

Buckley Ponds, CA

By Don Vachini

The town of Bishop is surrounded by plenty of outstanding trout options. The snow-capped Sierra Nevada range towering to its west provides myriad backcountry lakes with gaudily emblazoned brook, cutthroat, and golden trout, while three rainbow-and-brown-laden impoundments feed the creeks draining into town. To the east, the Owens River courses just outside the city limits.

Recently, I arrived in Bishop a day early for a planned backpack trip and was perusing one of its fly shops. Imagine my surprise when I overheard a pair of gentlemen discussing bass flies for some local waters. We chatted and I soon discovered that right in the

midst of this trout mecca sits a trio of interconnected largemouth bass waters, known collectively as the Buckley Ponds.

I had to check them out. From US Highway 395 in downtown, I turned onto East Line Street, drove a bit more than 2 miles, and took the first right turn immediately past the cemetery. The 1.5-mile dirt road brought me to the first pond. Historically, not much is known about this string of 6- to 8-acre ponds created by an artesian well sitting at an elevation of 4,100 feet. Sprawling parallel to a stretch of the Owens River, the chain of lakes courses a slight gradient through a maze of tule-infested growth to produce habitat where bass and bluegill thrive in relative anonymity.

Guarded by sparse stands of cottonwood and stunted willows, this sage-filled destination has remained under the radar for decades. Through the years, the ponds became heavily choked with layers of decomposing vegetation but, during a two-year combined effort, the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, the Paiute Tribe, and numerous local community volunteers drained two of the three ponds, burned the dead growth, and brought in heavy equipment to dig up and remove mats of vegetation several feet thick. Old Christmas trees were sunk to provide sanctuary for young fish. Ramps for the handicapped were erected.

By 2012, the ponds had again filled with water and were restocked. They also drew a lot more attention, according to Mark Rosen, a local trout guide. Although bass here typically fall into the 1- to 3-pound range, he noted that the Buckleys remain difficult to fish. Despite the open, restored waters, many *Micropertus salmoides* (largemouth bass) take haven in the channels, which are still rimmed with thick tules.

"The channels can be unfriendly and challenging sectors for fly fishers, fraught with overhanging growth, poor casting room, and narrow windows. But they're also hotspots," he confided.

Rosen uses a float tube to reach productive structure safely and attain efficient angles for short, accurate casts. To help turn fish away from stalky obstacles, he prefers a 7-foot, 5-weight rod, a floating line, and a 6-foot leader paired with a 3X or 4X fluorocarbon tippet. Early and late in the day, a selection of size 6 to 10 baitfish-imitating Muddler, Matuka or Woolly Bugger streamers and meaty hopper or cricket surface patterns become bass tickets; meanwhile, dark-bodied, size 12 and 14 beadhead nymphs twitched along shore are bluegill magnets.

In spite of the ponds' harsh conditions, Rosen is confident they will continue to maintain respectable sizes and numbers. To me, it certainly appears that the bass have established a strong foothold in the heart of trout country. For additional information, contact Rosen at Brock's Fly Fishing Specialists and Tackle Experts, (760) 872-3581, www.brocksflyfish.com.



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