

# Around the Northwest

News, Views, and Piscatorial Pursuits



PHOTO BY DON VACHINI

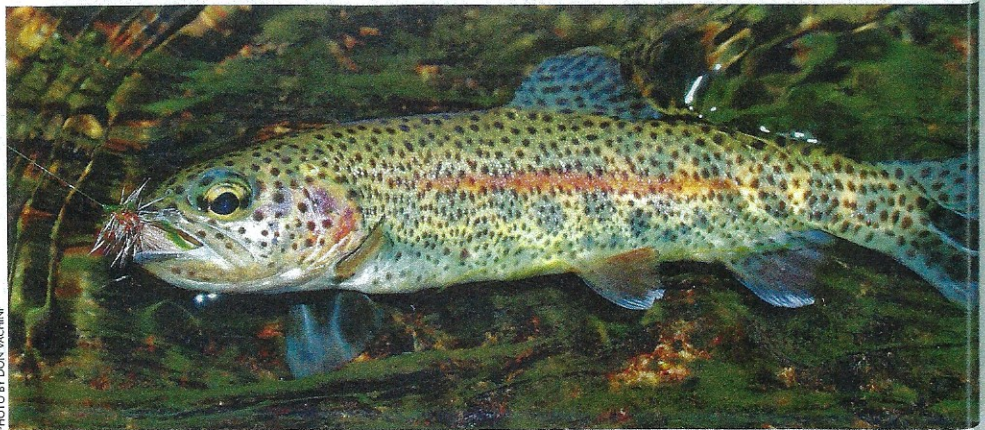
## Willow Creek, CA By Don Vachini

Centuries before monikers were assigned to landmarks, snowmelt trickling from the Eastern Sierra slopes of 10,817-foot Jobs Sister and 10,846-foot Freel Peak formed the headwaters of Willow Creek. Converging below Horse Meadow, its main stem bounces along a gentle gradient for 4 solitary miles to join the West Fork Carson River in Hope Valley.

Prehistorically, Willow Creek was one of many West Fork Carson River tributaries that provided spawning gravel and sanctuary for countless generations of the fabled Lahontan cutthroat trout ascending from Lake Lahontan, a vast Pleistocene Epoch inland sea occupying 8,000 square miles of western Nevada and northeastern California.

During westward migration in the early 1850s, covered wagons brought white settlers up the steep, grueling West Carson Canyon. Before continuing over Carson Pass, they commonly rested and regrouped for a few days adjacent to Willow Creek in the expansive meadows of Hope Valley. In more recent decades, throngs of anglers arrive via car at this same locale, where State Routes 88 and 89 now converge, known as Picketts Junction. However, most visitors don't even notice the creek as they target the West Fork Carson's rainbow trout, which range from 10 inches up to 5 pounds and are regularly stocked by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife and Alpine County Fish & Game.

PHOTO BY DON VACHINI



Willow Creek provides a retreat for anglers wishing to escape the crowds that routinely gather along the main river's banks. A hundred yards above the confluence, the sounds of traffic dwindle and tranquility reigns—precisely why I frequent this intimate Toiyabe National Forest stream.

Not more than 12 feet wide in most places, this pleasantly babbling, under-the-radar venue hosts ample habitat and fish food within its tiny runs, undercut banks, and minute pools shaded by a canopy of mixed pine forest. The creek is not stocked, but an occasional river escapee diverts to join the mix of scaled-down native cutthroat along with resilient populations of wild brook, brown, and rainbow trout—my other reason for visiting.

Heading upstream over no established trail, I leapfrog every other pool, enabling me to hit untouched waters on the way back. It is not uncommon to disturb a towhee raking leaves or see a water ouzel popping up midstream.

Trout here are rarely selective and usually eager to grab a dry fly. Success



often hinges on a dash of creativity while negotiating overhanging limbs, keeping shadows off the water, and keeping the fly riding high on the surface for as long as possible. I use a 2- or 3-weight rod, a 7-foot leader, and 7X tippet for making short roll casts and dapping. Size 14 to 18 dries—Parachute Adams, Elk Hair Caddis, Griffith's Gnat, and terrestrial patterns—are often vigorously taken by the creek's trout. Standard subsurface beadhead patterns also tempt hungry residents.

In addition to numerous Forest Service campgrounds along the West Fork Carson River, area lodging includes Sorensen's Resort, (800)423-9949, [www.sorensensresort.com](http://www.sorensensresort.com), and Woodfords Inn, (530) 694-2111, [www.woodfordsinn.com](http://www.woodfordsinn.com). To reach Willow Creek from Picketts Junction, park, cross the SR 89 bridge, and hike downstream to the creek's confluence with the West Fork Carson.

Whether exploring for a few hours or a half day, angler-hikers will find that the soothing flows of Willow Creek offer a perfect combination of solitude and wild trout.



PHOTO BY JON LUKE

### Clearwater Chain of Lakes, MT By Justin Karnopp

Salmonflies thumped off the windshield as we headed up State Route 200, causing me to momentarily question my decision to bypass the Blackfoot River and set course for the lakes, but my father and I had a hunch that the lakes were about to turn on after the first hot spell of the young summer. We launched the drift boat and motored to the first weedbed adjacent to the ramp. My dad took the bow, worked out 40 feet of fly line, and planted a 6-inch-long fly just on the edge of the exposed reeds. I was offering advice on the execution of the proper retrieve when his fly vanished and the old man was tight to his first fly-caught pike. The rest of the day continued like that as we enjoyed epic sight-fishing for cruising predators in the shallows. When the pike fishing on the Clearwater chain is good, it's really good, and an intriguing alternative to trout fishing in western Montana.

Nestled between the majestic Mission and Swan mountain ranges, the Clearwater River meanders southeasterly along SR 83, pooling into a half-dozen sizable lakes composing the Clearwater chain of lakes. Illegally introduced pike have flourished in several of these waters and provide fly anglers with summer-



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