

# Kit Carson

# TROUT OPTIONS

BY DON VACHINI

Want to catch some trout? Head 'em off at the Pass – Carson Pass, that is.

Squinting for rising trout in the early dawn light, my gaze drifted upward from Red Lake to Carson Pass, prompting memories of daring Pony Express riders who traversed this treacherous route a century-and-a-half prior. Indeed, I remember reading about the life-and-death struggles these young postal employees endured on their frenetic, 1860-61 mail deliveries between St. Joseph, Missouri and Sacramento, California. However, before becoming too immersed in Old West lore, concentric rings re-established my primary focus!

## OLD WEST HISTORY

Commissioned by the U. S. Government to obtain knowledge of the West, John C. Fremont and his guide, Kit Carson, explored extensively around western Nevada and east-central California during the mid-1840s. Though on a slightly lesser scale than the Lewis and Clarke Expedition, their party of 57 surveyed, mapped and blazed numerous trails throughout the Lake Tahoe region. On one such venture, Carson crossed the divide between the West Carson Canyon and the American River, which eventually

The creeks and rivers in Alpine County offer prime habitat for both native and planted trout. The author holds a 12-inch rainbow from the West Carson. ■ Photo by Don Vachini.

proved to be one of the more significant trans-Sierra wagon routes, providing passage to Sacramento's Fort Sutter. Probably not wanting to disturb the ghosts of the ill-fated Donner Party to the north, Mormon wagon trains eschewed the more famous Donner Pass for this challenging wagon trail (aka the Mormon Emigrant Trail), and it gained further notoriety from Pony Express usage. Years later, the pass was named in Carson's honor.

Fremont eloquently recorded the numerous escapades of the harsh frontier life in his journal, which were of great historical significance to the westward movement. Indeed, his vivid, 1844 accounts of the Washoe Indians netting and spearing, "... trout generally 2-4 feet in length and 20-30 pounds," certainly captured my attention. Comparing them to Columbia River salmon, he referred to them as "salmon-trout."

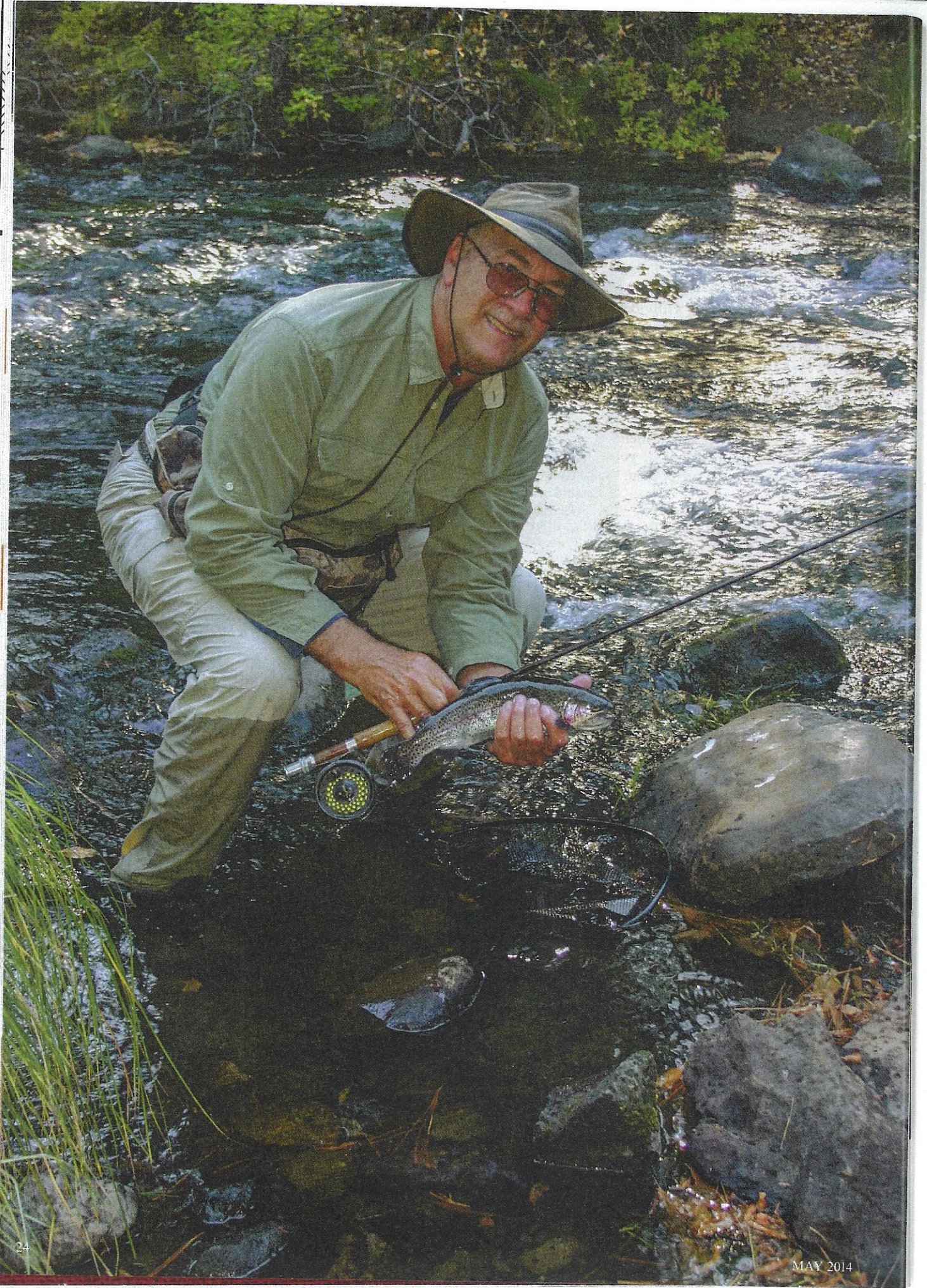
Maintaining their genetic integrity in pre-historic Lake Lahontan for centuries while using the Truckee, Carson and Walker river systems to spawn, the Lahontan cutthroat trout was the sole trout species in this arid, eastern Sierra landscape. Estimated to be present in lakes that covered more than 300,000-acres and 3,500-miles of stream in 1850, *Oncorhynchus clarki henshawi*, subjected to drastic over-

harvesting, dams, diversions and the introduction of non-native trout, sadly dwindled to only 2 percent of its native California range by 1915. Today, it inhabits only one-half of one-percent of its former range with sizes rarely approach 15 pounds.

## TODAY'S LAND

Remaining one of the least-populated in the state, this area is located approximately 30 miles south of the glimmer of Lake Tahoe's casinos and sits amid mixed conifers, sagebrush and granitic vistas along either side of the Sierra Nevada Crest. Today, Highway 88, a macadam two-laner, replaces the former mail and wagon route, bisecting portions of the El Dorado and Toiyabe national forests on its east-west traverse. West Slope streams drain into the American and Mokelumne river systems; east-flowing snowmelt funnels into the East and West Carson rivers before draining into Nevada.

Ranging in elevations from 4,400 feet to above 10,000 feet, over 20 lakes and nearly 70 miles of creeks and rivers offer abundant opportunities for native and hatchery trout, according to Ben Ewing, a Department of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) fisheries biologist with the Region 2 office in Sacramento. He believes the geology of this land, which includes a network



of coldwater sources, moisture percolating through numerous high meadows, wooded canopies and diverse insect populations, seems to favor solid growing conditions.

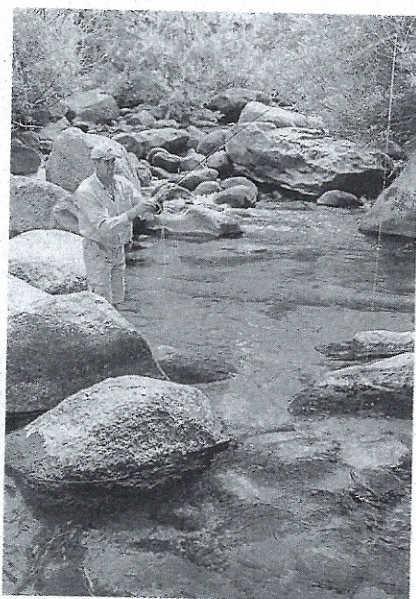
While rainbow trout are by far the predominant species, he hints that brook, brown, cutthroat, golden and mackinaw trout can also be found in a combination of snow-fed streams, man made impoundments and backcountry stillwaters. In addition to generous infusions of 9- to 12-inch rainbows, the DFW regularly deposits both catchable and fingerling Lahontan cutthroat in many of these waters, some of which sit adjacent to Highway 88; others are short destinations off spur roads. "Adding to the mix of self-sustaining native populations, the Alpine County Game and Fish Commission augments some of these waters with privately-funded, trophy-sized fish, providing plenty of chances."

Even though Ewing confides that trout plants on some waters have ceased and they will become fishless due to Mountain Yellow-legged Frog (MYLF) Critical Habitat designation, "...the remaining waters should continue to provide awesome fisheries."

### ROADSIDE STILLWATERS

Granite-rimmed Silver and Caples lakes are the first roadside waters viewed when approaching from the west and both form the headwaters of the Silver Fork of the American River. Although Silver benefits from generous rainbow trout stocks, it is secretly prized for its early season browns, which often approach double digits. While downrigging the narrows or just off the boat launch ramp at dawn or dusk with a selection of wobbling spoons produces spirited rainbows, *Salmo trutta* prefer baitfish-imitating, broken-back Rebels, size 3-4 jointed Rapalas or Hot Shots toplined back and forth off incoming tributaries.

Shore anglers dunking bait from Caples dam and its rock-laden north shoreline and boaters towing flasher/worm combinations along contour points for 'bows score consistently. However, those trolling Hopkins Spoons or F-7 Flatfish near the bottom of the main creek channel will work hard to score on deep dwelling mackinaw.



The author's son, Jason, battles a feisty rainbow on the West Carson River. ■ Photo by Don Vachini.

Slowly retrieving tiny spoons or soaking inflated night crawlers during stiff zephyrs can be effective ploys at Red Lake. However, nothing beats its morning surface-feeding sessions. Breaking my Pony Express trance, an unseen adversary inhaled my Zebra midge and, after a tenacious battle, was coaxed to net. Fully overflowing my hand, the 14-inch, bronze-bodied specimen with sparse black dots and trademark orange-slashed mandibles, conjured up further visions of what a 20-pound "salmon-trout" might look like!

The Blue Lakes Road delivers anglers to some classic High Sierra venues, blessed with deep, cold water and abundant forage. While expansive Upper and Lower Blue Lakes are recipients of prodigious DFW rainbows and house scattered holdovers, Ewing mentions the put-and-grow cutthroat and brook fingerlings stocked at nearby Twin and Meadow lakes grow in anonymity as they take on wild characteristics. "Maintaining moderate densities, they consistently range between 10 and 14 inches with much larger individual fish approaching 5 pounds."

Float tubers slowly ticking a fire-tiger Needlefish along the bottom, yo-yoing a crappie jig over steep dropoffs or stripping a streamer consistently fool residents, which prefer to cruise

deep. However, on a recent dawn trip to Twin's moving outlet channel, I proudly watched my 13-year-old grandson, Domenic, seduce a battle-scarred, 15-inch *Salvelinus fontinalis* from the bank.

Neighboring Tamarack Lake, not planted since 2007 and on the MYLF list to become fishless, remains a true wildcard. Surviving holdover Lahontans in the 15- to 18-inch range, definitely make it worthy of a visit.

Early season bait and lure anglers find Indian Creek Reservoir to be a top-level haunt for rainbows up to 5 pounds along with some resilient, holdover browns. As its nutrient-rich waters warm, shoreline weeds becomes an ally to trout, requiring a floating craft to efficiently probe their inner fringes.

### BACKCOUNTRY JEWELS

A plethora of feasible day hike, overnight trip or extended stay options exist here. A gentle, one-hour walk from the trailhead at Carson Pass into the Mokelumne Wilderness brings anglers to Winnemucca Lake and its plentiful, pan-sized brookies and 'bows. From Woods Lake, hikers can ascend steeply to Winnemucca, then scramble to Round Top and Fourth of July lakes before completing the loop trail.

Tiny Crater Lake, is reached via a 4WD road off Highway 88 followed by a three-quarter-mile uphill trail. It is home to a self-sustaining population of willing brookies, which often provide non-stop fly action.

My personal preference is to lace up my boots, don a daypack and escape to a pair of separate backcountry gems, which are as wild as the days when Fremont and Carson trod their shores. The frisky goldens and cutthroat at Granite Lake can be reached via a moderate, two-mile trek from the Upper Blue Lake trailhead.

Reaching 10,000 feet Raymond Lake involves a bit of a grind. The Summit Lake Trailhead links to a demanding section of the Pacific Crest Trail, followed by a sketchy, steeply-ascending side route to the lake and its gaudy goldens. Lengthy retrieves with a fly/bubble setup or twitching a dry/dropper tandem over littoral zones provides decent action for hyper pan-

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sizers at both of these tarns.

### STEAM OPTIONS

Upper and Lower Lost Lakes spillage, along with snowmelt from nearby Forestdale Ridge, The Nipple and Elephants Back, trickles into braids eventually forming the West Carson River. As it snakes between the lofty meadows of Faith and Hope valleys through Pickett's Junction, crouching or kneeling fly tossers can enjoy ample surface action, daintily plopping ant, beetle or grasshopper imitations along its cutbanks.

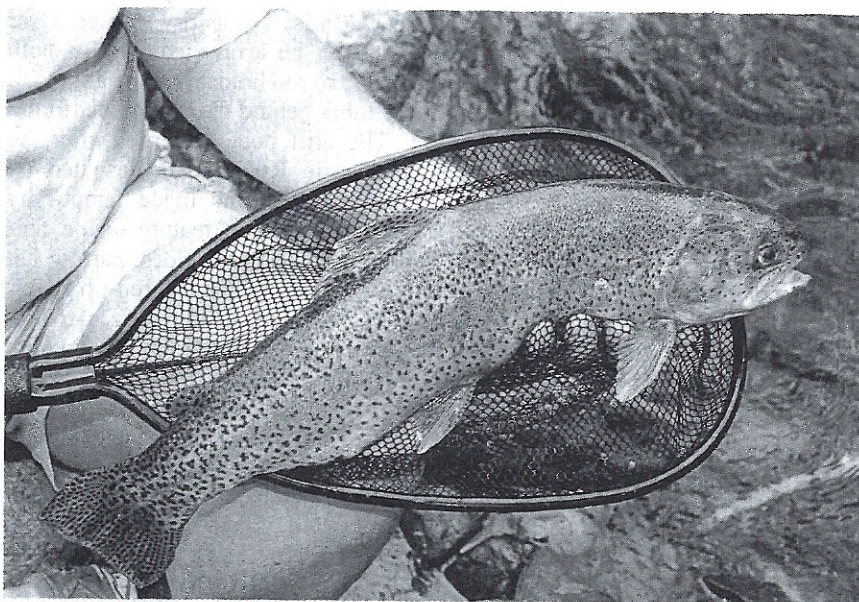
In the seven bridges section between Sorensen's and Woodfords, the river stepladders drastically, descending over 2,000 feet through heavy brush and Volkswagon-sized boulders. High-sticking beadhead nymphs through the well-oxygenated pockets and plunge pools can make for some exciting action on combinations of both native and planted 'bows and cutts.

In contrast, the East Carson drains a vast backcountry before cutting through a high desert, flood plain canyon paralleled by Highway 4/89. While many roadside turnouts in this eight-mile sector are heavily pressured, I mentally take leave by walking or wading to harder to reach settings. Here, amid scents of pinon pine and sage, I enjoy reading water, dredging characteristically deep pools or probing riffles with an inline spinner or a tempting wet fly in search of 4- to 6-pound *Oncorhynchus mykiss*.

The put-and-take section ends below Hangman's Bridge, which takes its name from an 1874 episode when a band of vigilantes lynched a murder suspect from this structure. Downstream from this landmark, restrictive regulations preside.

East Carson tributary creeks Silver and Markleeville, are infused with catchables while Wolf Creek and its selection of native 'bows, browns and brookies, merits consideration for an off-road jaunt. "Pay-for-play" Pleasant Valley Creek offers yet another option for catch-and-release trophy trout.

Housing fragile, self-sustaining 6- to 8-inch rainbow, brook, cutthroat or brown populations, tiny, brush-enshrouded, tributary "cricks" such as Forestdale, Red Lake, Blue Lake, Kirkwood, Hot Springs, Summit City,



Alpine County regularly plants additional "bonus trout" in the 2- to 8-pound range to provide steady action. ■ Photo by Don Vachini.

Charity Valley, Jeff Davis, Willow and Woods, require heightened bushwhacking senses. Although dapping flies over or around brush or downstream, fetal-position presentations will often reward with a spirited take, a non-consumptive mindset should prevail on these rivulets.

### CARSON TACKLE

Whether from boat, shore or float tube, the vast majority of waters and trout types are sportingly suited to both fly and spin angling. A light to ultra-light spinning rod and reel loaded with 2- to 6-pound monofilament, coupled with small BB weights and size 10-12 snelled bait hooks, is perfect for either drifting salmon eggs in streams, presenting an assortment of Rooster Tail, Vibrax or Panther Martin spinners, Kastmaster, Krocodile or Thomas Buoyant spoons or utilizing a fly/bubble combination.

For the fly-fisher, two rods are almost a must. For tiny streams, a 7-foot, 3- to 4-weight system matched with a floating line and 6X leader is ideal; bigger lakes and rivers or windy conditions, necessitate a 9-foot, 5- to 6-weight with either floating or sinking line, fluorocarbon leader and 5X tippet.

Popular and effective dry patterns include Parachute Adams, Elk Hair Caddis, Humpy, Royal Wulff and assorted terrestrials. Productive nymph

patterns include Caddis Pupa, Golden Stone, beadhead Midge, Hare's Ear and Bird's Nest in sizes 12-18.

Dry/dropper combinations are also wise choices on slowly moving waters and size 6-10 Woolly Bugger, Clouser, Matuka and Muddler streamers are solid standby patterns for larger predators.

Although visitors now traverse this land by car and mail is no longer delivered on horseback, this route still endures meaningful historic insight. Whether drifting bait for a roadside rainbow, climbing toward the clouds to prospect for a golden or pursuing scaled-down descendants of Fremont's legendary "salmon-trout," this famed passageway continues to deliver much anticipated messages-in the form of trout!

### RESOURCES

National Forest Service campgrounds are plentiful around the Blue Lakes and in Hope Valley while Woodfords Inn (530) 694-2111, [www.woodfords-inn.com](http://www.woodfords-inn.com) and Sorensen's Resort (530) 694-2203, [www.sorensensresort.com](http://www.sorensensresort.com), provide comfortable places to lay your head. Fishing information can be obtained at Horsefeathers Guide Service, (530) 694-2399, [www.horsefeathers01@frontier.com](http://www.horsefeathers01@frontier.com); the Creekside Lodge (530) 694-2511 in Markleeville; or CJ's Woodfords Station (530) 693-0438, [www.woodfordsstation.com](http://www.woodfordsstation.com). □