

*It boasts some of the highest trout counts in the country, yet on a summer weekend it's possible to find a beautiful stretch of prime flyfishing waters all to yourself.*

*hooked on*

# HAT CREEK

Where the wild trout roam

by ROBERT McMICHAEL

When Robert Redford's film adaptation of Norman McLean's story "A River Runs Through It" appeared in 1992, all hell broke loose in the American flyfishing industry. The movie's luscious cinematography and romantic portrayal of two brothers' complex connection to each other and to fly angling for trout in 1930s western Montana catapulted flyfishing's popularity into the stratosphere.

Since then, rivers in the Northwest have become more congested with trout fishers than ever, and flyfishing has played an important, if controversial, role in the tremendous economic growth and suburban sprawl in Big Sky country, prompting some long-time Montana residents to refer to the movie as "A Realtor Runs Through It."

For whatever reason, flyfishing in Northern California has remained relatively immune to the problematic impact of the movie and its related development. In fact, the fishing in wild trout water here is better than it's been for decades. Hat Creek, roughly 40 miles north of Mt. Lassen National Park and 50 miles east of Redding, runs through the center of some of the best flyfishing in the country.

Despite the increasing popularity of flyfishing, it's possible to find a beautiful stretch of Hat Creek on a summer or fall weekend all to yourself, even on the three miles of catch-and-release water below PG&E Powerhouse No. 2, which holds the highest numbers of large, wild fish. In August, fisheries biologists snorkled this section and spotted more than 400 trout 18 inches or larger, and the overall trout count there runs somewhere between an astounding 4,000 and 6,000 trout per mile.

Conditions haven't always been this good. Overfishing, the growing hydro-electricity industry, logging, and agricultural development in the early and middle part of the century nearly decimated the wild trout stock in Hat Creek and other nearby



Hat Creek's trout population has made an astounding comeback after near elimination in the first half of the century.

tributaries. But thanks to the tireless, ongoing efforts of concerned fishers and some PG&E biologists beginning in the mid-1960s, this blue-ribbon section of Hat Creek has not only recovered but thrives, boasting one of the highest trout counts in the country.

**O**riginating from Hat Lake, nestled just below the peak of Mt. Lassen, Hat Creek flows through the junction of several geological landmarks: the northern end of the Sierra Nevada mountain range; the southern ends of the Cascade and Klamath ranges, the Sacramento Valley, and the Modoc Volcanic Plateau at the edge of the Great Basin.

The volcanic rock beds in the 100 miles between Mt. Lassen and Mt. Shasta work as a kind of filter and pump system for the crystal clear water in Hat Creek and in other area rivers, like the Pit, the McCloud, and Burney Creek. A constant, year-round flow of clean, cold water sustains a healthy ecosystem for trout, giving life to the aquatic vegetation that supports the variety of insects that fish eat.

These wild trout – 85 percent rainbows and 15 percent browns and brook trout – are not easy to catch, however. Through natural selection and self-preservation in the face of human and winged predation (ospreys fly fish-hunting sorties all day), the big fish in Hat Creek got big by being smart and selective. And they have stayed big more through avoiding being caught than by relying on the catch-and-release regulations. As you walk along the bank looking for rising fish, you may notice V-shaped wakes of spooked trout darting into the middle of the creek, reacting to the vibrations of your feet.

Once you find a feeding fish to cast to, to catch it you will have to “match the hatch.” This means using an imita-

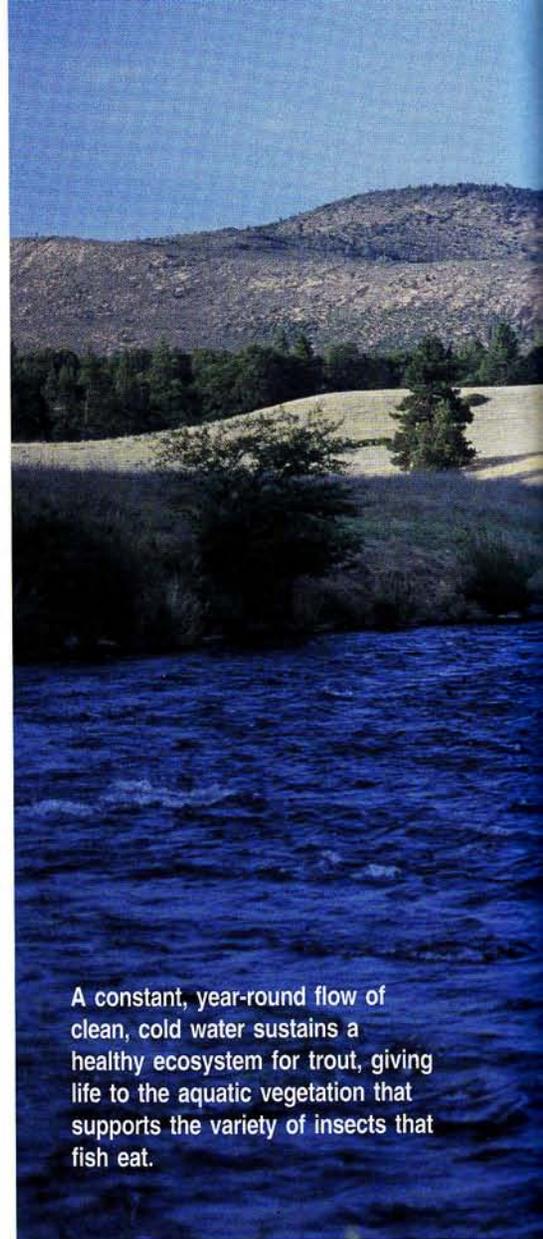
tion fly pattern most closely resembling the actual species of insect your fish currently dines on, in the appropriate stage of the bug’s complex life-cycle.

Even if you’re using the right fly, and your presentation of it looks natural to the trout, you may still encounter a fish that will not strike. Or, it may strike and you may fail to hook it – not an uncommon occurrence since the average mayfly here is smaller than a well-trimmed pinky fingernail. And the best fishing conditions, especially on the slower flat-water section, often occur in the waning moments of dusk as the caddis hatch begins, the tiny moths instigating a veritable feeding frenzy.

Near darkness promises the best fishing on the flat water, posing the problem of being able to see well enough to tie your caddis imitation onto your leader (bring a flashlight and a good pair of reading glasses). Add to all this the wind, sometimes unpredictable weather, and creek banks riddled with near-lethal muskrat burrowings, and fishing here becomes something like an adventure.

**B**ut catching one of these big trout is really, *really* exciting, and well worth the effort. These robust fish fight as hard as any trout, and may treat you to several airborne displays. Furthermore, the scenic beauty of the wild trout section of Hat Creek frames the excitement of catching a big rainbow in a wonderful setting of transitional zone forest and meadow. Black oak, manzanita, ponderosa pine, willows, huge cottonwoods, incense cedar, wildflowers galore, mule deer, foxes, coyotes, eagles, and pelicans are all part of the sensual experience of a Hat Creek fishing trip. And if your skills are decent and you have patience, you will catch fish. I brought a beginner to Hat, and she caught several nice trout in one evening.

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Because of the changing weather conditions in the area, especially in the fall, a trip to one of the local fly shops will ensure you know what kinds of flies to stock up on, as well as which areas seem to be hotter than others. Hiring one of the excellent nearby guides for a day is the best way to learn how to fish the Hat most effectively. Like us, the fish move around, depending on where the best and easiest food is.

Sometimes they even move well upstream and downstream, out of the wild trout section of Hat Creek and into the general fishing areas, where you can keep fish if you want to cook them up. A good place for this, especially if you have non-flyfishing family or friends with you, is the PG&E campground in the speck of a town called Cassel, just a few miles up-



PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBERT MCMICHAEL

stream (south) of the wild trout water.

The catch-and-keep section of Hat Creek flows right by the campground and is regularly stocked by Crystal Lake State Fish Hatchery, located at Baum Lake, which is a short hike from the campground. This is a must-see location, both for self-guided tours of the hatchery – featuring a pen containing thousands of 3-plus-pound brook trout – and for the fishing and bird watching on this pretty lake.

Neither should you miss MacArthur-Burney Falls State Park just a few miles to the north, with a gorgeous and fascinating 129-foot waterfall that Teddy Roosevelt once called the “eighth wonder of the world.” You can also camp there, but will need reservations for a weekend stay.

## DETAILS

**GETTING THERE.** PG&E Powerhouse #2 marks the upstream boundary of wild trout water on Hat Creek. Take Hwy. 299 1-3/4 miles east of Hwy. 89, turn right on the road marked PH#2, which winds down about a mile to the parking lot.

**CAMPING.** The closest camping to PH#2 is PG&E’s campground in Cassel, about 4 miles southeast of the 299/89 junction (\$13/night, pit toilets, running water, spacious & well-designed sites, first come-first served). A nearby general store sells firewood, ice and limited groceries. Gorgeous MacArthur-Burney Falls Memorial State Park (6 miles north of Highway 299 on Highway 89; 530-335-2777) has 128 sites, and showers (\$14 tent/\$16 RV; first come-first served after September 19).

**FISHING.** Season: First Saturday in April through November 15. Fly shops: Trout Country (530-335-5304; [www.geocities.com/Yosemite/Cabin/9197](http://www.geocities.com/Yosemite/Cabin/9197)) is closest to PH#2, 2 miles west of 89 on 299. Dave and Jan Brown offer friendly advice, guide services and tackle. Founder Dick Galland’s Clearwater House (530-335-5500; [www.clearwatertrout.com](http://www.clearwatertrout.com)) in Cassel provides rooms, meals, guide service, tackle and flyfishing classes, some exclusively for women. Check their Web site for details on courses offered in October & November.