

Fly Fishing Stillwaters

First of three parts:

Part One – Why you should fish stillwaters

By Bill Sunderland

It is amazing how often fellow fly-line anglers tell me they don't fish lakes and reservoirs. "I just fish moving water. That's what I like," is the song they sing.

The translation for this is: "I can't read lakes and reservoirs or try new techniques and I'm too damn lazy to learn." Or something like that, anyway.

I usually keep my mouth shut, figuring that their prejudices just leave anglers like me more space and less competition. But since all you GCFE types are friends, let me pass along what I've learned over the years about how to read water and catch fish in California's many fine lakes and reservoirs.

A few years back when I decided to write my third book on California fly fishing, "*Fly Fishing California Stillwaters*," I probably spent only about 40 percent of my fishing time on lakes. But during the two years it took me to research the book 95 percent of my fishing was on stillwaters. Now I fish stillwaters about 60 percent of the time.

First, why?

The major reason is that bigger fish are found in stillwaters. Think about it, it's logical. Trout that live in streams and rivers spend their life and most of their energy working against the flow in their search for food. They'll hold in a "soft" spot with little current and then dash into faster currents to slurp up a bug or other morsel that passes for food. Remember, food, food, food, is what it is all about in a fish's life (well, maybe a little sex thrown in occasionally).

That battle against the current, even holding in a slow-moving area, requires a constant expenditure of energy. That burns calories.

In stillwaters fish can swim around as they wish, slow, fast, whatever, in their search for food. If they want they can lay in wait, all but motionless, putting out a minimum of energy. Less swimming, less energy expended, fewer calories burned, more intake used to get bigger. The result is clear: there are much bigger trout in lakes than there are in most rivers and streams.

Take places like Lake Davis, only about an hour-and-a-half from Grass Valley/Nevada City. It's loaded with food, not only the usual mayflies and caddis but also a plethora of damsel and dragonflies and snails, which are a real mouthful for trout. A fish stocked in Davis at about 10 or 12 inches in the spring – Davis has almost no spawning, so its fish come from a DFG hatchery – will be 16 inches or so by fall, already bulking up. By the next year they'll be pushing 20 inches and have assumed that football shape trout that gorge themselves tend to take on. Not only are they big but they are usually healthy and feisty, putting up a great fight.

There are a myriad of lakes like this in California, places that support a healthy insect population which in turn assures big fish. There are a dozen or so lakes in the Northeastern corner of California near Alturas that become spectacular fisheries when the water is there, something that admittedly has been lacking in recent drought years. But others, such as Frenchman Lake, Lake Crowley, Bridgeport Reservoir, Heenan Lake, just to name a few popular areas, are always havens for big fish.

One other reason, and this may be just my personal problem (but I note there are a few GCFF members who also are senior citizens), is that I can float tube all day without getting tired. I no longer can spend a full day actively wading the North Yuba, nor battle the strong, deep currents of the Truckee for any great length of time. And that's what it takes to be a really effective angler on those waters.

For you beginners just learning the game of float-tubing thanks to the GCFF program, it may not sound that easy, but as you gain experience you'll be just like the trout –no currents and you can move (or not move) at any speed you want.

However, there is the wind. Fining a float tube against the wind can be tough, so keep that in mind, particularly on big lakes. Davis is a good example. As with many of the bigger lakes, particularly on the Eastern Slope of the Sierra Nevada; along about noon a stiff wind usually picks up. So long as you keep close enough to shore to be comfortable, that's fine. Just don't get caught out in the middle of the lake when that breeze suddenly becomes a gale or you'll find yourself in trouble and faced with a tough slog to get home. It's the same theory as wading dangerously deep -- no fish is worth it.

As you get to know a lake you'll also learn where protected bays and inlets are sheltered from all but the strongest wind.

If this has helped convince you that perhaps moving water isn't the end-all, be-all of fly fishing, that's great. In future articles I'll give you some guidance on how to read a lake, what tackle to use and, more important, stillwater techniques.

It isn't complicated and everything you learn helps build your arsenal of tricks to put you in the upper bracket of fly-line anglers.

NEXT MONTH: How to read a lake.

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