

Martis Creek Reservoir, CA By Don Vachini

Trickling as snowmelt from the forested slopes of 8,656-foot Martis Peak and 8,104-foot Lookout Mountain, Martis Creek was one of the ancestral spawning destinations of Lahontan cutthroat. However, since the day this Truckee River tributary was blocked to form the Martis Creek Lake reservoir, it has steadily distinguished itself as one of California's top still-water fisheries.

The East, West, and Middle Forks collectively drain a vast northern Sierra backcountry prior to merging into the main creek, which then gently meanders through the lush meadows and sagebrush flats of Martis Valley. From here, it enters the 70-acre reservoir, created as a flood-control project by the Army Corps of Engineers in 1970. Predictable *Callibaetis* mayfly, damselfly, and bloodworm midge hatches and varied terrestrials blown in from nearby pines feed the trout, which also enjoy high-protein forage in the form of redside suckers, dace, crayfish, and green sunfish.

After the California Fish and Game Commission designated Martis for wild trout management in 1974, the lake and its tributaries were treated to remove nonnative

browns and rainbows. Then, trophy-size Lahontan cutthroat, ranging from 3 to 8 pounds, were reintroduced. It was hoped they would spawn in the upstream forks of Martis, eventually reestablishing self-sustaining populations.

During 1980, this lake became the state's premier catch-and-release fishery and reigned for about six seasons. In 1982 and 1983, my then 11-, 13-, and 14-year-old sons landed some of the most incredible trout of their young lives—cuts from 18 to 24 inches, the largest weighing more than 4 pounds.

However, the resilient browns and rainbows gradually filtered back into the reservoir and again became the dominant species. Gaining substantial heft by dining on the exploding green sunfish population (illegally introduced), they triggered a revised management philosophy by 1990. Under its current wild trout status, Martis has settled into being a solid producer of sturdy 12- to 15-inch rainbows, browns, and cutthroat. Although fish grow fast, poor recruitment occurs

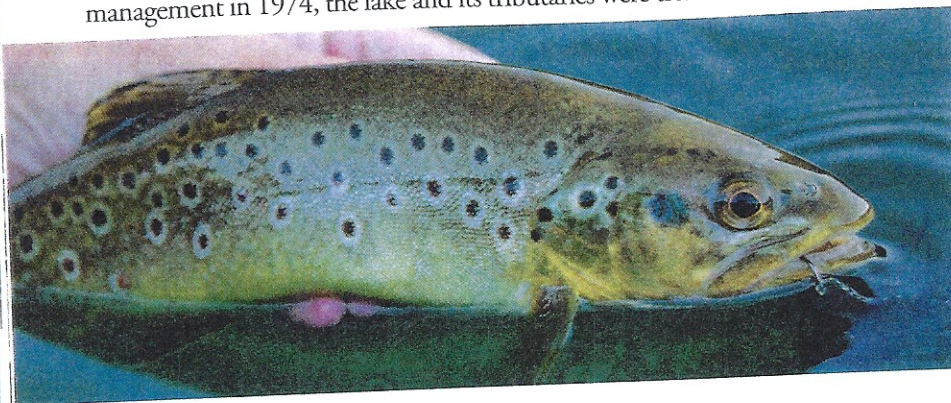




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in the creek, necessitating periodic put-and-grow infusions of fingerling cutts and catchable-size Eagle Lake rainbows (a native strain).

Certainly not pushovers, these robust residents usually require delicate presentations, extra-long leaders, and the ability to adjust to the moment. Whether you are presenting topside or subsurface, a 9-foot, 5-weight rod is perfect, paired with a floating line and 12- to 15-foot leader. Effective flies are numerous, but standards include the Parachute Hare's Ear, Parachute Adams, *Callibaetis* patterns, and adult damselfly patterns for surface fishing from late afternoon to twilight. During nonhatch periods, try a Pheasant Tail Nymph, damselfly nymph, midge pupa pattern, or Brassie, retrieved vertically. A dry/dropper combination or a midge or two suspended 3 to 5 feet under an indicator can also entice takers, especially when light breezes create movement.

Martis's predatory browns often seek bigger mouthfuls. A fast-sinking line or head and a size 8 or 10, baitfish-

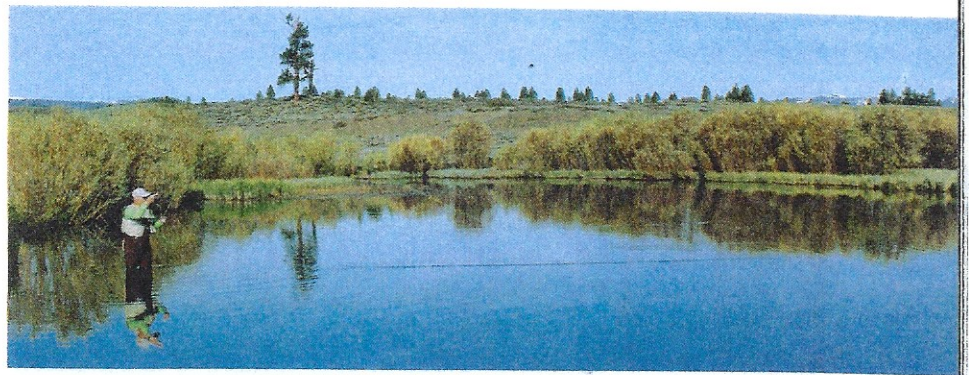


PHOTO BY DON VACHINI

imitating, olive or black Woolly Bugger, leech pattern, or Zonker, retrieved with slow, deliberate pulls near dark, can pique their interest.

A float tube allows deep exploration of the creek channel and around the weed-beds. However, trout are never far from the shallow flats, cruising in elliptical patterns on either side of the moving inlet. Preferring to wade here, I can regularly lead my target, anticipate the surface take, and enjoy the subsequent tug of a wild Martis trout.

From Interstate 80 in Truckee, follow State Route 267 southeast for 4 miles. Turn left at the signed Martis Dam Road about 3 miles to Martis Creek Lake. The lake and the creek below the dam are open from the last Saturday in April through November 15. Boats with motors are not allowed on the lake, which is all catch-and release; the creek has a 14-inch minimum size and a two-fish limit. All tributaries above Martis are closed to fishing.

For angling advice, contact Kiene's Fly Shop, (916) 486-9958, www.kiene.com, or Truckee River Outfitters, (775) 224-5918, www.renoflyshop.com. In addition to the campground at Martis, the Truckee Donner Lodge, (530) 582-9999, www.truckeedonnerlodge.com, offers nearby lodging.









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