



The author's son Jason prepares to net a chunky native 'bow from a hike-to lake near Carson Pass. ▶ Photo by Don Vachini.

# California TROUT PREVIEW

BY DON VACHINI

FOR TROUT ANGLERS, THERE'S JUST NO GETTING OVER THE RAINBOW — OR THE BROWN, THE GOLDEN, THE BROOK. . . .

**D**espite California's financial uncertainties, the Department of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) continues to be masters at stretching budget dollars. In addition to efficiently operating hatcheries and administering wild trout programs, privately funded facilities often augment Fish and Wildlife allotments with supplemental stockings, bolstering a bevy of statewide trout opportunities.

One recent policy change, created by the passage of SB 1148, shifts the emphasis to both

hatchery and native trout. This bill has initiated a DFW movement toward planting sterile (or triploid) trout to avoid compromising the genetic integrity of a water's native inhabitants.

Budget and mandates notwithstanding, Curtis Milliron, a senior fisheries biologist with the DFW's Redding office, believes that it is the year-in and year-out quantity and quality of winter rain and snow that has the greatest influence on the state's trout. "Following back-to-back seasons of below-average precipita-

tion, we are in dire need of a few good winters to sustain the state's fisheries."

With fingers crossed for an above-average winter, here is a rundown of some of the more productive 2014 statewide hotspots.

## NORTHERN CAL

Ranging from Coastal, Cascade and North Sierra Nevada mountain ranges to high sage desert, North state trout waters are spread out over a huge geographic area. Barring unforeseen conditions, Milliron contends that DFW personnel will again attempt to cover as many waters as feasible with regular trout plants.

While the Upper Sacramento River above Lake Shasta remains a world-renowned stream for both planters and natives and Lake Siskiyou can be a sleeper for wily residents, Shasta's impounded water provides season-long rainbow and brown action. Wild rainbows in the 3- to 5-pound class account for a great tailwater fishery below Shasta Dam.

Nutrient-rich Davis Lake is on schedule to receive large sizes and numbers of rainbows, while nearby Frenchman Lake will also benefit from abundant plants. Numerous, fast-growing holdovers lurk in both lakes, adding suspense to each outing.

Sitting in the arid northeastern part of the state, massive, 24,000-acre Eagle Lake is most famous for its unique strain of namesake trout. Located near Susanville, its impressive fishery has remained stable thanks to an impressive egg-taking and restocking program, which continues to maintain a viable, world-class fishery for spirited trout in the 2- to 5-pound range. Nestled a short distance away, McCoy Flat Reservoir can be another resource of exceptional Eagle Lake-strain rainbows and brook trout. Although late-season irrigation draw down drastically affects it on a year-to-year basis, it is especially noteworthy throughout spring months.

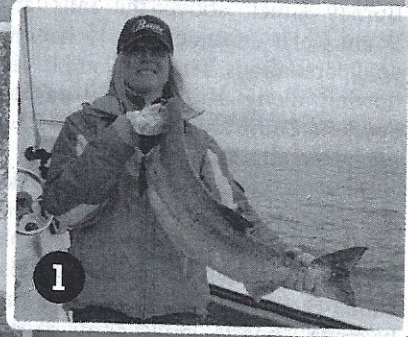
Trolling between Rocky Point and Canyon Dam or along the Hamilton Branch and North Fork Feather River inlets of Lake Almanor often dupes some big early- and late-season browns and rainbows.

The Intermountain Area between Burney and McCloud should remain the heaviest-stocked location in the northern sector, according to Milliron. Snowmelt from ancient volcanoes Mt. Lassen and Mt. Shasta percolates deep into igneous aquifers, picks up leached minerals and generates a phenomenal insect food base. "In addition to plentiful hatches, the consistent coldwater flowage helps maintain a healthy, year-round trout environment."

For those seeking a high degree of difficulty, exploring the gin-clear flows of Fall River

# YOUR PHOTOS

Great Shots From Around Your State



**1** Tracy McGuire, of Encinitas, caught this 11-pound coho salmon out of Edmonds, Wash., in October of last year. **2** Twelve-year-old Aryn Watson, of Bakersfield, took her first buck — a forked horn — the last day of the 2013 D5 season. **3** Dave Martinez (l.) and Victor Vasquez (r.) shot limits of Canada geese in Cibola, Ariz., on the Colorado River using 12-ga. shotguns. **4** Catherine Edwards Abernathy shot this 18.11-pound turkey with an 8-inch beard in the spring of 2012 in Calaveras County. **5** Kayli Palade, age 12, drew Lassen Zone 4 antelope for her first hunt. She perfectly placed a single shot at 140 yards.

Upload Your Photos Now at  
[gameandfishmag.com/photos](http://gameandfishmag.com/photos)

above Island Bridge can be great for wild and wary rainbows while specially-regulated Manzanita Lake harbors browns and 'bows up to 5 pounds. Huge numbers of brook and rainbow planters deposited into Upper Hat Creek from Old Station to Cassell, Burney Creek above the falls and Baum Lake enhance already healthy wild populations. The McCloud River, flowing along Highway 89 in the Fowler's Camp area, is also abundantly planted all season.

Boca Reservoir and Donner Lake are consistently infused with rainbow catchables and house sizeable holdover rainbows while nearby Lake Tahoe (home to the new state-record kokanee) boasts bruiser mackinaw plus browns and 'bows in its depths. Often necessitating aggressive wading tactics, the Truckee River produces well-conditioned, feisty native 'bows in the deeper pools and current edges between the Little Truckee confluence and the Nevada state line.

### CENTRAL CAL

Designed with agricultural irrigation needs in mind and created by damming rivers, several noteworthy reservoirs along the west slope of the Sierra Nevada are popular trout destinations for both recent plants and well-fed carryover rainbows.

The Kern River drains a vast backcountry and is 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 the bridge with best times occurring from July through the fall.

Shaver Lake, east of Fresno, has rebounded well from being drained two seasons ago. It will again be heavily stocked with private plants of trophy trout along with plenty of DFW infusions. 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, robust browns while popular gateway trails lead to the Bear Creek, French Canyon and Humphreys Basin drainages, which collectively make up the largest concentration of golden trout waters in the world.

## CALIFORNIA ANGLER PROFILE

1,576,000

Resident anglers

15

Avg. days spent fishing each year

\$1,323

Avg. amount spent fishing each year

721,000

Saltwater anglers

760,000

Trout anglers

444,000

Bass anglers

302,000

White bass/hybrid anglers

Source: USF&WS survey. Includes resident anglers only.

Pine Flat and Courtright reservoirs, along with Wishon and Bass lakes, remain well-stocked throughout the season while being highly popular with 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 frigid flows help maintain viable fisheries.

Lower-elevation McClure and McSwain lakes, located east of

Modesto, will continue receiving a pleasant mix of DFW and private-hatchery rainbows.

Massive New Melones, Don Pedro and Tulloch reservoirs 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 astride Highway 88 near Carson Pass. While both are heavily endowed with rainbows, they also house mackinaw and brown trout for those willing to utilize specialized, deep-water tactics. In addition to former years holdovers, regular deposits of private rainbow stocks (some up to 10 pounds) should more than add to the drama.

### SOUTHERN CAL

Though famously noted for bass during the summer months, many of the state's southern-most reservoirs double as excellent winter/early-spring trout holes when their temperatures are significantly lowered. Rainbow plants routinely occur from late-November through March.

Lakes Morena and Cuyamaca provide great spring angling in the San Diego area while to the north, Poway, Escondido's Dixon and Wohlford lakes, plus Lake Jennings in Lakeside, all provide consistent action. Timely updated information can be found by visiting [www.sdfish.com](http://www.sdfish.com).

Inland Empire waters that should also remain solid bets through spring include lakes Hemut, Gregory and Silverwood, which are deep enough to allow holdovers to survive.

While the heavily visited, pay-to-play Santa Ana River Lakes always contain sizeable trout for those who can afford them, the regions largest and top-producing water in Southern California remains Diamond Valley Reservoir. Although this pleasantly uncrowded impoundment has limited shoreline access, boating anglers enjoy plenty of freedom. The bulk of their catches include DFW 'bows of varying sizes and an occasional brown.

Big Bear Lake, located in the higher elevations of San Bernardino National

Forest above Riverside, should continue to be a first-rate rainbow fishery from spring through fall. According to Dan McKernan, the lake's director of marketing, 2,000 pounds of bi-weekly plants plus aggressive holdover trout from past derbies collaborate to make for some productive action.

## EASTERN SIERRA

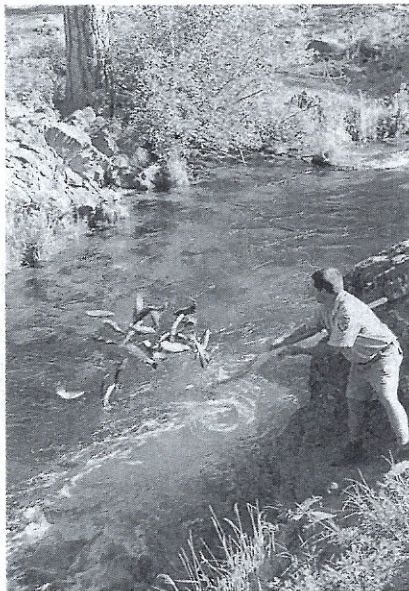
Encompassing a geographic swath northward from Mt. Whitney to Lake Tahoe, the harsh landscape along the Sierra Nevada Crest yields a dramatic backdrop of serrated sentinels nearing 14,000 feet. With close to 900,000 pounds of catchables distributed annually, Region 6 remains one of the most reliable and consistent places to catch trout in the state, attests Jim Erdman, a DFW fisheries biologist in the Bishop office. "With allotments expected to be about the same for 2014, the prognosis is expected to be good, especially throughout the early season."

The Bishop Creek drainage, huge beneficiaries from both private and DFW trout plants, includes the multiple forks of Bishop Creek, North, South and Sabrina lakes along with Intake II. Trailheads to the John Muir Wilderness offer 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.

For the "creek freak," Erdman suggests Baker, Buckeye, Green, McGee, Mill and Virginia creeks, among others, for either poking bait or dapping flies.

According to Scott Flint, a guide with The TroutFitter ([www.thetroutfitter.com](http://www.thetroutfitter.com)), the Mammoth Lakes basin should again provide prolific activity. While Mamie, Mary, George and Twin lakes satisfy patient bait-dunkers, the potential for a five-trout "Sierra Slam" is available when combined with nearby McLeod, Crystal and Sherwin lakes. The Convict Lake and Creek combination is a popular choice for more-than-willing rainbows plus a few browns, while Hot Creek poses intellectual challenges for its highly educated inhabitants.

Flint believes the June Lake Loop stillwaters (June, Gull, Silver and Grant) and Rush Creek should like-



The Intermountain Area is one of the most heavily stocked Nor Cal regions. Photo by Don Vachini.

wise continue to amaze. For the past six years, all loop lakes have received put-and-grow Lahontan cutthroat in addition to bountiful rainbows from the DFW. "However, don't overlook nearby, hike-to Parker and Walker lakes for steady backcountry action on native 'bows, browns and brook."

Heavily stocked Tioga, Ellery and Saddlebag lakes plus Lee Vining Creek, provide lucrative benefits for car-bound anglers along Highway 120 while the Twenty Lakes Basin offers a respite from heavily-crowded Yosemite National Park along with a possible four-species slam.

Sitting above 9,400 feet, the Virginia Lakes chain of Big and Little Virginia and Trumbull lakes remain very popular with campground visitors. The trio contains rainbow, brown and brook (with some approaching 4 pounds), while backcountry options include hikes to the Hoover Wilderness and its colorful brookies.

The town of Bridgeport is a hub of varied angling for both giant and small trout. Upper and Lower Twin lakes and Bridgeport Reservoir always carry a chance at bigger 'bows and gargantuan browns approaching 10 pounds. Open all year, the East Walker below the reservoir is a highly-regarded stream for those interested in quality brown trout, while scud-

rich Kirman Lake (governed by special regulations) is famous for trophy brook and Lahontan cutthroat trout. Noted put-and-grow brook and cutthroat sanctuaries, Poore, Roosevelt and Lane lakes are well worth the hike to reach them.

The West Walker and Little Walker rivers receive huge numbers of planted 'bows which keep roadside anglers satisfied all season.

Located in the Markleeville area, the East and West Forks of the Carson River plus Indian Creek Reservoir consistently produce eye-opening stringers. They are not only beneficiaries of normal-sized DFG stocks but supplemental Alpine County plants of trophy-sized rainbow in addition to Lahontan cutthroat.

A subspecies of special interest, Erdman mentions that the Lahontan cutt is being re-introduced to parts of its native range (historically, it was the only trout present in the Truckee, Walker and Carson river drainages). Put-and-grow cutts are already established in many of the tributaries and upper courses of the Walker and Carson rivers and consistently show up in angler's catches. "By moving toward an almost entirely sterile hatchery program, the DFW is not only protecting native species but assisting in the restoration and recovery of the Walker and Carson basins to more native cutthroat fishing drainages."

## GENERAL INFORMATION

In addition to a valid fishing license (available at many sporting goods venues or online at [www.dfg.ca.gov/](http://www.dfg.ca.gov/)), anglers should obtain a copy of the *2013-14 Sport Fishing Regulations* booklet and become familiar with the specific water(s) they intend to fish. It is also available online at [www.dfg.ca.gov/regulations/FreshFish\\_Mar2012](http://www.dfg.ca.gov/regulations/FreshFish_Mar2012).

For those wishing to strap on a daypack or backpack in pursuit of wild trout, peruse the "Eastern Sierra Backcountry Fishing Guide" at [www.dfg.ca.gov/region/6/](http://www.dfg.ca.gov/region/6/).

Once selecting a place to fish, phone local sport shop vendors for current information on weather and water conditions. On the DFG website, click on "Fish Planting Schedule" and scout the region you plan to fish. □