

Around the Southwest

News, Views, and Piscatorial Pursuits

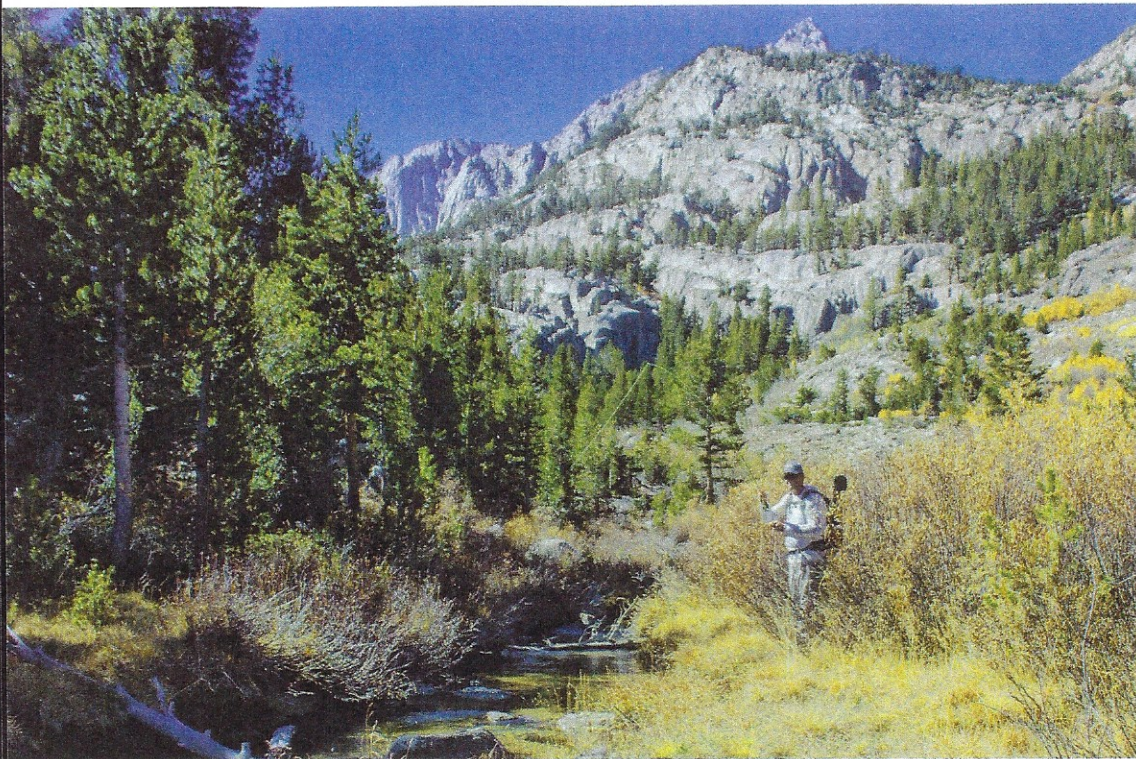


PHOTO BY DON VACHINI

Horton Lakes/Creek, CA By Don Vachini

Beginning at first light, fishing partner Brandon Parker and I had bounced over 4 miles of deteriorating four-wheel-drive road prior to gaining 2,000 feet in elevation while hiking the last 4.3 miles of our journey. Our reward for this demanding 2.5-hour jaunt was a pair of azure still waters reflecting a riot of wildflowers—brilliant yellows and greens—and pocked by rising trout.

On a mid-October morning, we had arrived at the base of a hanging valley leading to an ascending chain of mountain lakes 15 miles west of Bishop. Popular climbing destinations—13,652-foot Mount Tom and 13,240-foot Basin Mountain—not only preside over this slice of John Muir Wilderness, but their glacial melt also forms the Horton Lakes and their connecting creek. All above 11,000 feet, Lakes 3, 4, and 5 are tucked among jumbled talus on a bench against the eastern Sierra crest and comprise the basin headwaters (records reveal a 4-pound, 4-ounce golden trout landed from Lake 3 in 1952). Escaping spillage travels nearly 2 miles before tumbling over steep falls, separating the trio from Lakes 1 and 2, essentially preventing upstream fish passage.

Jim Erdman, an environmental scientist with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, confirms that the upper three lakes are currently fishless, their goldens recently removed as mitigation for the na-



PHOTO BY DON VACHINI

tive mountain yellow-legged frog. However, he notes that 10-acre Horton 1 and 18-acre Horton 2, both bordered by scrub willow, aspen, and pine forest, provide ample habitat for maintaining healthy populations of 8- to 12-inch brook trout. Indeed, we readily observed these lake dwellers cruising the shoreline contours of these waters. During our half-day visit, they assailed mosquito patterns, Adamses, and rubberleg flies presented on 4-weight fly rods

with floating lines, then twitched slowly through the littoral zone.

When afternoon winds buffeted the main body of Lake 2, we headed for its protected inlet. Here, the crystalline channel flared like embers in a breeze as scores of char, regaled in pre-spawning attire, were outlined against its white, sandy bottom. Dangled under a Stimulator, beadhead Prince Nymphs, Pheasant Tail Nymphs, and Zebra Midges often attracted a swarm of competitive takers, their flaming

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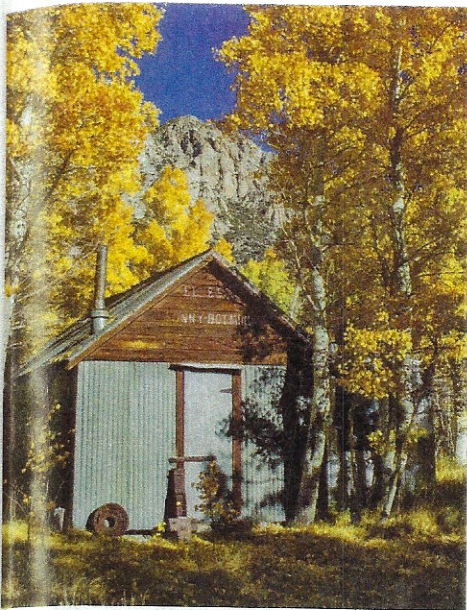


PHOTO BY DON VACHINI

orange undersides adding yet another shade to the autumnal scheme.

Gathering a few hundred yards above Horton 2, the namesake creek gains volume and pleasantly gurgles along a gentle gradient outlined by stunted willows. Staying low, pushing through brush, and dapping and high-sticking are required for probing chutes, seams, deadfalls, and undercut banks of this 10- to 12-foot-wide stream. Away from the lakes, the creek tumbles steeply downslope for 12-miles to eventually join the Owens River. In this steep section, hard-to-penetrate brushy tangles necessitate a 7-foot rod and more tedious, close-quarter casting for small brookies and an occasional rainbow.

The USGS Mount Tom and Tungsten Hills 7.5-minute topographical maps are valuable aids. The lower basin usually becomes accessible by mid-June. From US Route 395 in Bishop, follow State Route 168 (West Line Street) for 7.3 miles and turn right onto Buttermilk Road. After 1.7 miles, take the right fork and at 3.7 miles, bear left (a high clearance vehicle is highly recommended past this point). At 6 miles, take the right fork and follow the sign to Horton Lakes for 0.8-mile. The locked gate signifies the trailhead. For more detail, visit www.climber.org/driving/bishop.html#butter.

Stagecoach Reservoir Tailwater, CO By Michael Salomone

The final day of summer...already?

It had been three days since I guided my most recent fly-fishing trip. I could finally make plans to spend the last day of summer on the water with a fly rod in my own hand, but where? Winding down, the summer weather is quickly morphing into cooler nights that prompt the aspen leaves to begin yellowing. The popular Yampa River tailwater below Stagecoach Reservoir in northern Colorado has treated me well in the past. However, I hesitate to return because grumblings from fellow anglers about an improvement project on the tailwater have made me apprehensive (see page 32).

The river here, less than 20 miles south of Steamboat Springs, has been adversely affected by the sheer numbers of anglers walking the banks over the seasons, so this stretch was largely rebuilt during the past few years, with the channel being narrowed and recontoured, and riparian vegetation reestablished. I was somewhat eager to compare the modern-day rendition to the pools of years past. With sight-fishing opportunities to tempt any angler and regular catches of fish measuring in pounds—not inches—this tailwater has always ranked high on my list of favorites.

When approaching the tailrace below Stagecoach Dam, you need to be cognizant of water flow, water clarity, and dam activity. Is the dam releasing any water? Is the discharge forceful, gushing from the bottom of the dam? Or is a trickle of warm water cascading over the dam? Is the water the normal crystal clear flow that offers excellent sight-fishing opportunities? Answering these questions can steer you in a more productive direction before you even get water on your boots.



PHOTO BY MICHAEL SALOMONE

The Yampa tailwater used to form more pools, especially in the wider sections, where flows slowed considerably. The stream's midstream channel was slower and less apparent. In fact, the water often split into two smaller channels or braided into shallows. More slack water was available and aquatic vegetation thrived in the slower currents. The short tailwater looked like a natural stream, but evidence of hard use was apparent along the trampled banks. Sight-fishing typically required tiny flies, gossamer tippets, and unobtrusive strike indicators. Anglers congregated in the pools and often had to take turns; many arrived very early to stake out a spot.

Now, the modifications have changed the pace and flow of the tailrace. The mainstream current is faster, with less pooling. The river is cleaner, with less of the oxygen-depriving aquatic vegetation that filled the slower areas. Flows are managed to optimum water levels for fly fishing and to satisfy downstream water rights. Small eddies swirl below constructed rock wing-dams that help speed up