

Virginia Lakes Watershed, CA

Something for Everyone

Story and photos by Don Vachini

Starting from a pullout along US Highway 395 a few miles south of Bridgeport, California, Brandon Parker and I hiked nearly 2 miles upstream along a little-traveled ribbon of green amid stark, high-desert sagebrush. Staring us down on this early-September morning was 12,379-foot Dunderberg Peak, a dominating prominence that shadows a chain of feeder lakes a dozen miles farther up the canyon.

Taking a water break along pleasantly gurgling Virginia Creek, we noticed a promising sight: gnarled cottonwoods towering above, tangled willow stringers caressing the 10-foot-wide braid, and a deep azure pool guarded by a partially submerged log. Nearly out of sight and difficult to approach, the pool seemed the perfect place for a big brown trout. We needed a closer look.

Virginia Creek drains a high-altitude Sierra Nevada basin located between the towns of Bridgeport and Lee Vining in east-central California. The creek and its

headwaters collect snowmelt along the eastern slope of a spur ridge bisecting the East Walker and Owens River valleys; Highway 395 traverses this ridgeline at scenic 8,143-foot Conway Summit.

The Virginia Lakes Trail, almost all of it well above 10,000 feet elevation, leads into the heart of the seven backcountry tarns that feed Virginia Creek, which then flows through a pair of larger lakes before tumbling eastward down a wide canyon for 15 additional miles. Entering a broad, lush meadow, Virginia Creek merges with Green Creek to form the East Walker River near Bridgeport. Below this town, a dam impounds the river to form Bridgeport Reservoir, a notable fishery for rainbow and brown trout.

But back upstream, the Virginia Lakes watershed comprises a trove of lakes and streams and is home to a pleasant variety of options and landscapes for slinging flies for rainbow, brook, and brown trout.

A gaudily attired brookie, sporting a Müller dry fly in its mouth, battles in the gin-clear headwaters of Virginia Creek.

Headwater Lakes

Bordering the northeast shoulder of Yosemite National Park, the 128,221-acre Hoover Wilderness includes 12,379-foot Dunderberg Peak, which feeds snowmelt to nearby alpine tarns whose outlets converge to form the diminutive origins of Virginia Creek. The mountain (renamed from Castle Peak by the Wheeler Survey party in 1878) is the highest point in Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest.

During an early-June trip one year, my grandson, Domenic, accompanied me on a day hike into the backcountry headwaters. A hundred yards from the trailhead parking lot, which sits at 9,805 feet, we crossed the wilderness boundary just prior to sunrise, then skirted 11-acre Blue Lake, making mental notes of its fishing potential as we climbed the steep trail. After briefly viewing an old historic cabin, a testament to long-past mining exploits in the area, we visually collected more data as we hustled past timber-fringed Cooney Lake, which sits as 10,262 feet.

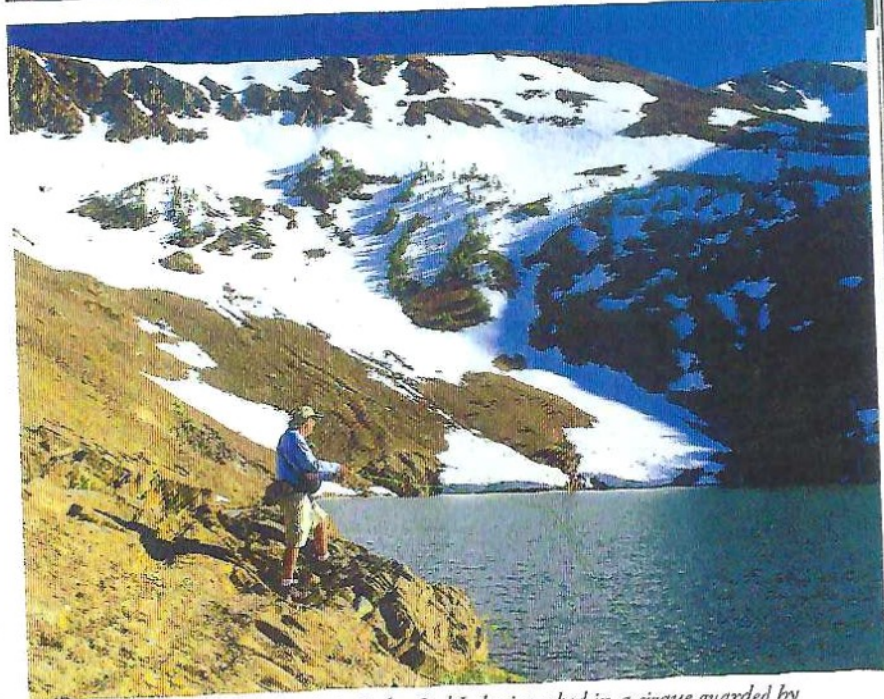
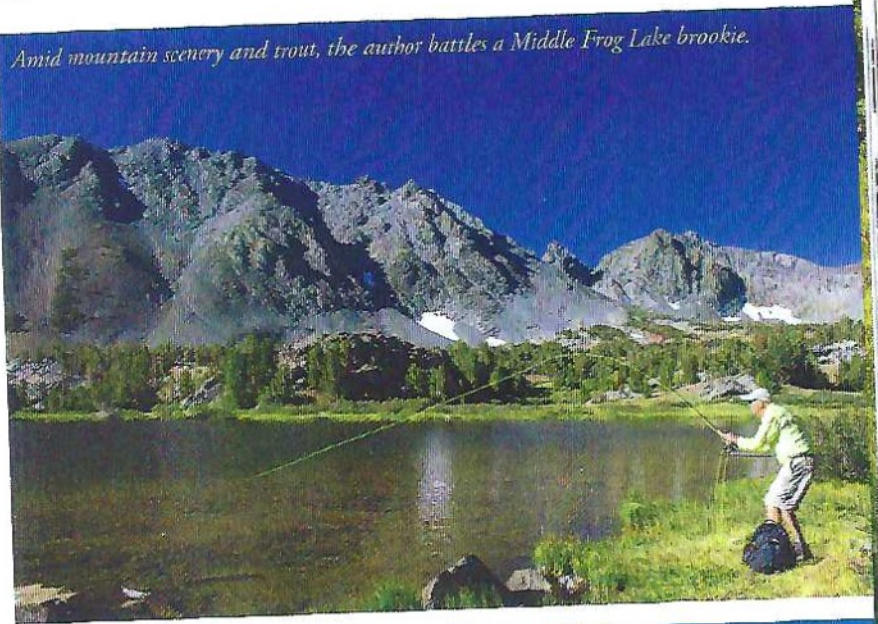
Although the Virginia Lakes Trail is generally tame, with just a few steep spots, our heaving lungs needed some acclimation to these lofty elevations. But in just under an hour, we arrived at our destination, the Frog Lakes, a trio of tarns, interconnected by tiny streams, that occupy tundra-like meadow at more than 10,300 feet. Majestic crags high above reflected the rising sun, and colorful columbines and paintbrush garnished the meadow edges with garish colors. These small lakes range from 1 to 5 acres; they are shallow, with soft bottoms and limited structure. But they hold fish.

We had missed the magic early-morning top-water bite, but managed to fool a pair of colorful brookies by fishing size 16 Zebra Midges drifted under Purple Haze dry flies along the reed lines of middle Frog Lake. Next, I probed upper Frog Lake, the largest of the trio, while Domenic was content to hone his skills on the 4-foot-wide outlet creek. Here his size 16 White Miller, twitched alongside the overhanging grass, took a few eager but truncated brookies as he figured out the nuances of fly-fishing tiny creeks.

Finally, we retraced our steps back to 9-acre Cooney Lake. With wading possible in only a few places, and the lake rimmed by trees, roll casting was required to reach the steep drop-offs leading to the productive littoral zones. However, at the inlet creek we noted trout sipping insects from the surface where the current slowly ebbed. With cramped casting room, we took turns presenting the Purple Haze/midge combos that

had served us well at the Frog Lakes. On one particularly miserable cast, my offering blundered onto a willow branch, then plopped unceremoniously on the water inches from the shore. I quickly tried to recover the aborted cast, but my line suddenly went tight. Initially I surmised a snag, but a pair of deliberate tugs told me differently and a 13-inch, hook-jawed brookie soon came to hand—the biggest I've ever landed on these lakes.

Amid mountain scenery and trout, the author battles a Middle Frog Lake brookie.



A very short hike from Big Virginia Lake, Red Lake is tucked in a cirque guarded by Black Peak. The outlet's moving water is a solid place to try for truncated brook trout.

We concluded our adventure at Blue Lake, which has similar shoreline features leading to noticeable depths. Blue Lake is popular with day hikers and gear anglers; they typically fish from the shoreline adjacent to the trail above the north shoreline. So, we scrambled off-trail, to the west end

of the lake, where a waterfall dumps the feeder creek into the tarn. The moving water there tends to congregate trout. Although it was well past noon and casting room was again at a premium, our dry/dropper setups yielded a mixed bag of brookies and rainbows. If you don't mind carrying the extra luggage, a float tube comes in handy on Blue Lake and on Cooney Lake.

An additional pair of tiny lakes beckon anglers in the basin. Sitting at 10,576 feet, 8-acre Moat Lake is reached via a right (north) turn just above Blue Lake. The steep, half-mile trail up the lower western flank of soaring Dunderberg Peak will test your quads, but the scenic views will take your breath away. Once housing prized golden trout, beautiful Moat Lake now contains a self-sustaining population of diminutive brookies. Nine-acre Red Lake sits just a few hundred yards south of Big Virginia Lake (aka upper Virginia Lake, and officially Big Valley Lake), tucked in a small, basaltic cirque at 9,852 feet elevation. The short trail departs from the main trailhead parking lot. Red Lake's inlet dries up after early summer, but both it and the willow-lined outlet are the most productive locales for gaudy wild brook trout.

The seasonal window of opportunity is short at these seven lofty lakes. Snow and ice usually don't melt until mid-to late July, and icy water keeps trout metabolism rates low. However, late July through at least early September can be highly productive. Late-season weather is unpredictable, and snow can fly by mid-October.

Fishing tends to be best away from the crowds that can accumulate in the easy-to-reach waters and shorelines of the basin. Common hatches include the ubiquitous *Callibaetis* mayfly, and Hare's Ear Nymphs, soft-hackle emergers or Timberline Specials, and Parachute-style dry flies are suitable imitations of its various stages. A full box of beadhead

nymphs and attractor dry flies, all in sizes 14 through 18, along with small streamers such as size 10 Woolly Buggers, complete the arsenal. As on many high-mountain lakes, the best action usually occurs early and late in the day. However, when afternoon winds blow, creating a light chop on a lake's surface, trout often become emboldened. At these times, try small flies, such as a BH Prince or BH Pheasant Tail Nymph, or both in tandem, and alternately drifted with the wind and strip-retrieved.

The Virginia Lakes Trio

In centuries prior to the coming of Euro-Americans, Paiute Indians inhabited much of the Mono County area, wintering in lower-elevation Bridgeport Valley, then using game trails and footpaths for summer foraging, gathering, and hunting in the upper drainage. In 1859, a group of 70 Mormon families founded a settlement along Dogtown Creek and a mining company was formed with the intent to placer-mine gold along the northern slopes of Dunderberg Peak. In 1870, the Dunderberg Mill was built to work the gold and silver ore from local mines and Thomas Ward further developed the mining operation, setting up the Ward mining village. Near the end of the 19th century, the gold played out and the miners moved on. Today the mill is in ruins, but three small, dilapidated cabins remain.

Many years ago, I read a book titled *I Caught a Fisherman* by Anita Foster, which vividly illustrates the post-1924 history and development of Virginia Lakes Resort. Foster chronicles the fulfillment of the dream realized by the author and her husband, Walt; the hardworking couple loved the outdoors. The book details their trials and struggles from the project's infancy, among them forging a road, early cabin construction, negotiating a U.S. Forest Service lease, and lining up trout stockings for the lakes; it is also rich in fishing success stories.

Today, nearly a century later, Carolyn Webb owns the resort, which sits amid three gorgeous and productive lakes: Big Virginia Lake, Little Virginia Lake (officially Little Valley Lake), and Trumbull Lake. Heavily planted with rainbows by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW), these lakes offer some of the best fishing in the Sierra Nevada amid some of its prettiest scenery and remain the focus of many campers, summer cabin residents, and day visitors.

At 27 acres, Big Virginia (9,805 feet elevation) receives approximately 12,000 half-pound CDFW rainbows annually, while 10-acre Little Virginia (9,720 feet) is infused with more than 15,000 'bows each year. In addition, over 3,200 pounds of brood-stock rainbows, ranging from 5 to 8 pounds, are stocked in the two lakes by private hatchery concessionaires.

Sitting adjacent to the Virginia Lakes, spring-fed Trumbull Lake (9,673 feet) garners subterranean seepage from the bowels of Dunderberg Peak. This 12-acre tarn is stocked with more than 10,000 half-pounders and 45 brood fish each year. Its outlet creek feeds Virginia Creek. Present in small



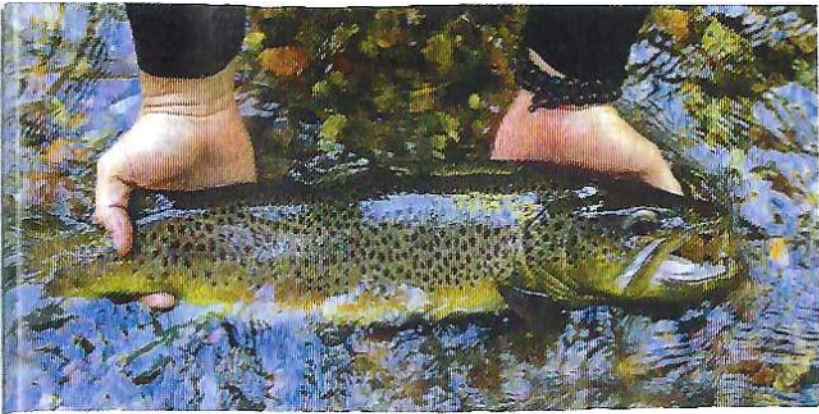
Hook: TMC 100, sizes 14-18

Body: Purple Flex Floss ribbed with fine silver tinsel

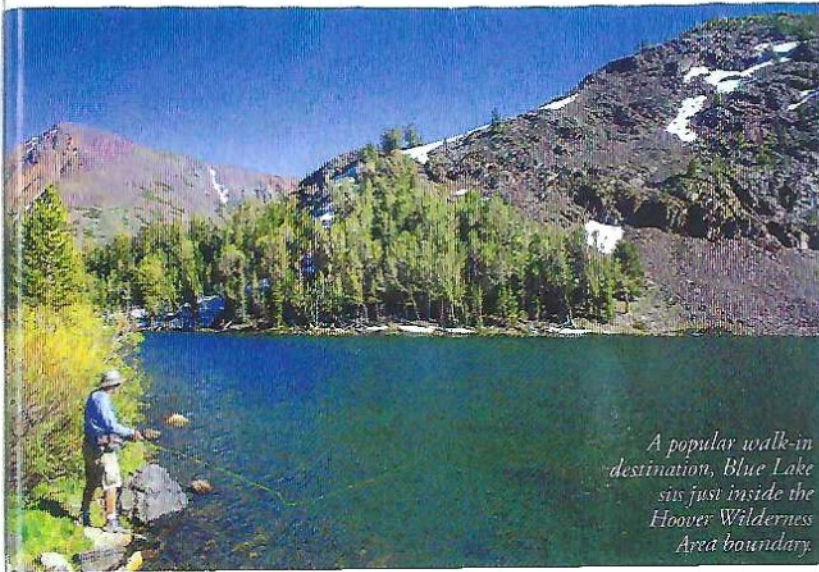
Tail: Natural brown elk hair

Wing post: White calf tail

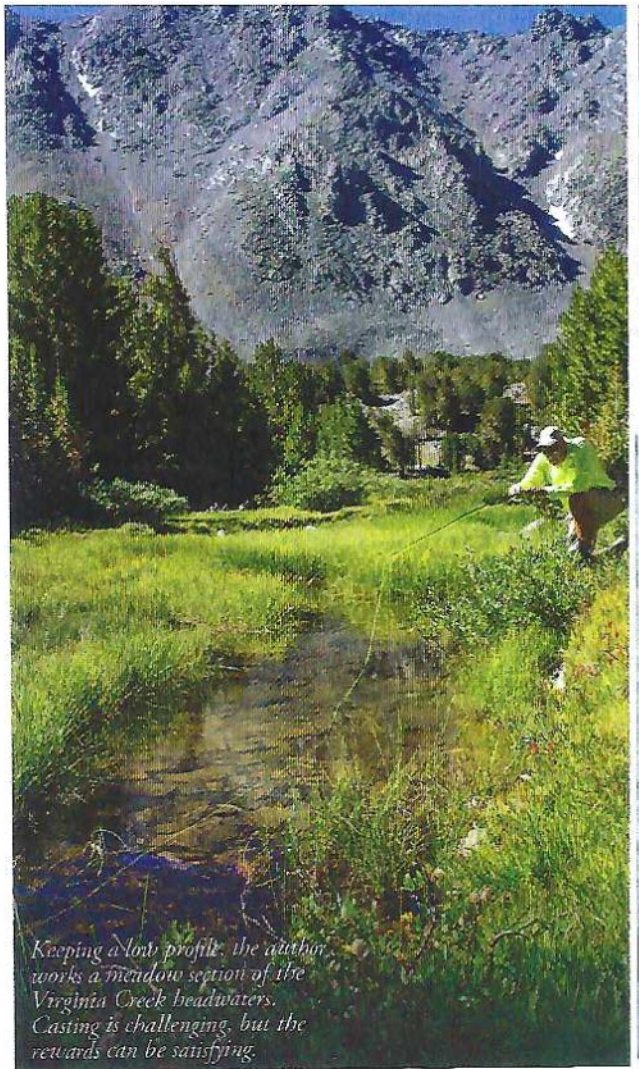
Hackle: grizzly, tied parachute style



Hefty browns ascend the canyon section of Virginia Creek during the fall with spawning in mind. A Matuka streamer, fluttered next to a logjam, persuaded this hook-jawed traveler.



A popular walk-in destination, Blue Lake sits just inside the Hoover Wilderness Area boundary.



Keeping a low profile, the author works a meadow section of the Virginia Creek headwaters. Casting is challenging, but the rewards can be satisfying.

numbers, brook trout show up in the Trumbull Lake catch and some hefty, albeit wary, brown trout haunt the depths, often feasting on the smaller planters to attain their size. A 13.6-pound brown hangs on the wall of the resort's general store as testament. According to Webb, "Targeting them can be tough, and they are usually only caught incidentally."

Early in the season, action can be very slow. However, when water temperatures elevate a few degrees, fish can be hard to keep off the hook. Webb explains, "Morning and evening sessions are best for fly anglers, with small midges, emergers, gnats, and mosquito patterns in sizes 14 to 18 being top choices. Weighty brood fish might require a rod step up to a 4 or 5-weight."

Shorelines often become crowded, making floating craft the most relaxing form of angling. Gas-powered motors are not permitted on these three lakes. Big Virginia is the deepest lake in the drainage, reaching a maximum depth of 110 feet. Both of its incoming tributaries are good starting points, and deep trolling with a streamer on a sinking line can occasionally fool a hungry brown.

Only 12 feet deep, Little Virginia Lake often provides the steadiest action as trout school and incessantly cruise the shoreline drop-offs. In the early-morning light, Domenic staked out his claim along the rocky north side of the lake,

where underground springs seep in colder water. He probed with an orange Woolly Bugger deep along this shelf to subdue a trio of girthy rainbows before sunrise.

Virginia Creek

Wasting little time in dropping 4,000 feet in elevation over 17 miles, Virginia Creek is never more than 25 feet across and often much narrower. A stream with three distinct sections, this swift, high-mountain rivulet abounds in trout habitat and trout, along with accompanying casting and presentation challenges to keep dedicated fly anglers happy. Originating in the meadows amid the Frog Lakes, uppermost Virginia Creek cascades into and flows through the Virginia Lakes. Below these catch-basin lakes, it achieves its full potential, gathering additional flows while coursing alongside a dirt road with a steadily decreasing gradient. This easy-access stretch offers both wild and stocked trout (including holdovers).

Virginia Creek's most intriguing stretch, however, is below the Virginia Lakes entrance road, where the stream flows for 5 miles through a densely wooded, braided section along a course that is challenging to reach and to fish. Highway 395 flows high above this canyon stretch, providing no access, so the only two options are to hike downstream

Virginia Creek Watershed NOTEBOOK



When: Late May or early June–September.

Where: East-central CA. From US Hwy. 395 at Conway Summit, turn west onto Virginia Lakes Road and drive 6 mi. to the trailhead and Virginia Lakes Resort.

Access: Easy walk-and-wade access to Virginia Creek and the lower lakes via Virginia Lakes Road and campgrounds; challenging bushwacking to fish the 5-mi. stretch of Virginia Creek below the Virginia Lakes Road crossing; high-elevation hike-in access to upper lakes and the creek within Hoover Wilderness.

Headquarters: Nearby Bridgeport and Lee Vining offer services and lodging options. Virginia Lakes Resort, (760) 647-6484, www.virginalakesresort.com, is located near the trailhead. **Information:** Humboldt–Toiyabe National Forest Headquarters (Bridgeport), (760) 932-7070, www.fs.usda.gov/recarea/htnf/recarea/?recid=65162.

Appropriate gear: 3- to 6-wt. rods, floating and sinking or sinking-tip lines, 4X–5X tippets.

Useful fly patterns: Woolly Bugger, Matukas, Muddler Minnow, Callibaetis dun/spinner patterns, Green Mosquito, Purple Haze, Adams, Yellow Humpy, ant and beetle patterns, BH Hare's Ear Nymph, Bird's Nest, Pheasant Tail Nymph, Zebra Midge, EC Caddis, BH Prince Nymph, Griffith's Gnat.

Necessary accessories: Polarized sunglasses, mosquito repellent, sunscreen, SPF shirts, wide-brimmed hat, good hiking boots, water filtration system or purification tablets, bear canister (if camping).

Nonresident licenses: \$19.18/1 day, \$29.42/2 days, \$58.58/10 days, \$158.25/annual.

Fly shops/guides: Ken's Sporting Goods, (760) 932-7707, www.kenssport.com. Virginia Lakes Pack Outfit, (760) 203-4215 (summer), (760) 872-831 (winter), www.virginalakes.com.

Books/maps: *I Caught a Fisherman: Pioneers of Virginia Lakes Resort 1923* by J. Anita Foster. Humboldt–Toiyabe National Forest map; Hoover Wilderness map, www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5239088.pdf, and Eastern Sierra Back Country Fishing Guide, www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5410679.pdf, all by USFS, www.fs.usda.gov/visit/maps.

from the Virginia Lakes Road bridge or upstream from the Dog Town area. Dog Town is a small gold rush-era ghost town located about 6 miles south of Bridgeport along Highway 395.

After gaining a bit more flow from Dog Creek, Virginia Creek flows just west of Highway 395 for 3.5 miles. Here, most willow-lined sections are easily accessible, with multiple roadside turnouts providing adequate parking. Stocked rainbows predominate. Finally, about 3 miles south of Bridgeport, Virginia Creek turns westward away from the highway, merges with Green Creek, and flows across the private lands of the Long Point and Hunewill Ranches, where part of its flows are diverted for irrigation. The remainder of the creek then surrenders to the East Walker River.

The stretch of the creek along the highway, accessible from oft-used turnouts, are noticeably pressured, especially by gear anglers. Short-lining dry flies or probing seams, riffles, and eddies with bottom-hugging nymphs will catch recent planters and holdover rainbows. In the more secluded reaches, small browns can sometimes be fooled with meaty streamers fished deep through small pools or underneath overhanging branches.

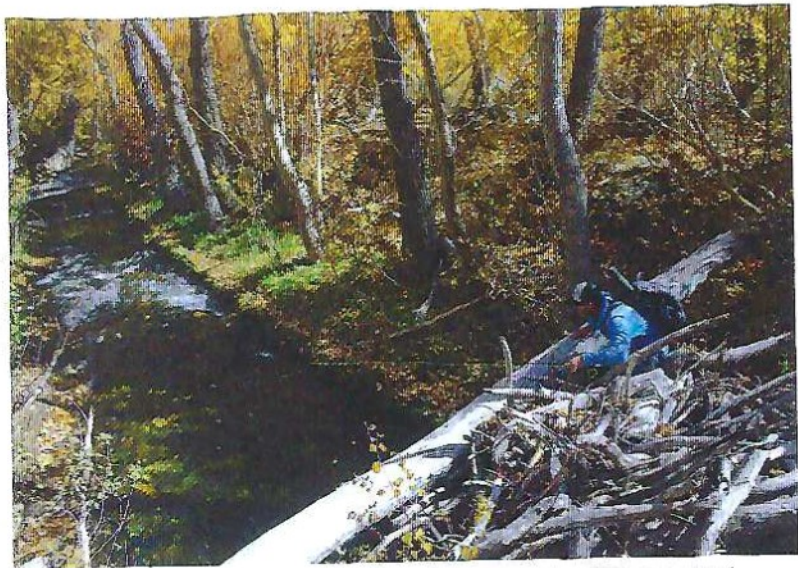
But I prefer bushwacking away from heavily frequented spots to find tranquility and trout. Jim Reid, owner of Ken's Sporting Goods in Bridgeport, told me about the remote, off-road portion of Virginia Creek, where it flows through the canyon downstream from the Virginia Lakes Road bridge. "This section contains three species of trout, from pan-size to trophy class, is only accessible by foot, and gives adventuresome anglers a solid workout," he says. "You really have to love brushy conditions to fish this sector."

Solitude, highly oxygenated flows, abundant spawning habitat, and plenty of cover make it ideal for both hardy trout and anglers who prefer hiking, crawling, and tedious low-profile casting. When Brandon and I fished that stretch a few years ago, we left at first light, intending to hike for one hour before we started fishing. Just about anywhere you like to fish, an hour of hiking will separate you from any potential crowds, if not every other angler. Although hard to achieve in such a brushy environment, successful tactics include equal parts stealth and precise presentations through jumbled windfalls and under sunken logs. By midmorning we were happily catching small brookies and 'bows by using a dry/dropper combo featuring either a Pheasant Tail Nymph or a Prince Nymph drifting beneath a Sofa Pillow.

No surprise given the small size of the stream, Virginia Creek's wild trout typically range from 9 to 11 inches, although Reid says the hike-in section holds some 16-plus-inch brown trout. He explains that hefty spawning browns begin ascending from Bridgeport Reservoir during late fall, cautiously running the gauntlet up the East Walker and finally making their way into Virginia Creek and its remote canyon. While they commonly spawn in the creek and then return to the reservoir, some stay on and become stream residents. Their offspring tend to use the confines of this brush-canopied creek as a refugium, gaining size and experience where they remain protected until returning to the lake to attain further growth. Masters of avoidance, leviathan browns can theoretically go undetected for much, if not all, of their lives here.

Over the 15 years I have known him, Brandon Parker seems to have a penchant for zeroing in on trophy browns. Shortly after our midday water break, we pondered what looked like a nearly impossible mission. Barely visible under a log and guarded by a jumbled willow canopy, a dark, bulbous shape lurked—we estimated the hidden fish to weigh perhaps 4 pounds.

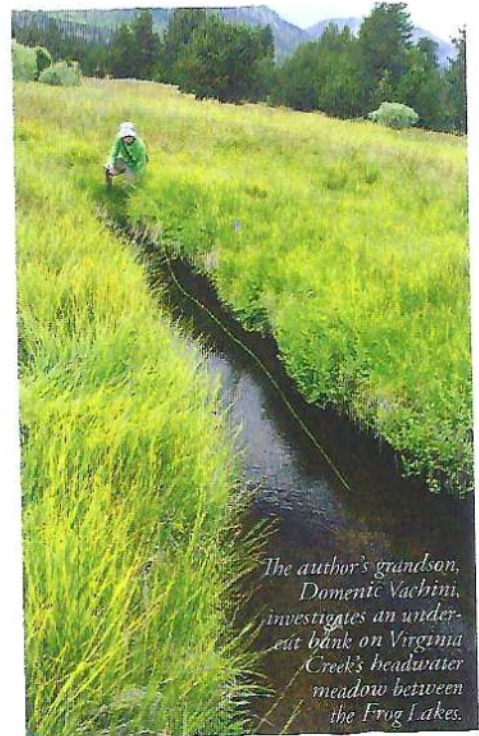
Parker secured his favorite Matuka streamer to a stout tippet, then slowly maneuvered, ninja-style, into an advantageous casting position amid a congested tangle of willows. He then tediously placed his offering upstream and watched the fly drift and sink into the trout's lair. Seconds seemed like minutes as he held, heron-like, while his streamer



Brandon Parker uses a log tangle as cover in the canyon section of Virginia Creek, which is both difficult to reach and challenging to fish.

fluttered in the current. Anticipation became reality and a primal "Whoop!" echoed down the canyon. Parker arose from the riparian shrubbery, crashed like a buffalo through cane brush, then disappeared from my sight and into the flows to do battle. By the time I reached him, only 4 feet of tippet appeared beyond his severely bowed rod. He somehow managed to bulldog a thick, 17-inch brown away from the logjam and quickly netted it. Upon release, the fish bore like a rocket back into its home under the logs, appearing almost too big for the stream.

California-based veteran writer and photographer Don Vachini is a longtime contributor to American Fly Fishing magazine.



The author's grandson, Doment Vachini, investigates an undercut bank on Virginia Creek's headwater meadow between the Frog Lakes.