

California: Tenaya Lake/Story and photo by Don Vachini

Standing beneath Medlicott Dome, I was mesmerized by the way this smooth, glacially-carved monolith caught the midmorning sunlight. As my gaze returned to glassy Tenaya Lake, an osprey unexpectedly shattered the surface nearby. Scattering spray, it struggled to lift off then flew away with empty talons. And, 45 minutes later, I, too, was humbled by the same fishless fate.

Created by Tenaya Glacier during the last Ice Age and named for Chief Tenaya of the Ahwahnechee Indian Tribe, this Yosemite National Park lake sits at 8,150 feet elevation near the park's eastern boundary. Triangulated between a trio of peaks—Polly Dome, Tresidder Peak, and Medlicott Dome—this 150-acre lake nestled alongside Tioga Pass Road gains snowmelt from these and other nearby granitic escarpments. Shortly after escaping the lake, Tenaya Creek tumbles down a treacherous, un-fishable canyon before entering the Merced River in Yosemite Valley.

During the 1970s, the National Park Service ceased stocking trout, meaning today's surviving populations are wild. Tenaya was last stocked during 1966 and to this day remains a bit of an enigma. It contains fair densities of self-sustaining brook and rainbow trout, most of which are 6 to 9 inches long, with a few reaching 12 inches. Although healthy, they remain inexplicably hard to locate. They also share residency with Sacramento suckers, a nongame species inadvertently stocked during trout planting operations in the 1960s.

Consistent caddisfly, mayfly, and midge hatches provide a stable diet for the fish, while daily up-canyon zephyrs distribute supplemental terrestrials, courtesy of the surrounding timber. Tributaries Tenaya and Murphy Creeks offer limited but efficient spawning habitat, with marginal recruitment also taking place in the lake's inlet and outlet channels.

A 3-mile-long trail encircles this windswept alpine lake. Hiking to a loftier vantage revealed much of the

lake's northern shoreline to be bare, with shallow flats creating deterrents to productive structure. Near the heavily forested southern shoreline, submerged Tenaya Creek courses the 1.4-mile length of the lake. Although providing ideal temperatures and protection from airborne predators, its deep channel is inaccessible from shore until it funnels into the narrowing outlet area. Motorized boats are not permitted but a float tube or kayak would provide a huge advantage.

Early- and late-day, dim-light periods hold the key to unlocking Tenaya's guarded trout. And after viewing it from above, I gained a greater understanding of the lake's underwater topography. I cautiously approached the fan-shaped outlet and, in the fading afternoon light, peered from behind a boulder. Easing a size 16 beadhead Pheasant Tail Nymph ahead of a pod of brookies finning in the slowly moving current brought instant results. Displaying the nymph that betrayed it, a bejeweled char lit up the shallows prior to release. I then opted for dry-fly

action with a white, size 16 caddisfly pattern. Emboldened by the fading light, the fish relentlessly ravaged this highly-visible imitation until darkness ended my session and vindicated the aforementioned humbling.

A few steep drop-offs occur near the outlet's shoreline but reaching them requires long casts. Shoreline brush and mountain winds often necessitate roll casting. I like a 9-foot, 4- or 5-weight rod and a floating line for this kind of lake fishing. Other effective flies include the Adams, Elk Hair Caddis, Yellow Humpy, California Mosquito, BH Black Ant, BH Hare's Ear, and various caddisfly pupa patterns. Dry/dropper combos are often very effective.

Depending on weather whims, the season generally runs from mid-June through early October. From U.S. Route 395 in Lee Vining, turn west onto State Route 120 (aka Tioga Pass Road) and drive 26 miles to the lake. There is a fee to enter the park. A spacious picnic area is located adjacent to Murphy Creek but camping is not permitted. Supplies and lodging are available in Lee Vining.

