

Blue Lakes Basin, CA

Ghosts of Kit Carson, Washoe Indians, and the Legendary Salmon-Trout

By Don Vachini

Thirty miles south of the South Lake Tahoe casinos, a sparsely populated, Alpine County watershed retains its rustic Old West persona. And near Carson Pass, a cluster of natural tarns known as the Blue Lakes creates yearlong habitat for native and hatchery trout, offering challenging yet rewarding opportunities for fly fishers.

Archaeological research places Washoe Indians as inhabitants of the Tahoe Basin as early as about 6,000 years ago. Their nomadic lifestyle would change dramatically when explorers started arriving in the 1800s. Commissioned by the federal government, John C. Fremont and his guide, Kit Carson, explored extensively around western Nevada and east-central California. Beginning in 1849, after word of gold being discovered at Sutter's Mill spread like wildfire, an estimated 50,000 wagons and more than 200,000 gold seekers used the Carson Trail, later named the Mormon-Emigrant trail.

The tiny settlements of Markleville and Woodfords Station sprang up, servicing westward travelers and accommodating an estimated 10,000 people during the Comstock Lode's silver boom, which began in 1859. Just prior to the Civil War, young Pony Express riders gained notoriety by utilizing this east-west trail.

"World's Biggest Trout"

Today, State Route 88, a macadam two-laner, replaces the former mail and wagon route over the Sierra Nevada crest. Both paved and unpaved spur roads bisect portions of the Toiyabe and El Dorado National Forests,

linking modern-day trout prospectors to sites ranging in elevations from 4,400 to 10,000 feet.

Parking along the Blue Lakes Road above Faith Valley, I hiked along a headwater sector of the West Carson River

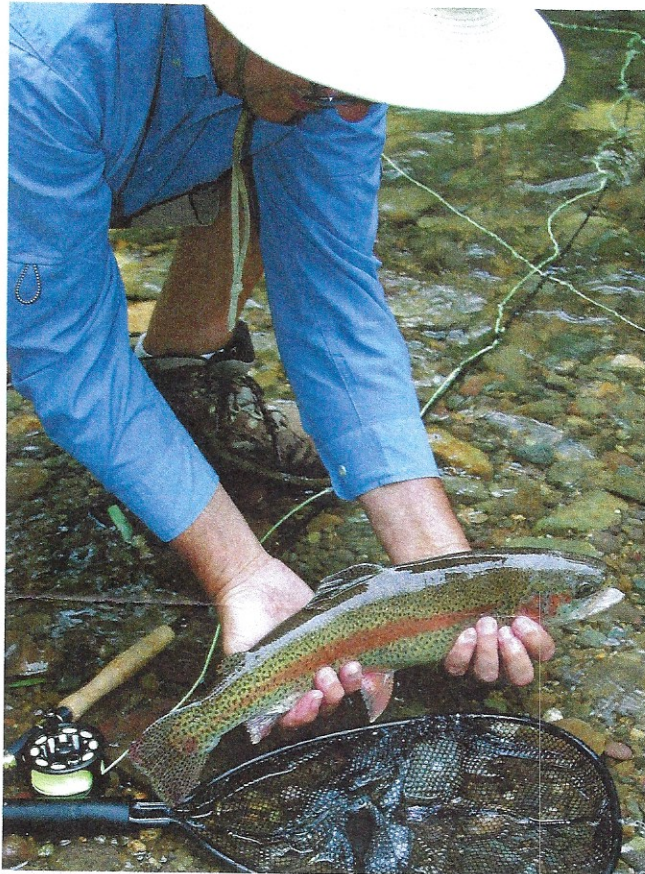
where wagon wheels once left ruts in the virgin soil. I crawled through a slight part in the willow-laden bank of a 4-foot-wide braid and emerged into an open tunnel in the dense shrubbery. Lying prone, I stripped out line and fed a size 14 Hot Wings Elk Hair Caddis through the passageway and into a scaled-down eddy along the opposite undercut bank.

The take was instantaneous. Instinctively raising the rod, I accidentally dislodged a few dead branches, which eerily rained down near the frantically-darting 9-inch trout tugging on my line. I soon brought the fish to hand and cradled it gently in the stream prior to releasing it; I admired its yellowish-bronze torso, sparsely spotted with black dots, and noted the characteristic orange-slashed mandibles that identified the fish as a cutthroat.

As the juvenile shot to freedom, I imagined what it would have been like tan-

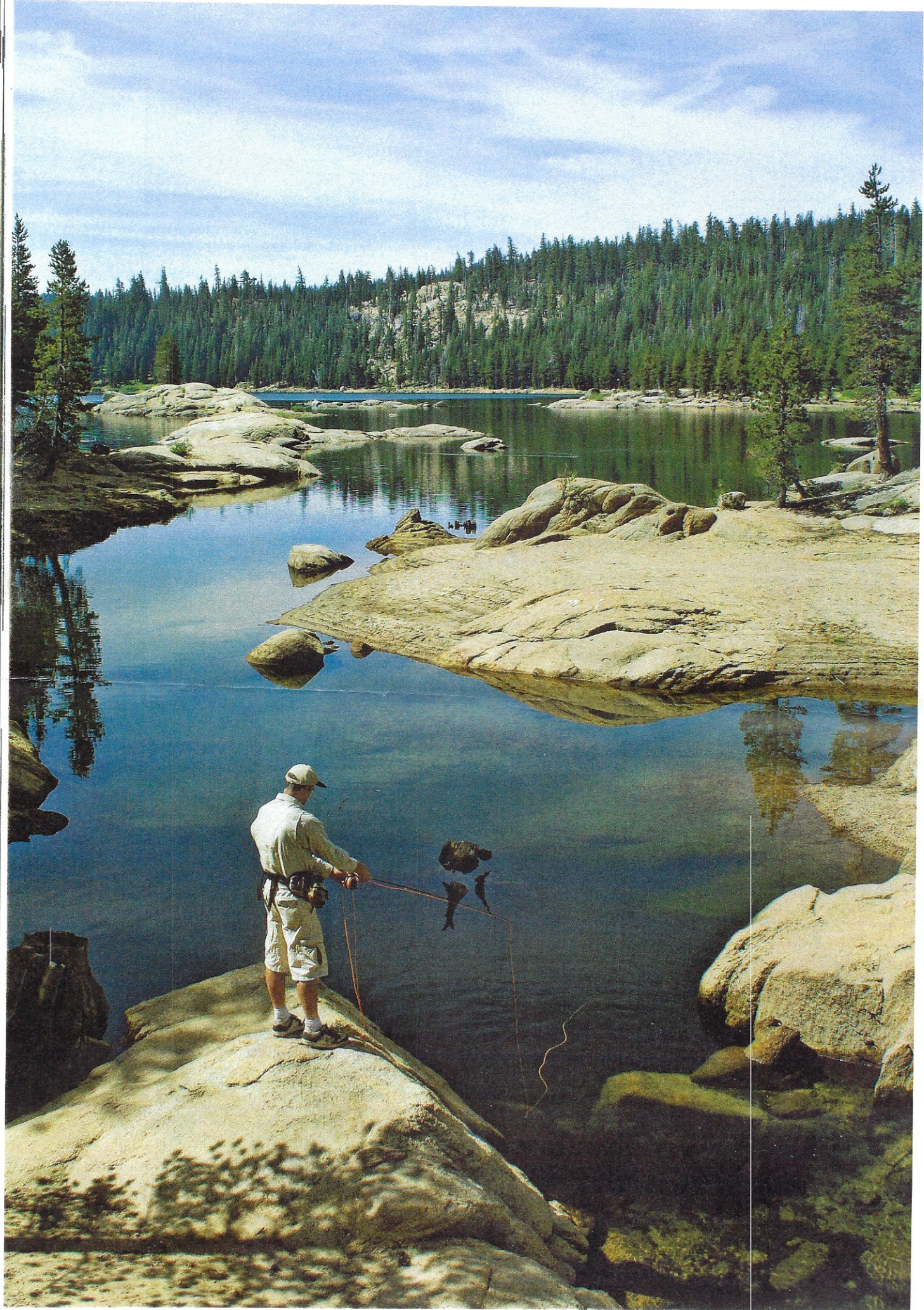
gling with one of this trout's immense ancestors during the early 1800s. To gain perspective, imagine Lake Lahontan, which was formed during the last major Pleistocene glaciation and occupied more than 8,000 square miles of western Nevada and northeastern California.

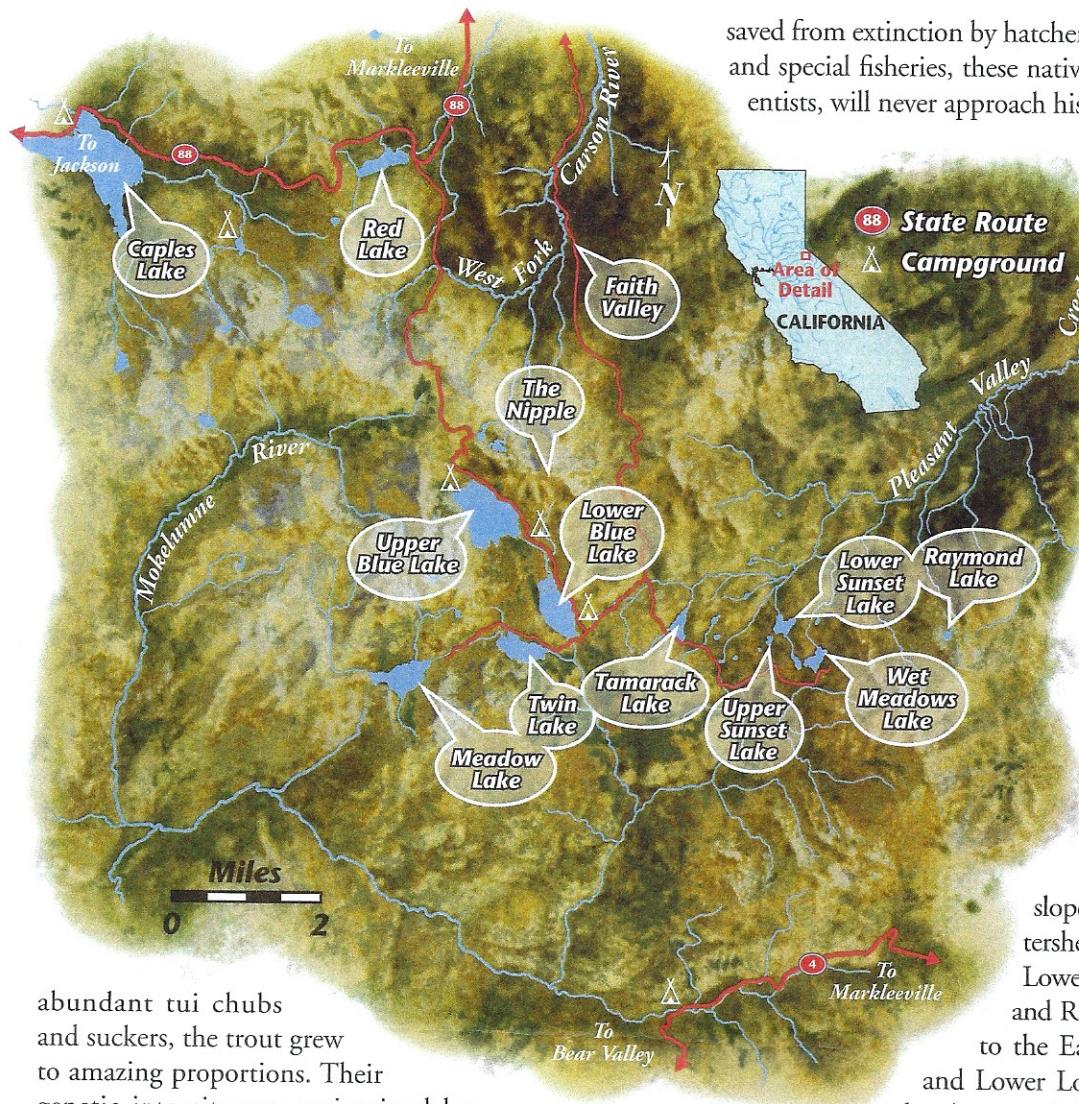
Snake River and Yellowstone cutthroat entered this vast inland sea via breaches in the Columbia River system during the middle Pleistocene's Illinoian Stage and, over the centuries, evolved into a separate subspecies. Thriving in the alkaline waters and feeding voraciously on



ALL PHOTOS BY DON VACHINI

The Alpine County Fish and Game Commission supplements state fish stockings in the West Carson River and Upper and Lower Blue Lakes with additional "bonus" rainbows in the 2- to 8-pound class. Here, the author prepares to release a healthy 4-pounder back into the headwaters of the West Carson in Faith Valley (above). The most consistent hotspot on Lower Blue Lake is the Blue Creek inlet channel. Here, the author's son, Jason Vachini, plies the slow-moving water (left).





saved from extinction by hatchery programs, refugariums, and special fisheries, these native cutthroat, say most scientists, will never approach historic proportions.

The Blues Layout

The Nipple (9,340 feet) and Jeff Davis Peak (8,990 feet) guard a dozen still waters scattered on both sides of the Sierra Nevada crest. Resting between 7,000 and 9,000 feet and ranging from 15 to 345 acres, seven of these lakes are currently home to introduced Lahontan cutthroat.

The basin's hydrology reveals an anomaly. Flowage from Granite, Upper and Lower Blue, Twin, Meadow, and Summit Lakes feeds into the west slope's Mokelumne River watershed; Tamarack, Upper and Lower Sunset, Wet Meadows, and Raymond Lakes contribute to the East Carson River; Upper and Lower Lost Lakes help form the headwaters of the West Carson River.

Herders and sportsmen introduced rainbow, brook, and brown trout into these originally fishless waters during the 1920s, then various water agencies placed dams on most between 1941 and 1943. The increased depths created suitable niches for cutthroat. Since spawning habitat is nonexistent on these impoundments, trout populations are maintained by large put-and-grow infusions, according to Ben Ewing, a Region 2 California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) fisheries biologist in Sacramento.

While upslope breezes distribute a variety of insects on the lakes, chub, dace, and Lahontan reddsuckers provide a significant share of high-protein nourishment. Growing in direct proportion to their food supply, these heavy eaters gain a half pound or more per year. Indeed, CDFW field samples indicate solid numbers of fish between 10 and 13 inches, with fair densities of 14- to 18-inchers ranging between 2 and 5 pounds.

From State Route 88, follow paved Blue Lakes Road to 198-acre Lower Blue and 345-acre Upper Blue. These two waters, the hub of the "magnificent seven," are the largest and most-fished of the basin. The CDFW stocks both lakes with fingerling cutts each year. In addition,

abundant tui chubs and suckers, the trout grew to amazing proportions. Their genetic integrity was maintained by spawning in California's Truckee, Carson, and Walker Rivers, plus the Humboldt and Reese River systems of Nevada. The lake's desiccation occurred during a thousand-year drought, causing it to shrink to the modern-day vestiges including Pyramid and Walker Lakes.

The sole trout inhabitant in the Tahoe Basin, these Lahontan cutthroat were a highly prized food for Washoe Indians. Indeed, Fremont's 1844 journal accounts vividly portray the natives spearing and netting huge specimens "...generally 2-4 feet in length and upwards of 20 pounds" and eloquently refer to the fish as "salmon-trout," which certainly captured my attention.

Commercial fishers gillnetted and shipped tons of these fish to destinations near and far, grossly overharvesting the resource. Substantiated accounts consistently mention astounding specimens up to 60 pounds. Small wonder why a 1914 *Ripley's Believe It or Not!* column proclaimed them the "Largest Trout in the World!" In 1926, the still-standing world-record 41-pounder was caught in Pyramid Lake.

Sadly, dams, diversions, and the introduction of non-native trout species nearly sounded the death knell for *Oncorhynchus clarkii henshawi* by 1938. Although ultimately

Alpine County Fish and Game occasionally plants bonus, trophy-size 'bows in the 2- to 8-pound range. Expect company from gear anglers at either lake.

Lower Blue is entirely encircled by forest. Its most productive locale is the incoming Blue Creek channel, where twitching a Zebra midge dropper under a Hot Wing Caddis can prove deadly. On a day when my son, Jason, and I visited Upper Blue, we encountered pods of rainbows cruising along its north shore. Methodically fan casting E/C Caddis patterns, we released over a dozen gullible planters up to 1.5 pounds in an hour's time.

After this confidence builder, we drove to 185-acre Twin Lake where a sparse population of brook trout join the cutthroat. Known locally as "the best, least-known fishery," the lake possesses a super-rich biomass, including freshwater *Gammarus* scuds. Gorging on a high-caloric shrimp and baitfish diet, both species approach 15 to 16 inches. Two years ago, my grandson, Domenic, was practice casting near the outlet when he unexpectedly hooked a noteworthy 2-pound brookie.

Nearly a mile below Twin, you can reach 205-acre Meadow Lake via a scrambling descent from a dirt parking



Upper Lost Lake is tucked alongside the snow-enshrouded slopes of The Nipple. Although both Upper and Lower Lost lakes are now fishless, their spillage helps create the headwaters of the West Carson River (above). An angler makes a long-line connection at Tamarack Lake. This lake is destined to become fishless because it has been deemed critical habitat for the Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog, whose numbers have declined rapidly since fish were introduced to historically fishless waters (below).

area. Its trout don't see many anglers but do wield a well-earned reputation for size, some in the 6- to 8-pound range.

Tamarack Lake is one of my past go-to waters. Fringed by gravel shores, this 46-foot-deep lake consistently produced cutthroat over 12 inches. Tamarack hasn't been stocked since 2007 and is destined to become fishless because it is native range for the Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog. Still, it continues to be a wild card. Recent surveys have shown sizable survivors to 17 inches still finning there.

Pan-size golden trout coexist with cutts in a pair of backcountry tarns best exploited with a 9-foot, 3-weight rod, floating line, 6X tippet, and sparse size 14 or 16 terrestrial or dark-colored beadhead patterns, either worked alone or as part of a dry/dropper combo. However, gaining their shores involves boots, a daypack, and hiking.

After a 2-mile jaunt from the Upper Blue Lake trailhead, I twitched a Black Ant over an opaque shelf at Granite Lake, attracting a trout of lemon yellows and cadmium.

From the Summit Lake trailhead, the full-day round-trip to rockbound Raymond Lake involves a bit of a grind. First, link to the Pacific Crest Trail for a 3.5-mile trudge, then ascend via a sketchy trail that tests route-finding skills. However, the bright gold and silver jewels residing there definitely make the sweat-inducing journey worthwhile.





The author works a headwater braid of the West Carson River where westward-heading wagons once left ruts in the soil. Stealth and short-line tactics are necessary to fool the cutts, 'bows, and brookies on these brushy sections.

Still-Water Strategies

Stocked rainbows of Upper and Lower Blue Lakes remain largely accessible. However, the granddaddy Lahontans generally lurk deep in the water column and transition zones, making them elusive. For lengthy presentations and tactfully probing steep drop-offs, ledges, sunken channels, and around rocks with erratic retrieves, use a 9-foot, 5- or 6-weight rod matched with a fast-sinking line and a short 4X fluorocarbon leader.

A decade ago, I managed to survey these lakes when extreme low-water conditions exposed much of their underwater topography. A few years later, I gravitated to Meadow Lake's familiar finger cove with its submerged data firmly engrained in my memory banks. After letting a weighted purple leech settle among the now-submerged boulder field, I initiated a rapid-burst strip retrieve, then let the fly settle for a five-count. Strip-settle, strip-settle, repeat, repeat, repeat. A slight tug on the drop was my only warning, then I was firmly attached to a weighty, head-shaking force that I eventually managed to pry from the ebony bottom.

Because baitfish are a major part of the trout diets on these lakes, size 8 and 10 conehead Woolly Buggers, Zonkers, Matukas, Clouser Minnows, and Articulated Leeches in purple, black, yellow, or white serve faithfully much of the time. The key is keeping the minnow imitator

along the bottom while darting it erratically to entice an inquisitive carnivore. Remain attentive and anticipate subtle, deliberate pulls, often on the drop but sometimes near shore.

Where steep drop-offs limit wading, Liz Weirauch, co-owner of The Angler's Edge Fly Shop now located in Minden, Nevada, recommends a float tube. "Tubers can hang San Juan Worms under an indicator, float a hopper with a Copper John or Blood Midge dropper, or tow leech or [Woolly] Bugger patterns. Those retrieving around islands or away from shore and toward deeper water typically enjoy a more definite advantage."

Moving Water Options

Plenty of challenges and opportunities exist for the creek freak willing to implement sneaky tactics and short-line presentations around brush

and deadfalls. According to Judy Wickwire, the owner of Horsefeathers Fly Fishing School and Guide Service, the small but vibrant flows of Blue, Deer, Charity Valley, Forestdale, Red Lake, and Jeff Davis Creeks always seem to hold brilliantly-hued, self-sustaining wild trout. Some seasons ago, she put me on to her personal favorite, the upper West Carson River, which behaves more like a tiny creek in this section. "It just happens to be one of the Lahontan cutthroat's historic spawning sites," she tells me.

The autobrecciated rock and andesite flanks of Round Top, Elephant's Back, and the nearby Forestdale Divide create a dramatic, dark-chocolate backdrop against the snowbanks draping their slopes. Melt and seeps from these peaks along with the Lost Lakes spillage give rise to braids funneling into the main channel, which further gains volume from Forestdale Creek, cascades under Blue Lakes Road, and leaves Faith Valley. With brookies and cutts its primary residents, the fishery is also bolstered with frequent stockings of triploids, along with periodic bonus trout.

Light was fading fast as I stepped into the 10-foot-wide, 3-foot-deep stream and flicked a beadhead Brassie under a protruding limb. On the discreet tap, I struck, expecting a nimble 10-incher. Instead, an ominous V-wake lightning-bolted through every corner of the tiny pool, transforming an electric surge up my line then through

my deeply bowing fly rod. The stream could barely contain the raging behemoth as it first slipped downstream then burst back up, gaining substantial leverage while cutting through the fast current. Parrying each high-voltage run, I prayed my knots would hold. They did, and soon, a muscular, football-shaped rainbow momentarily balanced in my hand.

I recalled my previous thoughts about what tangling with a circa-1840s Lahontan cutthroat would have been like. Based on how this comparatively minute 4-pound bruiser 'bow tested both tackle and nerve, I pretty much had my answer.

On the Horizon

As part of its High Mountain Lakes Project, the CDFW has been conducting surveys during the past decade to identify existing populations of southern mountain yellow-legged frogs (*Rana muscosa*) and Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frogs (*Rana sierrae*), both of which have declined severely in their natural haunts. The project's ultimate goal is to give the two species of threatened frogs more fishless habitat at the upper ends of a watershed.

Under a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposal in the works, 1.83 million acres of publicly-managed lands amid 17 counties (including Alpine) are to be set aside as critical habitat. Many of the lakes feeding the Carson drainage support yellow-legged frog populations, potentially affecting the future of Blue Lakes Basin angling. Still waters with documented frog populations have been removed from future stocking lists and are reverting to a fishless state while lakes with no frog presence still remain on the planted schedule.

While Upper and Lower Lost, Upper and Lower Sunset, Summit, and Wet Meadows are now virtually fishless, Tamarack remains in transition. However, most area biologists feel Granite, Upper and Lower Blue, Twin,

Blue Lakes Basin NOTEBOOK

When: Best right after ice-out and spring runoff through late October.

Where: Alpine County, south of SR 88 near Carson Pass. From SR 88, follow the Blue Lakes Road apprx. 12 mi. to the Lakes Basin.
Information/road conditions: Alpine County Chamber of Commerce, (530) 694-2475, www.alpinecounty.com/chamber-info/.



Headquarters: Woodfords and Markleeville. *Lodging:* Sorensen's Resort, (530) 694-2203, www.sorensensresort.com; The Woodfords Inn (530) 694-2111, www.woodfordsinn.com; numerous campgrounds in the area. *Food/supplies:* CJ's Woodfords Station, (530) 694-2930, www.woodfordsstation.com.

Appropriate gear: 3- to 6-wt. rods, floating and sinking lines, 5X and 6X tippets.

Useful fly patterns: Green Mosquito, Sierra Bright Dot, Mayfly, Hopper, PMD, Stimulator, Yellow Sally, Hot Wing Elk Hair Caddis, White Miller, Outrigger Caddis, Black Caddis, Chernobyl Ant, E/C Caddis, Zebra Midge, scuds, beadhead Copper John, Flashback Pheasant Tail, Bird's Nest, AP Black, Prince, Hare's Ear, terrestrial patterns, conehead Matuka, Woolly Bugger, Marabou Muddler, Zonker, Articulated Leech, Black Bunny Leech.

Necessary accessories: Wide-brimmed hat, bug spray, polarized sunglasses, sunscreen, hiking boots, hiking sticks, wading staff.

Nonresident license: \$14.61/1 day, \$22.94/2 days, \$45.93/10 days, \$124.77 annual.

Fly shops/guides: *Minden, NV:* The Angler's Edge Fly Shop, (775) 781-7112, www.theanglersedge.com.

Horsefeathers Fly Fishing School and Guide Service (Judy Wickwire), (530) 694-2399, www.woodfordsstation.com/horsefeathers (at Sorensen's Resort).

Books: *Sierra Trout Guide* by Ralph Cutter.



Meadow, and Raymond should continue to be awesome fisheries under current guidelines.

The scrappy, centerpiece battlers in today's Blue Lakes Basin will certainly not erase visions of past legendary leviathans. However, they do allow visitors to this slice of the Old West to pay homage to the salmon-trout's incredible legacy. ➔

Don Vachini is a freelance writer and photographer who lives in Petaluma, California.