

# Fly Fishing Stillwaters

## *Second of Three Parts:*

### *How to Read Lakes and Reservoirs*

**By Bill Sunderland**

There's little more frustrating for the beginning stillwater angler than standing on the shore gazing at a lovely lake and wondering where to fish. Unlike moving water, there aren't any riffles and runs, pools and rapids or backwaters that logically hold fish.

Not to worry; like many other things in this sport of ours it is a matter of learning new techniques.

There are a few basics that can act as a starting point in the learning curve. First, the fish are where the food is. Second, they seek protection from predators. Third, just as do fish in moving water, they take advantage of structure. So let's deal with each of these.

**FOOD:** In moving water food usually is washed into the trout's feeding area. They hold in a "soft" area of current, such as in front of or behind a rock, move briefly to slurp up passing insects, then return to their spot and wait for the next opportunity. Stillwaters aren't moving, so fish need to cruise areas where food can be found. There's a logical chain involved. The aquatic insects that trout eat live on or near plants, which are their main source of food. And plants need sunlight to grow. Sunlight, in turn, can't penetrate deep into water – about 25 feet if the water is reasonably clear – so you don't get much plant life in very deep water.

Put all this together and what you have is fish normally concentrated in shallower water, be it along the shore or around areas of a lake where the underwater structure is close to the surface. Always look for them in and around areas where there are reeds and other such plants growing out of the water. Those are hot spots for insect growth and the fish know it. A well-known example is Crowley Lake on the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada, where the Green Banks area toward the northwestern end has become a favorite for float tubers because of such growth. In that case there are not only bugs but also Sacramento perch, a favorite food for big trout.

Realistically, most of your stillwater fishing will be underwater, but when there is a hatch trout will key on the emerging fly. If you do have a hatch the trick is, whenever possible, to target a specific fish. Remember, the bugs are for the most part moving toward the surface so the fish need to move around to pick them off. Most of the time trout cruise in a specific pattern, and if you can determine that pattern, or what direction they are going, then you can put your fly in front of them instead of where they were a few seconds before. And, yes, this does take some practice. It often isn't easy to determine the pattern but learning how by trial and error can be very rewarding in the number of hookups.

It really helps to know what insects trout are keying on, and how they act. For example, damselflies are a prime food in many lakes, including Lake Davis. You need to know that they don't hatch in the water, but have to make their way to shore (or

something that is on the water, like a float tube!) and crawl out before they can pop their shuck, spread their wings and fly away. Because of this fishing from shore can be more productive than fishing from a float tube. Cast into deeper water and make a slow strip towards shore.

**PROTECTION:** Fish are food, too, and they know it. For the most part their enemies come from above, usually in the form of birds such as ospreys. Because of this they tend to be skittish about cruising along just under the surface, or in shallow water with a flat, unmarked bottom where they can easily be seen. A windless day and calm, glassy-surfaced water means that trout are going to be hesitant to cruise near the surface. That's why there can be a hatch and no sign of fish until a slight breeze ripples the water and suddenly the trout will begin to feed on or near the top. Those ripples break up the clarity and offer them some protection from predators.

Gusting winds also can cause definite wind lines on the water – ripples on one side, a smoother surface on the other. Trout will hold under the ripples and move into the calmer water to pick off emerging insects.

Along the banks overhanging brush or down trees protruding into the water offer protection, as do those rushes and tules growing out of the water. Heavy underwater plant growth, even if it doesn't break the surface, gives fish a place to hide. So always probe any area that offers protection to a fish, even if it means hanging up or losing flies in the overhanging underbrush or in the limbs from a tree that has fallen into the water.

**STRUCTURE:** This goes hand-in-hand with food and protection. The question, of course, is how do you determine structure when you can't see it. Well, in many cases you CAN see it ... but not from water level. So before you climb into your float tube and shove off take the time to study what is above water. Better yet, if there is any surrounding area you can get to and look down on the water, do it. It is amazing what you can see, particularly on a clear day. Often there are underwater weed growth areas on high mounds, or shallows that push out from shore. Better yet, dropoffs, or piles of rocks that might attract fish. At times you can spot fish, particularly if the bank rises sharply and you can stay well above the water.

Just remember that once you are on the water you may not be able to see these things, so make certain you note landmarks to help you. On lakes I don't know I usually sketch a rough map to guide me when I'm on the water. Yeah, this process takes time and energy, but it is well worth it.

Here are some other hints that might help you pick the best areas to fish.

Almost all of California's lakes are man-made impoundments. Whoever picked the spot, be he engineer or rancher, found an area that funneled to a low spot that could be dammed. Usually the deepest part of the lake will be near the dam, which might be productive in late summer's hot weather when the water is warming up and the fish tend to hold deep. A ridge that leads to the water's edge doesn't stop there, it keeps going right on down. This could offer a spot where fish are holding. Maybe there's a rocky cliff going right down to the water. Chances are plenty of rocks have fallen into the water, creating structure that attracts fish.

The creek or river that feeds the lake was there before the reservoir was created, so it probably cut a channel through the meadow or valley that is now underwater. That channel, particularly in shallow lakes, can be a prime area for trout, so see if you can

figure out where it is. This is a case where a small fish-finder might help out, although I have to admit I'm not a real fan of those sonar devices – for me they just get in the way.

And of course there is where the river or creek comes into the lake. There are three major reasons you can find fish there. First, trout will hold in the softer water along the edges of the inflowing current and pick off the food being washed into the lake. Second, when the water heats up to where they are having trouble getting enough oxygen they will go into this moving water because, even though it may be the same temperature, it carries more oxygen. Last, since trout go upstream during their spawn, they'll often gather at the mouth before making the final push. This may even hold true when the inflowing water is too low for them to actually go to spawning areas – hope springs eternal.

NEXT MONTH: Stillwater fishing techniques.

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