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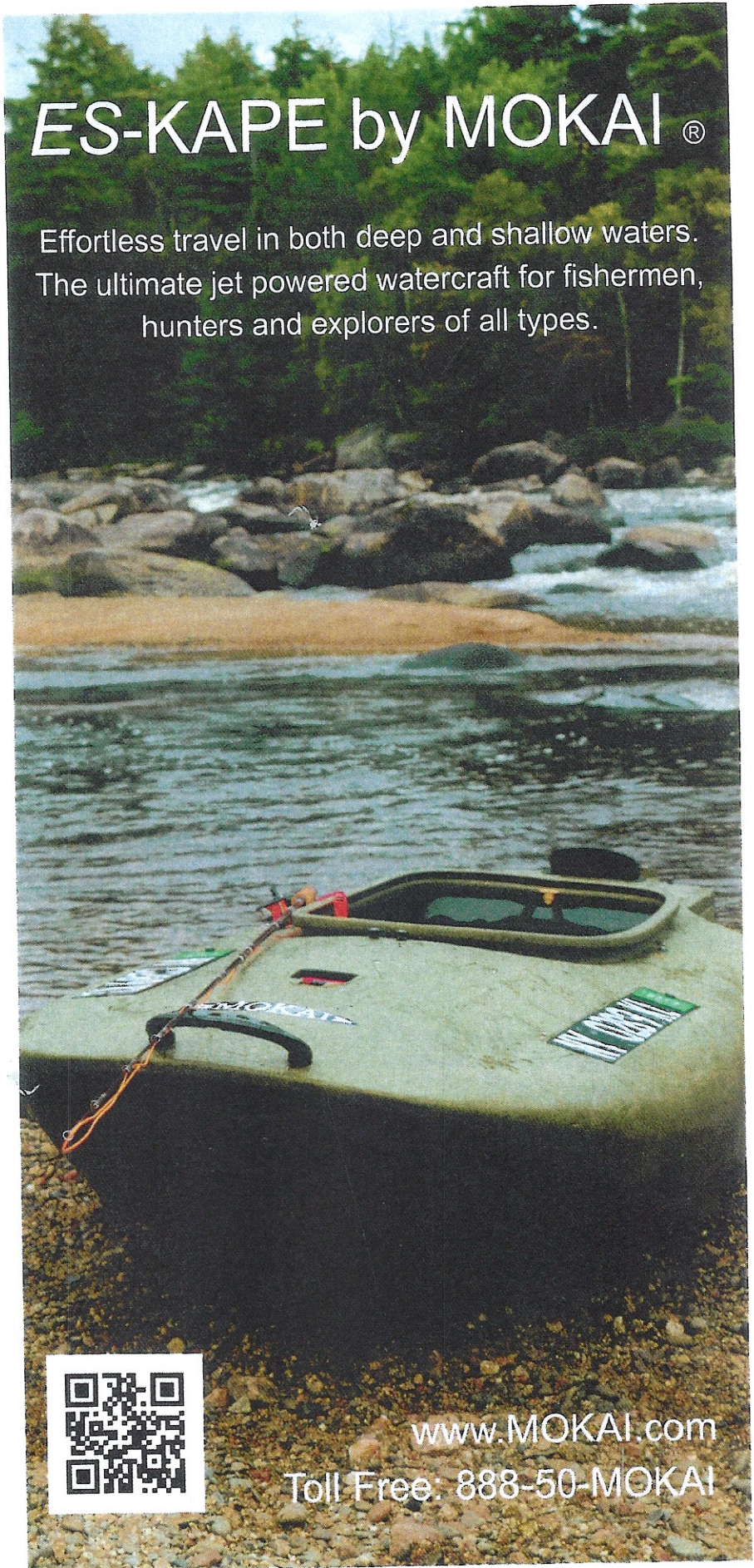
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Horseshoe Lake, CA

By Don Vachini

Dominating a part of the eastern Sierra Nevada, Mammoth Mountain's hulking prominence not only serves as a cherished wintertime ski destination, but also provides yearlong sustenance to myriad still waters on its southern slopes. A bona fide angling mecca, the Mammoth Lakes Basin is home to rainbow, brown, brook, cutthroat, and golden trout within a 6-mile radius.

However, this monolith occasionally shrugs its shoulders, causing mild tremors and belching carbon dioxide and steam from geothermal fissures, reminders of its violent volcanic past. Indeed, during 1989, a series of seismic disturbances opened a fissure above 8,950-foot Horseshoe Lake's west shore. According to the U.S.



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Geological Survey (USGS), the resultant outgassing of high concentrations of carbon dioxide into the soil for nearly seven years caused a 170-acre tree die-off next to the lake, prompting hazard warnings. Thankfully, USGS data reveal emissions have dropped significantly and remained stable since 1996. The lake itself remains safe for angling, with USGS advisories for visitors to walk upright and avoid the swath of dead and noticeably dying trees (see USGS fact sheet, <http://pubs.usgs.gov/fs/fs172-96/>).

Surrounded by lodgepole pine and Douglas fir, Horseshoe is located in the Inyo National Forest just outside the town limits of Mammoth Lakes. Since the naturally occurring lake sits on a bed of porous volcanic rock, its water level varies considerably throughout the year. Heavily reliant on gathering annual snowmelt, four seasons of below-average precipitation have reduced its formerly 53-acre perimeter to roughly half that size. Many visitors ignore this dwindling water, instead opting for the huge infusions of hatchery rainbows in the basin's four core lakes 0.25 mile downhill. However, this avoidance translates to a positive, for despite vast sections of exposed lake bottom and stands of dead timber, Horseshoe's feisty brook trout grow in virtual anonymity.

Leached minerals continue entering via submerged aquifers, and the resultant, nutrient-rich zooplankton food base is supplemented with midge and mayfly hatches, plus wayward winged insects and terrestrials air-dropped by fortuitous, upslope winds. These favorable conditions enable the squaretails to consistently attain sizes between 10 and 13 inches.

The remaining contours, coves, and points of land under the water allow residents easy transitions to and from deeper water. On a recent trip with my 15-year-old grandson, Domenic, we arrived at dawn's magical first light to find ourselves alone—and with trout rising everywhere! Beneath the humbling grandeur of 10,400-foot Crystal Crag and the Mammoth Crest, and minus the hindrance of backcast-disrupting timber, Dom confidently presented Mr. Rapidian and *Callibaetis* mayfly dries to the nearby brookies, and routinely hooked pretty 11-inchers. When the sun peeked over the horizon, our quarry moved deeper. With lengthier casts in order, size 14 to 18 beadhead Psycho Prince and Flashback Pheasant Tail Nymphs,

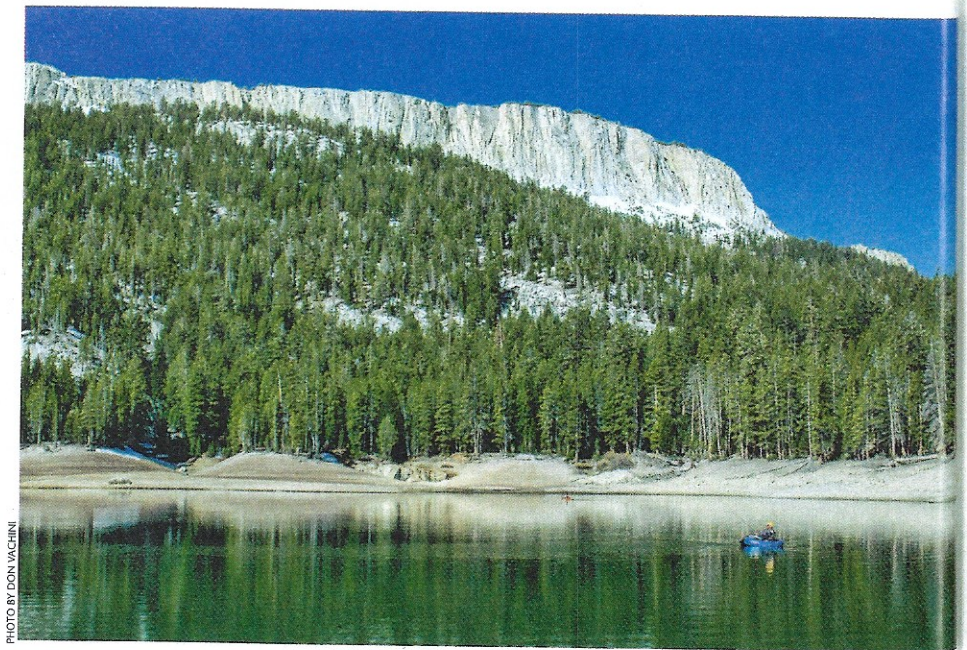


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flicked ahead of cruising trout, were top enticers during the conclusion of our 90-minute foray.

On occasions when the wind ripples the surface, Copper John or Zebra Midge droppers under a Parachute Adams often draw strikes. Float tubes are great for dredging streamers along drop-off zones for deep dwellers approaching 13 inches. A 4-weight fly rod paired with either a floating or sinking line is perfect for this lake, which usually thaws by mid-June and stays open until mid-November.

From US Highway 395, take the Mammoth Lakes exit (California State Route 203) and follow it through the town. Bear left onto Lake Mary Road for approximately 5 miles to its end at the paved Horseshoe Lake parking area. The TroutFitter, (760) 924-3676, www.thetroutfitter.com, provides reliable, up-to-the-minute information regarding hatches and fly selections.

Mammoth Mountain taketh, as drought and geologic unrest portray a somewhat discouraging image of Horseshoe's immediate surroundings. However, the mountain also giveth, for the vibrant brookies finning under its icy surface continue to paint a portrait of piscatorial health. Domenic is already negotiating for another session!