

parted for the hike up to Big Spruce, the sky opened up on us again. We arrived at Big Spruce amid a soggy mixture of snow and rain. But that didn't stop us from fishing around the entire lake. Yet again Shawn proved the top rod, netting a gorgeous 16-inch cutthroat.

As early afternoon approached, another storm rolled in, so we headed back to camp and again hail and lightning let loose. Back under the mountain tarp with the whisky, we cooked up dinner and decided that with the weather being what it was, and the fishing being less productive than we had hoped, we would pack up the next morning and head out a day early.



PHOTO BY JONATHAN HILL

While the weather and fishing weren't ideal, the mountain wilderness is always alluring; hanging out at 12,000 feet in the middle of nowhere with good friends and at least a few cooperative trout never gets old. In a few years, I'll have to try to get back there and try it again, once the memories of bad weather have faded.

Buckeye Creek, CA

By Don Vachini

On a midsummer morning in 1980, my three preteen sons and I reached the upper meadows of Buckeye Creek after an invigorating 3-mile hike. There, in the shadow of majestic Sierra Nevada spires, I watched my 11-year-old son react too slowly and miss a pair of successive surface strikes on the gently meandering flows. Then, with heightened anticipation, he set the hook so aggressively on the



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ensuing rise that a startled, 5-inch brook trout was catapulted directly into his face—a vivid memory we still laugh about.

Buckeye Creek has many faces. It begins a 15-mile journey as snowmelt from imposing 11,000-foot peaks within the Hoover Wilderness. After tumbling eastward, the creek flows onto Toiyabe National Forest lands, snakes through Big Meadow, then begins to slow as it sifts over myriad boulders, passing Buckeye Campground and Buckeye Hot Springs before entering private ranch lands in Bridgeport Valley. After diversions for irrigation, the creek trickles into massive Bridgeport Reservoir.

This lively creek is home to rainbow, brook, and brown trout in varying sizes and numbers. The beneficiary of icy flows, decent insect hatches, and thick pine and cottonwood cover, Buckeye Creek forms healthy trout habitat. The California Department of Fish and Wildlife augments the wild-trout population with heavy doses of 10- to 13-inch rainbows in the vicinity of the campground and bridge. While many of these stocked fish congregate in the

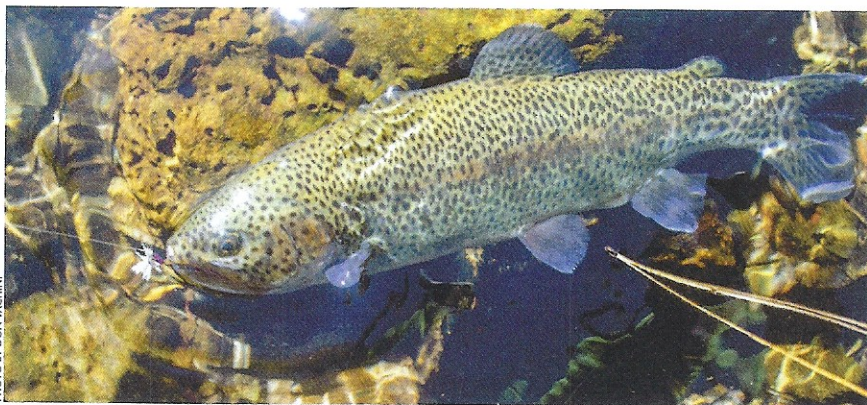


PHOTO BY DON WACHINI

obvious pools near their infusion points, some scatter and join their wild brethren.

On a recent solo trip, I found welcome solitude hiking a short distance upstream from the bridge. Wet wading and short lining a Purple Haze along seams and through slots enticed four hand-size 'bows plus a pudgy 14-inch holdover.

A bit more than a mile above the campground, a maintained Forest Service trail skirts willow-lined flows dominated by hyperactive brookies. With plenty of competition for the available food, these cookie-cutter residents max out at less than 10 inches, but they are eager and colorful. A few miles farther upstream, the forest canopy dwindles and the stream character changes as Buckeye Creek serpentine along the grassy banks of Big Meadow. A few seasons ago, a nostalgic moment occurred while I was kneeling on the same bend where my son's face collided with an airborne brookie in 1980: an over-eager brookie repeatedly slashed at my hopper pattern, and I focused intently on a delicate hook set to avoid another family fish facial.

On the other end of the spectrum, fall-spawning browns ascend from Bridgeport Reservoir. Often approaching 5 pounds, they are wary, reclusive, and rarely caught; most return to the impoundment immediately after recruitment duties are fulfilled. However, their much-tinier progeny often remain in the creek for years, taking refuge near logjams or nearly inaccessible cover. Here, minnow-imitating streamers fished during low light offer a fair chance at a connection. Generally though, I rely on Cutter's Perfect Ant, Stimulators, Copper Johns, Prince Nymphs, and Pheasant Tail Nymphs. Three-weight outfits are ideal.

From Interstate 395 in Bridgeport, drive west 7.2 miles on Twin Lakes Road. Turn right onto Buckeye Road and follow it 2.7 miles to the bridge crossing. Signs lead to the campground, trailhead, and hot springs. The season runs from the last Saturday in April through November 15. Ken's Sporting Goods, (760) 932-7707, www.kenssport.com, offers flies, tackle, guides, and advice. Camping information is available at the Toiyabe National Forest Service Ranger Station, (760) 932-7070, in Bridgeport, which also offers numerous dining and lodging options.

I am currently planning to introduce my 10-year-old granddaughter to the willing brookies of upper Buckeye. And, as she greets them, I will definitely emphasize subtle hook sets.

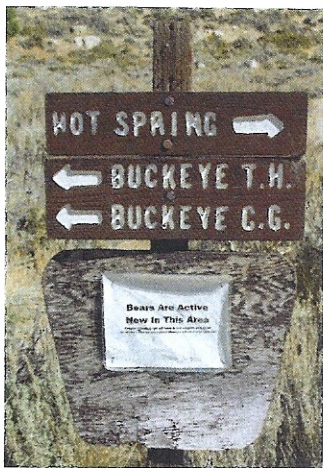


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