

PHOTOS BY DON VACHINI

California: Elizabeth Lake/By Don Vachini

Departing Tuolumne Meadows Campground, I gained 900 feet while completing an invigorating 2.3-mile ascent to my Yosemite National Park backcountry destination. Unicorn Peak, a 10,822-foot granitic beacon guarding azure Elizabeth Lake, drew my gaze, but then my attention was riveted by the lake's funnel-like, turf-lined outlet. The placid water was bathed in late-afternoon sunlight, and a few concentric circles tight against the bank indicated a feeding trout. I carefully eased into casting position.

This 63-acre, glacier-carved lake sits along the west slope of the Sierra Nevada near Tioga Pass at an elevation of 9,487 feet. It was named for Elizabeth Crow Simmons, the niece of Robert Marshall, a U.S. Geological Survey geologist recording and mapping Yosemite's landscape at the dawn of the 20th century. In 1907, the California Department of Fish and Game stocked the lake with brook trout. With abundant snowmelt water, varied submerged structure, and a vibrant creek with abundant spawning and

rearing habitat, the lake proved ideal, and the brookies established a thriving, self-sustaining population. The fish dine on midges, mayflies, caddisflies, and terrestrial insects, and typically range from 8 to 12 inches.

While smaller fish tend to hug the shoreline, plenty of productive underwater topography exists on the opposite side of the lake from the outlet. Here, larger brookies often cruise

in repetitive patterns amid the sanctuary of drop-offs to deeper water or the outer edges of littoral zones. Polarized sunglasses help locate both subsurface structure and fish, which helps swing the pendulum in favor of the angler. Once you pinpoint a target, execute an intercepting cast and initiate a seductive retrieve in front of the fish. Instead of sight-fishing, you can also make long casts out over a submerged

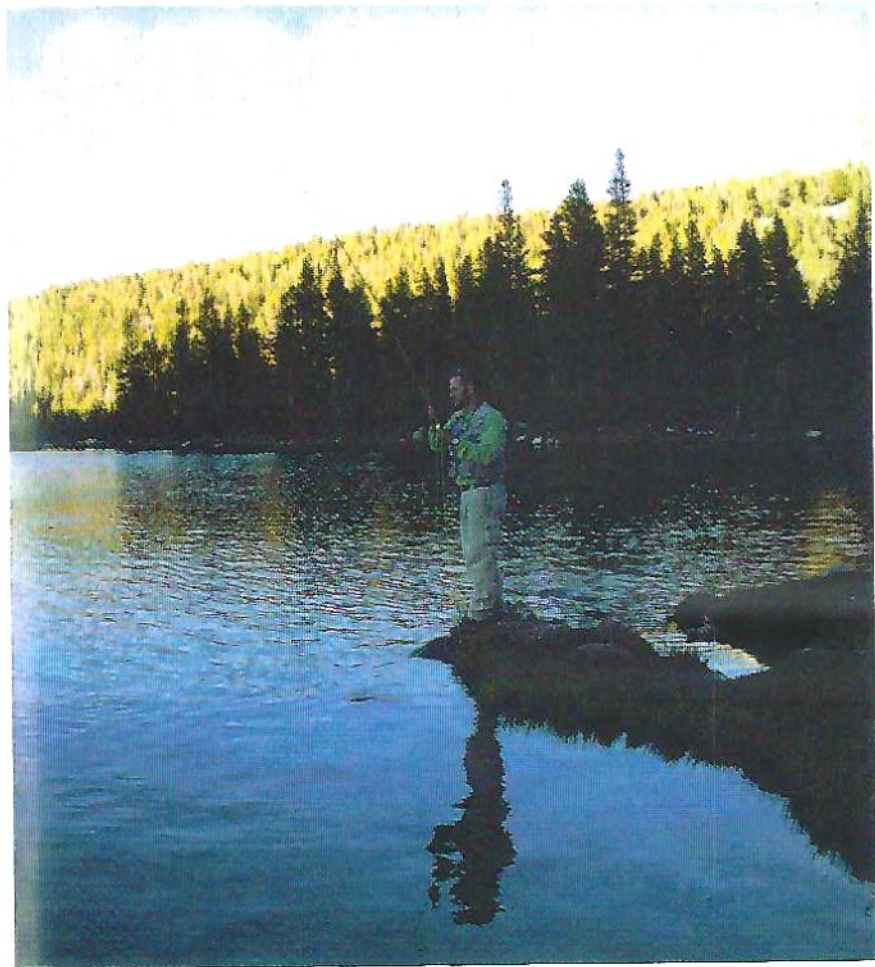


shelf, let the fly settle deep, and then make erratic, stop-and-go retrieves.

Stealth and precise presentations prevent spooking fish in the outlet's confined quarters. Kneeling, I flicked a black/green beadhead nymph next to a patch of overhanging grass in the slowly moving current. Within seconds, a gurgling explosion ensued, followed by frantic V-wakes before I beached a robust, 14-inch char. This fish had obviously achieved plenty of prior success dining heavily on the

Black Gnat, and California Red Tail Mosquito for dry-fly action. Dry/dropper setups are also effective and can help you pinpoint the depth at which the fish are feeding.

A continual series of riffles and plunge pools define outflowing Unicorn Creek, a tributary to the Tuolumne River. Nowhere is the stream more than 2 feet deep, so dapping and short-lining a high-floating size 16 or 18 dry fly around rocks or seams always seems to attract truncated,



tiny fingerlings, which tend to hunker in the shallows.

While midday feeding sessions can be sketchy, the lake comes alive with activity during morning and evening hours. Dark size 14 and 16 patterns are effective: among my favorites are the Black Ant, Zebra Midge, BH Pheasant Tail Nymph, Copper John, and Hare's Ear for subsurface, and the Elk Hair Caddis, Parachute Adams,

gaudily attired char to the surface.

Because of the high elevation, the season at Elizabeth Lake begins late, usually in early July, and extends into October. From Interstate 395 in Lee Vining, follow State Route 120 west into the park. At Tuolumne Meadows, turn into the Tuolumne Meadows Campground and park at the day-use trailhead.



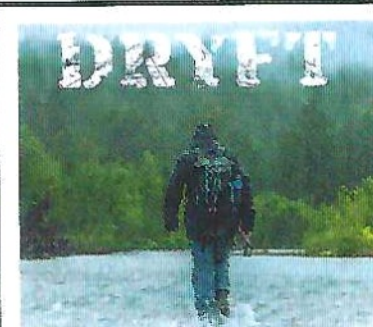
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