times are usually after run-off from July through the fall.

Shaver Lake, east of Fresno, was virtually emptied two seasons ago for repairs to its dam. To make up for this inconvenience, it was heavily stocked with trophy trout upon re-opening last year and rebounded better than expected. On the horizon, plenty of DFG and private plants are again ticketed, and holdover fish, some approaching 6 pounds, will more than add to the drama.

Higher up in the drainage along Highway 168, Huntington, Florence and Edison lakes should continue producing heard-earned chunky browns while popular gateway trails lead to the largest concentration of golden trout waters in the world.

Courtright Reservoir, Wishon Lake and Pine Flat Reservoir remain well-stocked throughout the season and continue to be highly popular for the boating crowd.

The Kings River below Pine Flat Reservoir, the San Joaquin River below Friant, the Tuolumne River and the North, Middle and South forks of the Stanislaus River are all heavily stocked and their forest-cooled flows usually hold up very well.

Lower-elevation McClure and McSwain lakes, located east of Modesto, will continue receiving a pleasant mix of rainbows and brook trout.

New Melones, Don Pedro and Tull-och are best worked with boats. Some impressive, multi-year holdover specimens reside here and, along with fair-sized schools of kokanee salmon, attain unexpected size in these deep, cold impoundments.

Some eye-opening trout exist in Caples and Silver lakes, located along Highway 88 near Carson Pass. While both are heavily planted with rainbows, they also house mackinaw and brown trout for those willing to utilize specialized, deep-water tactics. Two-year holdover Chauk Mound Hatchery rainbows from Nebraska, possibly up to 10 pounds, continue finning in Caples.

### EASTERN SIERRA

When it comes to this region, where NOT to fish should be the question.

Encompassing a geographic area along the Sierra Nevada Crest northward from Mt. Whitney to just south of Lake Tahoe, this harsh landscape with a dramatic backdrop of mountain crags, is undoubtedly the most reliable and consistent place to catch trout in the state. Also known as the roadway to trout, Highway 395 reaches, crosses or parallels some of its best waterways.

Basically, all of the waters on the east side should remain productive from both qualitative and quantitative aspects, according to Jim Erdman, DFG fisheries biologist in the Bishop office. "The prognosis for 2013 is expected to be good throughout the season."

Last year, nearly 900,000 pounds of catchables were distributed throughout Region 6. "While this year's allotment numbers should remain about the same, individual trout sizes are anticipated to be slightly larger overall," Erdman said.

You can't go wrong on the Bishop Creek drainage, which includes the multiple forks of Bishop Creek plus North, South and Sabrina lakes along with Intake II. These, plus a few others, benefit hugely from both private and DFG trout plants. Trailheads to the John Muir Wilderness originate at North and South lakes, offering uncrowded chances at vivid brookies and gaudy goldens while down in the Owens Valley, Pleasant Valley Reservoir contains solid densities of current planters plus leviathan 'bows and browns.

According to Brad Beckering of Brookie Brad's Guide Service (info@brookiebrad.com), the Mammoth Lakes basin should again provide a bevy of trout activity. In-town Mamie, Mary, George and Twin lakes satisfy patient bait-dunkers while a five-trout "Sierra Slam" opportunity is available from waters in or very near the city limits. Nearby Convict Lake and Creek combination is fantastic for more-than-willing browns and rainbows while Hot Creek offers PhD-type challenges for its highly educated browns and rainbows.

Further north, Beckering believes the June Lake Loop still waters (June, Gull, Silver and Grant) and Rush Creek, should continue their amazing results. Over the past five years all loop

*Continued on page 52...*



lakes have received put-and-grow Lahontan cutthroat, a fast-growing, long-living subspecies, in addition to bountiful rainbows from the DFG. "With specimens up to 4 pounds recently caught, June and Grant lakes possibly contain some of the largest cutthroat in the state," says Beckering.

Overflow crowds from Yosemite National Park find heavily-stocked Tioga, Ellery and Saddlebag lakes plus Lee Vining Creek, just the ticket for 11- to 13-inch planters along Highway 120.

Sitting above 9,400 feet, the Virginia Lakes chain of Big and Little Virginia and Trumbull lakes are heavily infused with rainbows and remain very popular with campers. The trio also contains brown and brook, some approaching 2-4 pounds while several backcountry options include hikes to the Hoover Wilderness and its golden trout.

The town of Bridgeport is a hub of varied angling for both big and little trout. Upper and Lower Twin lakes and Bridgeport Reservoir should be on the hit list for a chance at bigger 'bows and gargantuan browns approaching 10 pounds. Open all year, the East Walker below the reservoir is a well-respected stream for those interested in quality brown trout, while nutrient- and scud-rich Kirman Lake is noted for football-shaped, trophy brook trout and is governed by special regulations.

In addition, the West Walker and Little Walker rivers are great bets, receiving a huge number of planted bows to keep "roadside warriors" satisfied all season.

The East and West forks of the Carson River and Indian Creek Reservoir consistently produce eye-opening stringers. Located in the Markleeville area, they are beneficiaries of supplemental Alpine County plants of trophy-sized brook, Lahontan cutthroat and rainbow in addition to normal-sized DFG stocks.

Erdman hints that a selection of smaller, lesser-known, off-the-beaten-path creeks from Lone Pine north to Topaz can produce some unexpected results. Baker, Big Pine, Buckeye, Convict, Green, Lone Pine, McGee, Mill, Robinson and Virginia, among others, should be worthwhile and less crowded, he mentioned.

For those interested in wild trout, he suggests perusing the *Eastern Sierra*

*Backcountry Fishing Guide*, [www.dfg.ca.gov/region/6/](http://www.dfg.ca.gov/region/6/). This document, which lists only those waters inaccessible to vehicle and species present, is available for download.

### NORTHERN CAL

When referring to the north state, trout waters are spread out over a huge geographic area, from Coastal and Cascade mountain ranges to high sage desert. According to Curtis Milliron, a senior fisheries biologist with the DFG's Redding office, upcoming trout plants will continue to reflect this diversity, as DFG personnel will attempt to cover as many waters as feasible.

Large impoundments Shasta and Trinity (aka Claire Engle Lake) commonly provide good, season-long rainbow and brown action. The Sacramento River above Shasta is a world-renown stream for both planters and natives, Lake Siskiyou can be a sleeper for wily residents while wild rainbows in the 3-5 pound class in Redding make a great tailwater fishery below Shasta Dam.

Continuing on the road to recovery from a pike infestation several years ago, Davis Lake still receives large sizes and numbers of rainbows and browns while nearby Frenchman Lake (which also had pike removed) receives abundant plants. Numerous, well-fed holdovers in both lakes add suspense to each outing.

Any trip to the arid northeastern part of the state should include a visit to massive, 24,000-acre Eagle Lake, probably most famous for its unique strain of namesake trout. Located near Susanville, the fishery has remained stable for years despite varying water levels with trout in the 2- to 5-pound range common. An egg-taking and restocking program continues to maintain a viable, world-class fishery.

Located a short distance away, wild-card McCoy Flat Reservoir is another solid producer of exceptional Eagle Lake-strain rainbows and brook trout as well. Although it is heavily dependent on the amount of rainfall, and late-season irrigation drawdowns drastically affect it on a year-to-year basis, it remains noteworthy throughout most springtimes.

Trout-for-trout, probably the heaviest-stocked northern sector is the

Burney-McCloud area. Dominated by Mt. Lassen and Mt. Shasta and known as the Intermountain Area, snowmelt from these ancient volcanoes seeps deep into igneous aquifers, picks up leached minerals and subsequently exits as icy subterranean flows. Resultant nutrients produce prodigious plant growth, which in turn generates a phenomenal insect food base. In addition, Milliron hints that the consistent cold water helps maintain a healthy, year-round trout environment.

Huge numbers of brook and rainbow planters infused into Upper Hat Creek from Old Station to Cassell, Burney Creek above the falls and Baum Lake augment healthy native brookies, browns and 'bows. The McCloud River flowing along Highway 89 is heavily planted with an abundance of rainbows in the Fowler's Camp area.

### GENERAL INFORMATION TOOLS

A battery of online tools will make gathering pertinent information much easier. Of course, before fishing, you must have a current, valid fishing license. They can be purchased at many sporting venues or online at [www.dfg.ca.gov/](http://www.dfg.ca.gov/). Click on Online License Service.

For information on regulations, limits, seasons or closures, you should obtain a copy of the *2012-13 Sport Fishing Regulations* booklet and check out the area or specific water(s) you intend to fish. It is also available online at [www.dfg.ca.gov/regulations/Fresh-Fish\\_Mar2012](http://www.dfg.ca.gov/regulations/Fresh-Fish_Mar2012).

Once selecting a place to fish, contact local sport shop vendors for current information on weather and water conditions. On the DFG website, click on Fish Planting Schedule, which is updated in real time. Or, using the phone, call the numbers listed for the region you plan to fish. □

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