



PHOTO BY DON VACHINI

## Lake Ralphine, CA By Don Vachini

After picking up my twin 15-year-old grandkids at their high school, then completing a 40-minute drive, we arrived at the shores of Lake Ralphine. Throughout the remainder of this April afternoon, Domenic and Sophia's "lessons" would continue: studying the water's magical, late-winter-early-spring transition, then testing it for a mixed-species bag.

Constructed in 1882 by Colonel Mark McDonald and named for his wife, this 25-acre impoundment was purchased by the city of Santa Rosa in 1947. While serving as a city water source, this inner-city gem also offers tennis courts, a children's playground, picnic areas, a softball complex, and gentle hiking trails. Under parks and recreation supervision, paddleboats, canoes, kayaks, rowboats, and sailboats are all available for rent. Sitting a few hundred yards away from bustling traffic and surrounded by Howarth Park's stately oaks and conifers, the reservoir offers a peaceful energy along with a low-key fishery for largemouth bass, bluegills, and rainbow trout.

A modest insect and forage base, adequate water conditions, and the sanctuary of tules, weedbeds, and docks enable both bass and bluegills to maintain healthy residencies. Definitely more active during the warmer months, the pugnacious panfish range from 4 inches to hand-size, while the bass top out at nearly 2 pounds. Exceptional specimens are known to lurk in the heavily vegetated back reaches of this still water, and are nearly inaccessible from shore. A float tube or rowboat is advantageous in getting a fly into their lairs.

From mid-October through March, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife plants 15,000 pounds of catchable-size rainbow trout in Ralphine; these fish tend to school and cruise methodically back and forth along the face of the dam. Although most are caught by bait-and-wait anglers within days of a stocking, some scatter, become holdovers, and provide bonus catches into early summer. On a previous bass recon, an unexpected, plump, 13-inch rainbow came to hand, illustrating the lake's multiple-species capability.

During my grandkids' recent visit, 7- to 9-foot, 5-weight rods with floating lines and 5X tippets made up the arsenal. An assortment of size 14 and 16 dry flies and nymph patterns for bluegills,

along with a few size 8 to 10 minnow-imitating streamers, completed the session's minimalistic accouterments.

Ralphine was brim-full and vacant of anglers as the kids assembled fly rods and strategized about structure. They initially probed with beadhead nymphs around the floating dock, in the presence of a mallard hen attentively parenting her ducklings, before a lone, prespawn largemouth took a streamer worked along the gently sloping dam. However, their attention

was drawn to the shaded west shoreline of the lake, where the high-water line touched an intimidating birdcage of overhanging branches. Presenting a definite physical challenge, this low canopy also hinted at prime spiny ray habitat.

Amid friendly banter, Domenic and Sophia worked together in these



PHOTO BY DON VACHINI



tight conditions. I proudly watched them pull aside limbs to momentarily clear gaps for each other, then tediously poke, flip, or dap size 14 Elk Hair Caddis or Humpy dries to formerly guarded residents. Accounting for a dozen or more bluegills, their laborious efforts also ramped up ravenous teenage appetites. As the sun crept near the horizon, we departed for a well-earned taco dinner.

Traveling north on US Highway 101 into Santa Rosa, take the east-bound State Route 12 exit and bear right toward Sonoma. After 0.5 mile, turn left onto Farmers Lane, then right on Sonoma Avenue. A left turn onto Summerfield Road takes you to the Howarth Park entrance. Parking is free, and the park is open from sunrise to sunset. Go to [www.srcity.org/departments/recreationandparks/parks/howarth/lake/](http://www.srcity.org/departments/recreationandparks/parks/howarth/lake/) for current information.

Between bites of tacos, the twins eagerly discussed their next visit, eager to gain additional knowledge about Lake Ralphine's bass, bluegills, and trout.

## Amber Lake, WA

By Chip O'Brien

**A**mber Lake, about 35 miles southwest of Spokane, is widely regarded as the prom queen of channeled scablands lakes within easy striking distance of eastern Washington's largest city. Loaded with hatchery-bred rainbows and westslope cutthroat trout (and largemouth bass), the lake offers excellent trout fishing in the spring and the fall, drawing legions of enthusiastic anglers. The fact that it's so popular should surprise absolutely no one.

Regulations permit only artificial flies and lures with single, barbless hooks; bait is not allowed. The lake opens to fishing on March 1, even though fishing the opener might mean bringing an ice auger and a flask of peppermint schnapps. (I always have a hard time hitting that little hole with my fly.) Ice-out generally happens a few weeks later, and early-season angling can be remarkably good for fly fishers hanging a balanced leech pattern under a strike indicator. It pays to plan for cold, wet, and windy weather early in the season.

While shore fishing right around the boat launch ramp can be productive, access to the rest of the lake is best with a pram, pontoon boat, or float tube. The section of lake adjacent to the boat ramp drops off quickly, and there is often better fishing



PHOTO BY CHIP O'BRIEN

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