

Around the Southwest

News, Views, and Piscatorial Pursuits



PHOTO BY DON VACHINI

Morgan Lakes, CA By Don Vachini

Nestled at the head of a rugged canyon along the eastern Sierra Nevada crest, the Morgan Lakes offer a pleasant combination of hiking, history, and pan-size trout. Situated in the John Muir Wilderness northwest of Bishop, Upper (10,810-foot elevation) and Lower Morgan (10,515-foot elevation) gather snowmelt that rolls down the cheeks of massive 13,748-foot Mount Morgan. Their outflow creates Morgan Creek, which loses more than 3,000 feet in 3 miles, joins Pine Creek, and 9 miles later, enters Pleasant Valley Reservoir.

While vivid brook trout inhabit neighboring Finch, Split, and Bear Lakes, rainbows are the main fare at the Morgan duo, which are heavily steeped in mining history. In 1916, prospectors Billie Vaughn and Arch Beauregard discovered tungsten-bearing scheelite on the ridgeline between Mount Morgan and Wheeler Peak, and shortly thereafter established a mine. Initially, ore was mule packed downhill over a steep 4-mile trail to a processing mill at the junction of Morgan and Pine Creeks.

During 1939, an additional, less-inclined roadway was



PHOTO BY DON VACHINI

bulldozed from the east, up the adjacent Rock Creek drainage and over 11,104-foot Morgan Pass. Heavy-duty half-trucks replaced mules and by 1942, the mine had become the largest tungsten producer in the country, crucial to U.S. stockpiles of strategic metals during World War II.

Nearly 80 years later, this long since abandoned road still plays a significant role in reaching these still waters, now as a well-maintained wilderness footpath. Brandon Parker and I recently opted for this Mos-

quito Flat entry. Indeed, the gently-ascending, low-impact route kept our aging knees happy as we coursed through Little Lakes Valley and over Morgan Pass, gaining only 800 feet in elevation in less than two hours.

A school of hyperactive rainbows greeted us at rockbound 8-acre Upper Morgan. Under gathering ebony clouds, several fish eagerly smacked a

tungsten beadhead ant twitched parallel to the bank. During the 15-minute feeding frenzy, Parker wondered aloud if the tungsten possibly came from deep within the namesake edifice looming directly above us.

Lower Morgan spans 16 acres and offers a few primitive campsites. Its surface that late-June morning was shattered by actively feeding trout, with heavy concentrations of 8- to-10-inch residents choking the inlet channel. Between furtive glances at a swirling, cobalt sky, we watched the trout repeatedly and swiftly attack our dry flies as we cast up into the inlet and let them drift into the lake. When action here ebbed, we probed with fast-sinking tungsten beadhead nymphs, sinking them along the rocky ledges, boulder fields, and steep drop-offs of the western shoreline until imminent rain mandated evacuation.

While conditions might be considered harsh at either lake, moderate spawning habitat exists in the connecting creek and meadow tarn, ensuring self-sustaining populations. Although there is sustainable insect life from the nearby trees and upslope blow-in, high densities of fish tend to stretch the food resources a bit.

Both lakes are usually accessible by early July and hold up through the November 15 closure. Shoreline access is excellent with plenty of room for backcasts. Don't forget insect repellent, sunscreen, and polarized sunglasses.

Fourteen miles south of Mammoth Lakes, exit US Route 395 at the Tom's Place turn, then follow the paved Rock Creek Road for 9.5 miles to the Mosquito Flat parking lot/trailhead. Local fishing guru Jim King is a dependable source of information at Rock Creek Lakes Resort, (760) 935-4311, www.rockcreeklakesresort.com.

Having escaped the rain with a quick retreat back to the trailhead, Parker and I stopped at Tom's Place (www.tomsplaceresort.com) to savor a burger and brew, and again we pondered the probability that a bit of formerly-mined tungsten really did come full circle.

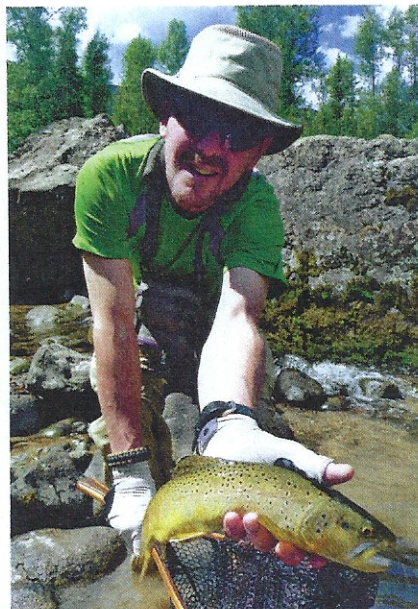


PHOTO BY JONATHAN HILL

South Fork Conejos River, South San Juan Wilderness, CO

By Jonathan Hill

I am almost certain that the urge to walk in water is in my blood. Growing up in the western New York countryside with a creek running through my backyard might also have had something to do with

A man wearing a white long-sleeved shirt, a white visor, and sunglasses is leaning over the side of a boat. He is holding a large, striped fish. In the background, another person is visible on the boat. The scene is set on a body of water under a blue sky.

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