

Around the Northwest

News, Views, and Piscatorial Pursuits



PHOTO BY DON VACHINI

Crater Lake, CA By Don Vachini

With my heart rate accelerating after I crested a berm, I caught sight of my target water, a crater-like depression guarded by granite cliffs and partially encircled by scattered timber. Concentric circles initially implied raindrops, but a quick glance heavenward revealed a cloudless sky. Those rings were made by trout. Lots of trout.

Tucked along the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada's Carson Range between Red Lake Peak and Stevens Peak, aptly named Crater Lake, along with Crater Creek, offer a lightly visited, under-the-radar fishery for spirited, pan-size brook trout. Gathering ice- and snowmelt from the pair of lofty Toiyabe National Forest peaks, the 8,590-foot-elevation lake has steeply sloping shorelines and reaches depths of 30 feet.

The funneled outlet of this 14-acre, bowl-shaped tarn has minimal obstructions, and I stood there, flicking a Brassie to no one ring in particular. In what became a pleasant routine, I'd gently impart a twitch or two to my briefly settling nymph, enjoy a welcome take, then watch colorful swirls disrupt the morning glass. The connection usually ended with a close-up inspection and unbuttoning of a gaudily attired cookie-cutter char.

Brook trout were first planted in this lake during the 1930s, and self-sustaining populations continue to endure, thanks in part to the lake's deep, cold waters, abundant aquatic insects, and adequate spawning habitat. However, conditions are sometimes too good, as the fish show a tendency to stunt. Normally, they range from 7 to 9 inches, with a few fish topping out around 11 inches.

As the dimples ceased a little after 10 a.m., I could see brookies feeding subsurface, seemingly unfettered by my presence as they cruised in repetitive patterns along the shoreline. The bank's steep incline and fly-snagging riparian timber make for challenging contortions, and a float tube would certainly be handy. Although you could probably cast any dark and buggy fly pattern, my favorites include the beadhead Copper John, Zebra Midge, Brassie, and Flashback Pheasant Tail, along with the Parachute Female Adams and Green Mosquito for surface fishing.

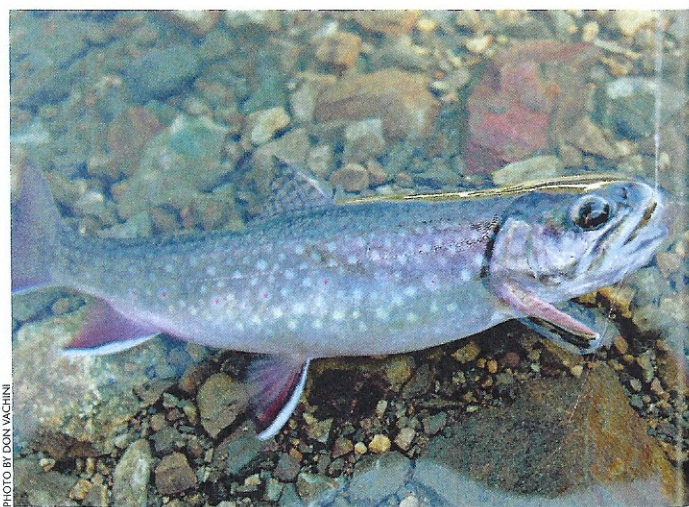


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Brush-infested Crater Creek bounces sharply down the pine-clad mountainside, flows under State Route 88 (aka the Carson Pass Highway), then gently courses through a large meadow before entering Red Lake Creek. Here, a 7-foot, 2-weight rod, floating line, and 6X leader are perfect for dapping or high-sticking tiny dry flies over the willow-shrouded meadow sections and along undercut banks. Dawn and dusk can account for some pleasant connections on this tributary.

To reach this serene still-water escape, from US Highway 395 in Minden, Nevada, turn west onto SR 88 and drive for 22 miles, continuing past Picketts Junction and Blue Lakes Road; 2 miles from Blue Lakes Road, turn right at the unmarked Forest Service Road 31091 (aka Alpine Mine Road) and follow the dirt road 1.5 miles until it forks, then park in the small parking area overlooking Crater Creek. Do not cross the creek, but rather hike along the left-bearing four-wheel-drive spur road for 0.75 mile to the lake (deep ruts, loose rocks, washouts, and deadfalls can make driving to the lake tedious, making bipedal locomotion a more feasible plan). Incidentally, the road to the right winds 2 miles up to the Alhambra and Alpine mine sites, noted for their gold and silver production from the 1930s through the 1950s.

Crater Lake has two primitive campsites. Forest Service campgrounds are plentiful in the area, and nearby Woodfords Inn, (530) 694-2111, www.woodfordsinn.com, and Sorensen's Resort, (530) 694-2203, (800) 423-9949, www.sorensensresort.com, offer more comfortable lodging. Supplies are available in Markleeville. Todd Sodaro of the Creekside Lodge, (530) 694-2511, in Markleeville, and Judy Wickwire, owner of Horsefeathers Fly Fishing School and Guide Service, (530) 694-2399, are reliable sources of local and current information.

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