



PHOTO BY DON VACHINI

California: Portal Forebay/By Don Vachini

The dozen or so hyperactive brookies I tempted from Portal Forebay were an unexpected, albeit pleasant, surprise. Sitting on the west slope of the Sierra Nevada, this lesser-known fishery, in Sierra National Forest, doesn't receive the fanfare of more notable nearby waters. Indeed, most visitors making the trip northeast from Fresno motor right past Portal Forebay on their way to such popular destinations as Mono Hot Springs, Vermilion Valley Resort, High Sierra Pack Station, or the Thomas A. Edison and Florence Lakes trailheads into the John Muir Wilderness backcountry.

Snowmelt from nearby Mount Givens feeds both the East and West Forks of Camp Sixty One D Creek, aka Camp Creek. Below their confluence, Camp Creek was dammed in the late 1940s to form the 20-acre impoundment. While the reservoir feeds a minimum water flow of 15 cubic feet per second trickling downhill into the South Fork San Joaquin River, a larger portion is piped into nearby Huntington Lake, part of an intricate water-delivery system for Southern California Edison.

Most importantly, this 7,180-foot-elevation reservoir provides an off-the-radar option in a region burgeoning with fly-fishing destinations. Thanks

to year-round inflow, favorable water temperatures, and adequate bug life (including terrestrials in the thick Jeffrey pine, lodgepole pine, and cedar forest cover), Portal Forebay supports a self-sustaining brook trout population, augmented with rainbow trout stocked by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. The feisty, cookie-cutter char max out at about 10 inches; hatchery 'bows consistently reach 12 inches, with a few running a bit larger.

Uncluttered and backcast-friendly, the lake's north bank is steep and drops off abruptly; extensive shallows fringe the opposite shore where the submerged inlet channel creates a noticeable depression. Prior to a recent August backpacking trip, Brandon Parker and I spent a few leisurely afternoons exploring this hot spot. Enjoying the captivating view of the nearby Sierra Nevada crest to the east, we pinpointed a dense concentration of brookies in the clear water, their white-edged fins flaring noticeably and giving away their positions. Hunkered deep, they wouldn't rise to the surface for dry flies, so we tried tiny beadhead nymphs, allowed to sink, then animated by strip-retrieving the flies in the margins of the gently moving current of the inlet. The tactic was simple and effective.

The typical Sierra Nevada fly selection serves faithfully, including size 14 and 16 beadhead Prince Nymphs, Copper Johns, Hare's Ear Nymphs, and Zebra Midges for subsurface fishing. When surface action occurs, try a Parachute Adams, Comparadun, Elk Hair Caddis, or California Red Tail Mosquito. A dry/dropper combination at first and last light is a great option, and a 9-foot, 3- or 4-weight rod with a floating line is ideal. Carry a sinking line just in case the fish stay deep.

Portal Forebay's season begins when the road is plowed and ends at winter closure. There are no special regulations. A tiny U.S. Forest Service campground offers basic campsites plus easy access to prime morning and evening angling. To get there, take State Route 168 northeast from Fresno past Huntington Lake, where the pavement narrows and becomes Kaiser Pass Road. For its final 15 miles, this tedious, one-lane road demands close attention to oncoming traffic, blind corners, and precipitous drop-offs. Both Turner's Outdoorsman in Fresno, (559) 214-1200, www.turners.com, and Shaver Lake Sports, (559) 841-2740, www.shaverlakesports.com, provide reliable information.