



PHOTO BY DON VACHINI

California: Sherwin Lakes

By Don Vachini

The town of Mammoth Lakes abuts seven trout-infused roadside lakes, each frequently swarming with throngs of floating craft and shore anglers, all jostling for preferred spots. But nearby hiking routes lead to pristine backcountry destinations where adventuresome anglers who invest the required sweat equity can find solitude and wild trout.

On an early October morning, Brandon Parker and I left

an Inyo National Forest trailhead at first light. Initially meandering through high-desert sagebrush and chaparral, the trail soon commenced a steady ascent and, after abundant switchbacks, delivered us into Jeffrey pine and aspen forest. After gaining nearly 900 feet in elevation over 2.2 miles, we crested a ridge overlooking Sherwin Lakes #1 and #2 hunkered just below. Staying on high ground, we traversed a few more steps uphill to the in-tandem #3 and #4.

Snowmelt funneled off the southern slope of the Sherwin Range accumulates in Valentine Lake (9,765 feet) and forms the headwaters of Sherwin Creek. After tumbling 2 miles and dropping a thousand feet, the creek creates a cluster of 4- to 6-acre lakes, all nestled in a small, densely forested basin at 8,748 feet. Below here, the creek continues a stepladder descent for an additional 2 miles to enter Mammoth Creek, which eventually becomes Hot Creek and joins the Owens River above Lake Crowley.

First glance below the surface of 6-acre Lake #3 revealed flaring, black-and-white-edged fins—brook trout cruising back and forth along the boulder-strewn shoreline. However, we were also aware of ominous, leaden clouds lingering over the taller peaks while we hastily assembled fly rods. We had maybe three hours before rain became a reality.

Fed by icy, perennial flows, and surrounded by insect-rich timber and scrub brush, these subalpine tarns are home to healthy, self-sustaining populations of brookies, along with a few rainbow trout. The lakes are blessed with just enough bug life to support moderate densities of fish that generally top out around 10 inches. Obstacles exist, as tangled blow-downs and fly-grabbing willows form aprons around each of the lakes. To efficiently deliver flies without hooking foliage, you'll need to employ innovative roll casts.

A 9-foot, 3- or 4-weight rod and a floating line are perfect for presenting a wide range of size 12 to 16 flies along contours, points of land, and steep drop-offs. Effective patterns include the beadhead Zebra Midge, Copper John, Brassie, Prince Nymph, Flashback Pheasant Tail Nymph, Green Mosquito, Elk Hair Caddis, Parachute Adams, Rubber Legs, and flying ants.

On that cloudy morning, the rapidly darkening sky kept residents actively feeding. Both ends of dry/dropper combos consistently wrested vibrant, cookie-cutter brookies and 'bows from the beautiful lake. However, shortly before the patter of raindrops ended our stay, Brandon let out a whoop while dredging a beadhead pattern through Lake #4's gouged-out inlet. Arrayed in

flaming colors, with vibrant fins, the stately, hook-jawed 12-incher capped off our session—and firmly indicated that the Sherwin Lakes are indeed a noteworthy day-hike destination.

From US Highway 395, take the Mammoth Lakes turnoff (SR 203), drive west 2.7 miles, and turn left on Old Mammoth Road. Just after crossing the Mammoth Creek bridge, turn left on Sherwin Creek Road and continue for 1.4 miles. Turn right on a dirt road signed for Sherwin Lakes Trail/Motocross and follow it 0.25 mile to the trailhead. The lakes are open from the last Saturday in April through November 15. Mammoth Lakes Visitor Center, (760) 924-5500, www.visitmammoth.com, can point out numerous dining and lodging options in addition to trail information; The Troutfitter, (760) 924-3676, www.thetroutfitter.com, offers timely angling advice, tackle, and necessary flies.

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