

California: Lake Mendocino

By Don Vachini

The predawn morning at Lake Mendocino had already yielded a pair of pugnacious, 1-pound smallmouth bass. Then, on an ensuing cast along a rocky outcropping, an unknown adversary suddenly zapped a jolt of electricity into my hands while putting a serious bow in my rod. I had my hands full as the unseen fish raced toward the middle of the lake, peeling line from my reel.

When the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) completed construction of Coyote Dam on the East Fork Russian River in 1958, it formed 1,822-acre Lake Mendocino. Designed

for flood control, water storage, and recreation, this multifaceted impoundment near Ukiah sits amid oak, pine, and bay woodlands of the Coastal Range. Controlled releases feed the Russian River, which courses 125 miles southwesterly to enter the Pacific Ocean at Jenner. Starting in Ukiah, drive north on US Highway 101 for 4.5 miles and exit onto State Route 20. Travel 2.2 miles to the lake. Lodging and food are available in Ukiah. The USACE, Lake Mendocino Division, (707) 462-7581, can provide lakeside camping information

A popular waterskiing and recreation destination, Lake Mendocino supports a diverse warm-water fishery. Abundant nutrients, terrestrial and aquatic insect life, and bountiful baitfish sustain healthy bluegill, crappie, channel catfish, largemouth bass, smallmouth bass, striped bass, and rainbow trout populations.



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ecology that includes lots of baitfish. With something always in competition for a meal here, you never know what to expect. A case in point occurred that early morning, as I targeted smallmouth: the anonymous battler headed toward the horizon, but when finally coaxed to shore after a frenetic skirmish, it turned out to be a sleek, 14-inch striper—an unexpected yet welcome surprise.

While early and late in the day are prime periods for targeting all species, a good rule of thumb is to concentrate heavily on the fringes, edges, and drop-offs, especially in the vicinity of the inlet. Expect company from gear and bait anglers, although a float tube or paddle boat can afford a bit more freedom.

A 4-weight system with a floating line, plus small surface poppers or beadhead nymphs under an indicator, is great for panfish and smaller bass. For larger smallmouth and stripers, use a 5-weight rod, sinking line, and 3X fluorocarbon tippet, and size 8 to 10 baitfish patterns, including Clouser Minnows, Zonkers, and conehead Woolly Buggers. Crawdad patterns are also effective.

The 3-mile-long East Fork Russian River above the lake offers a pleasant change of pace. Weighted nymphs bounced through seams and pockets work best on the 10- to 12-inch rainbow trout regularly stocked by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Open all year, Lake Mendocino provides a varied fishery. And with any of seven species willing to chase your fly, expect the unexpected.



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