

Hidden Bass Jewels Of Lake County

Besides legendary Clear Lake, Lake County offers lesser-known, smaller lakes that provide easy accessibility and outstanding bass fishing.

by Andrew R. Parsons

Most anglers headed to Lake County go there for one reason — to fish Clear Lake. And why not? It's legendary known as the Bass Capital of the West. The lake is a magnet as well for water-sport enthusiasts, and other anglers in search of catfish, carp and panfish. For anglers who enjoy plying waters less churned, however, Lake County has several hidden jewels.

The allure of these lakes includes their small size, proximity to major highways, typically good access, and huge bass. They are the Blue Lakes, only 17 miles from Ukiah and Highway 101, and Highland Springs Reservoir, a mere eight miles from Kelseyville. Both destinations offer beautiful surroundings, quiet waters, and bass in the 10-pound range, not to mention good numbers of quality fish of 3 to 7 pounds.

BLUE LAKES

Near the border of Lake and Mendocino counties lie the Blue Lakes. This scenic series of waters is set at an elevation of 1,357 feet and surrounded by peaks of over 3,000 feet.

The westernmost, known as Upper Blue Lake, is deep, clear and spring-fed. It is stocked year-round, typically during the first week of each month, with 1,000 pounds of rainbow trout. With the twin attractions of a mountainous location and a generous stocking program, most anglers come in pursuit of

these handsome fish.

Bass anglers, however, love lakes stocked with trout for a different reason. The high-protein diet they provide is capable of promoting rapid growth in largemouths. Bass estimated to be in excess of 12 pounds have been reported by some who SCUBA dive in the lake, and in August 2000, Kevin Marcheschi caught a hawg of 9.38 pounds on a Zara Spook while fishing in a float tube tournament.

Although its waters are often aquarium-clear, bass fishing early and late in the day can be excellent. The southern side of the lake has spots draped with huge lay-



Float tube tournament angler Rich Caro holds the 11.82-pound club record bass and a 7.9-pounder, both from Highland Springs Reservoir. Photo by Mike Ayers.

downs that hold multiple fish. The Narrows has stationary docks and a major point that drops steeply, while the northern shore sports numerous naturally occurring brush piles. There are also weedbeds of limited size and some isolated patches of tules.

Topwater fishing can be surprisingly good during summer. Try buzzbaits, poppers and large stickbaits in the early morning or evening hours. Spinnerbaits and crankbaits can also be highly effective, especially during the pre- to post-spawn period and autumn. Soft plastics, however, are the most consistently productive option, with drop-shotting, split-shotting, Carolina rigs and Texas-rigged worms and lizards catching their share of good fish. Small crawdad imitations, such as the 3-inch Berkley Power Craw in pumpkinseed, are one of this lake's secrets. During summer, once the sun gets high in the sky, the bite shuts down for all but those who fish deep water. The lake's maximum depth is 70 feet.

Access to Upper Blue Lake is excellent. It has four resorts — one at the west end, one at the Narrows, and two at the east end, all of which have boat ramps. Boats of any size may use the lake, but a 5-mile per hour speed limit applies over its 73 acres, effectively prohibiting water skiing.

For shore anglers, the north side has numerous spots that allow effective casting, while for those who don't mind paying a day-use fee, all the resorts have good bank access as well as docks from which to fish. Aside from trout and bass, Upper Blue Lake has a healthy bluegill population and a few catfish.

Just to the east lies Lower Blue Lake. Its waters are much shallower, with maximum depths to 25 feet. Fed by run-off from its clear sister to the west, its waters are typically stained to muddy, with visibility of only two to three feet. This same murky water, though, in combination with a shoreline thick with tules and dotted with docks, brush piles and overhanging trees, provides textbook largemouth habitat. Aside from bass, it also is home to healthy populations of carp, catfish and crappie.

Bass in Lower Blue Lake stay shallow much of the year. For active,

roaming fish, spinnerbaits and crankbaits can be dynamite. When the strike zone narrows and bass are holding tight to the abundant cover that lines its 52 acres, flipping and pitching jigs and soft plastics are top choices. And if the bass seem to get lockjaw, don't hesitate to try split-shotting finesse worms such as the Iovino 4 1/2-inch Fat Boy Straight Tail. Despite the off-colored water, such techniques have fooled bass topping 6 pounds in this lake.

Lower Blue Lake's chief roadblock is its lack of accessibility. There are no boat ramps. Much of the shoreline is either private property or too steep and brush-laden to be fished from the bank. However, near its eastern end, there is a large turnout off Highway 20 with plenty of parking and limited bank access. Those in good physical condition and exercising due caution can launch a float tube, small inflatable craft or canoe. Be advised, however, that aside from the steepness of the bank, poison oak abounds, and the water along the shore runs three to four feet deep, making both launching and exiting somewhat dicey.

HIGHLAND SPRINGS RESERVOIR

Set in pastoral hills near Kelseyville and with no gas-powered motors allowed, Highland Springs Reservoir offers a restful alternative to nearby Clear Lake.

It has fair bank access and provides good numbers of bluegill, crappie, catfish and small bass. What makes it such a treasure for largemouth bass anglers, though, is huge fish. In April 2003, Rich Caro landed an 11.82-pound behemoth while competing in a float tube tournament. He had another of 7.19 pounds, while fellow angler Binh Phi brought one to the scales of 7.7 pounds.

With a depth of about 50 feet near its dam, Highland Springs presents a pleasing variety of cover and structural options. As its waters warm in the spring, large weed beds form that hold good numbers of fish. Its tule-lined banks cry out for a flipping or pitching stick. There are brush piles and overhanging trees, and by the dam, large rockpiles. Near its center, there is a prominent point with a weed-covered finger extending far

into the lake.

Its somewhat stained water (which can be downright muddy when the lake swells to 146 acres at the height of spring run-off) calls for standard bass presentations. If you're not yet a believer, Highland Springs can quickly boost your confidence in spinnerbaits and crankbaits, while burning Rat-L-Traps over the tops of its extensive weedbeds can produce one fish after another. For flipping and pitching, jigs are highly effective, as are soft plastic stickbaits such as Senkos. And in the summer, topwater baits can be explosive fun.

Highland Springs has a paved boat ramp near the main picnic grounds and an undeveloped boat ramp on its northwest side. The reservoir is open year-round from 6 a.m.-9 p.m. free of charge.

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

To get to Blue Lakes, take Highway 101 to Highway 20 eastbound (the intersection is four miles north of Ukiah). Shortly after passing from Mendocino into Lake County, you'll come to Blue Lakes on the south side of the road.

Accommodations include the Pine Acres Resort, 707-275-2811; The Narrows Lodge Resort, 707-275-2718; and opening this spring the newly renovated Lodge at Blue Lakes, 707-275-8070. All resorts on the lakeshore have paved boat ramps.

To get to Highland Springs Reservoir, take Highway 29 four miles to Highland Springs Road, and follow that for 15 minutes (traveling through farms and orchards). To reach the picnic grounds and paved ramp, take the left-hand fork in the road and continue for about two miles. The reservoir can also be accessed from Highway 175 by turning onto Matthews Road and then turning south onto Highland Springs Road.

Nearby accommodations include the Kelseyville Motel, 707-279-1874; the Ferndale Resort and Marina, 707-279-4866; and the Konocti Harbor Resort and Spa, 707-279-4281. For more information concerning the reservoir, contact Lake County Public Works, Water Resources Division, 707-263-2341. □