

Northwest

Wallowa River
Native Redbands
OREGON

Putah Creek
Wild Rainbows
CALIFORNIA

Cedar River
Urban Trout
WASHINGTON

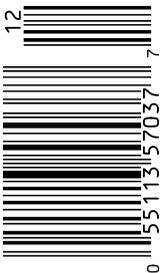
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EXPOSURE

Wading Around Montana







Putah Creek, CA

Riches Close to Home

By Greg Vinci

Twisting, turning California State Route 128 led me to my rendezvous with Putah Creek guide Richard Loft. It was mid-morning on a late spring day and the hills were an emerald green with a lighter green backlit tapestry of recently leafed-out oaks, creating an impressionistic pattern against the hillsides. Little puffs of cumulus slowly floated by on the horizon. This time of year is special, I reminded myself, knowing that soon the summer heat would turn the grasslands gold and they'd remain that way for six months. I've long enjoyed fishing Putah Creek, which feeds Lake Berryessa about 25 miles northeast of Napa and about 24 miles west of Davis. I thought I knew all of Putah's guides until I met Loft, who runs Napa Valley Fly Guides. I first met him at Kiene's Fly Shop in Sacramento and quickly realized Loft was unlike other guides. There was a retro vibe about him that reminded me of some fishing guides I had known more than 30 years ago. In his fifties, with a rugged exterior, the creases of his face revealed a life spent in the outdoors squinting through polarized sunglasses looking for fish finning in the currents.

Convincing him to work with me on a magazine story required negotiation, as he seemed wary that I might give away his secrets. But we finally came to an agreement: he'd be happy to work with me provided I wouldn't divulge his secret flies and his little-known favorite spots on the creek. No problem: much of the joy in fly angling is the process of discovery and Putah Creek provides ample opportunity for doing just that.

On the appointed day, after Loft had provided directions to our rendezvous point, I was running late. I found his vehicle parked on a gravel turnout and assumed that he was probably at the creek—about 50 yards down a steep slope from the road. I parked and gave the horn a quick honk before stepping out of my car. I heard him call out my

Popular and easily accessible, Putah Creek not only holds a robust population of resident rainbows, but also draws large spawning 'bows out of Lake Solano each December, giving fly anglers a chance to hook fish over 20 inches in length (above). Anglers adept at accurately presenting flies in tight quarters are routinely rewarded on sections of Putah Creek where riparian brush crowds steep banks and trees overhang prime runs and pools (left). Photos by Phil Reedy

name, and he said he'd be back up shortly. By the time I donned waders, Loft had made it up the slope. We exchanged greetings, and then we slid down the steep embankment to the creek.

We bushwhacked through dense riparian vegetation to emerge at a deep pool. Loft pointed to the bank on the other side and indicated that was where we were going.

I said, "We, kemosabe?"

I was hardly keen on wading across the swift flow while carrying expensive camera gear. Trying not to sound like a wimp, I used the excuse that I would get a better angle for photos of him fishing from across the creek. With a brief knowing smile, he then forded the creek and positioned himself near the head of the pool about 20 yards downstream from a steep pocket-water section.

Loft soon began high-stick nymphing and while I was unzipping my pack to retrieve my camera, I heard my name over the roar of the creek. I looked up to see his rod bent and him stripping line as fast as he could

X-Ray Midge



Hook:	Daiichi 1130, sizes 18–20
Abdomen/ underbody:	Fluorescent red Danville Flymaster 210
Ribbing:	Fine copper wire
Thorax:	Black UTC Ultra Thread 70
Wing case:	Fine Flashabou Mirage
Coating:	No Knot Sense cured with UV light

to take up slack as the fish swam downstream toward him. Then the trout reversed direction and sped upstream; Loft managed to get the line on the reel and turned the fish by lowering his rod to a horizontal position. He finally led the spirited trout into slower water and into the net.

Whew!

And that was my exciting 2-minute introduction to Richard Loft and his expertise on Putah Creek.

Fabled Rainbows

About an hour north of the Bay Area and less than an hour west of Sacramento, Putah is one of the few creeks that flows year-round from the rather arid coast range into the Sacramento Valley. The creek is fabled for its huge rainbows (and rumored browns) ascending the stream from Lake Solano each December to spawn in the upper reaches of the creek, where it flows from Monticello Dam, which impounds Lake Berryessa. From the time I cast my first rod, I was hearing about Putah Creek, the local holy water for Bay Area and northern Central Valley fly fishers.

It's unusual for eastern-flowing Coast Range creeks to have stable flows year-round, and prior to the construction of the dam, the creek nearly dried up in the summer months to again flow once the winter rains returned, usually in October or November. At that time, steelhead were able to make it up the creek to spawn. For about half of the year, the water was too shallow and too warm to support a self-sustaining trout population, but with the completion of the dam, cool water flowed in the creek all year and remained cold during the hot summer months.

With regular stocking, Putah Creek flourished as a fishery for 'bows as well as browns. Stocked trout



Putah Creek guide Richard Loft took a 15-inch rainbow by high-stick nymphing a deep hole below a freestone pocket-water section. Even though the creek endures heavy fishing pressure, a lot of good water is only lightly fished because the dense riparian brush makes access difficult (above). Many stretches of Putah Creek are easy to wade, but in places, access is challenging because of steep, brushy banks. If flows exceed 200 cubic feet per second, wading can be difficult (right).

that managed to avoid a creel began to spawn in the creek, propagating a wild population. Nowadays, rainbow trout comprise the fishery; browns are seldom if ever reported. Still, a friend of mine who grew up on property adjacent to Putah Creek recalls catching many browns in the lower stretches of the stream's accessible section and says it still is possible to do so now.

Putah Creek has a robust year-round population of wild rainbows; the fish can reach 20 inches. Beginning around mid-November and lasting through February, large rainbows—some more than 20 inches—ascend the river from Lake Solano on a spawning run. Many of the guides refrain from bringing clients during this time, preferring to allow the fish a chance to spawn unmolested.

Although bait anglers and fly fishers coexisted on the creek since the dam was built, one can imagine that there was some level of acrimony between the factions. The conventional-tackle anglers wanted to throw the fish into the freezer and the fly fishers preferred to release the fish. Many conventional-tackle anglers thought the fly anglers were effete snobs, and the fly anglers resented the



PHOTO BY GREG VINCI

plethora of worm cups and beer cans strewn along the banks of the creek.

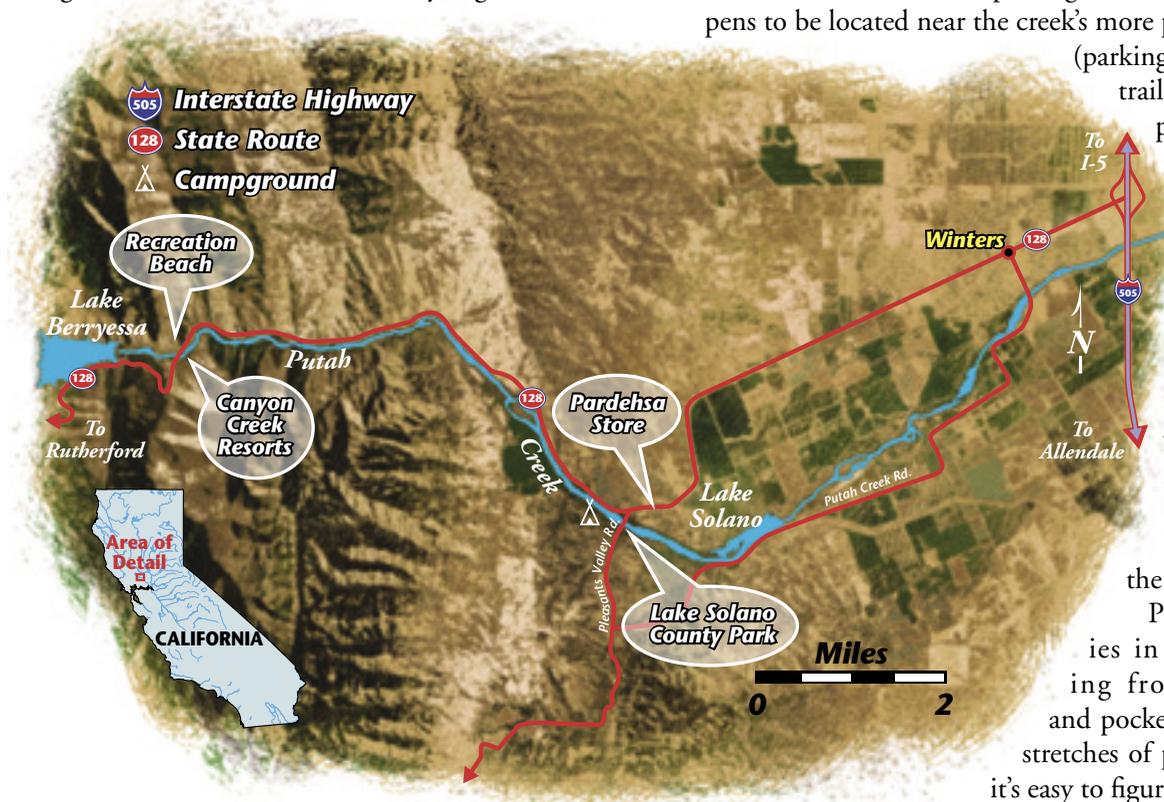
But in 2014, the California Fish and Game Commission designated the creek as a Wild Trout Water, meaning that stocking was discontinued and tackle limited to artificial lures and flies with single barbless hooks. Since then, the percentage of trout exceeding 15 inches has noticeably increased.

Putah Creek is one of the most accessible fisheries in the state. Close to urban areas, it's just miles west of Interstate 505. Each of six parking areas conveniently happens to be located near the creek's more productive runs

(parking is free). Good trails lead from the

parking areas to the creek, but once you reach the water, you must bushwhack your way along the shoreline. Beware the prolific poison oak and blackberry brambles along the trails.

Putah Creek varies in nature, ranging from deep runs and pocket water to long stretches of placid water, so it's easy to figure where the fish



live. Naturally, they prefer the swifter and more broken flows. However, during the evenings, the slow water stretches can produce some surface action. Because gaps in the riparian vegetation are intermittent, nearly everyone enters the creek from the same spot along the shore, which means that nearly everyone fishes the same runs. That's not to say that you will always be sharing the run with another angler, but it does mean that the fish see a lot of split shot and flies bouncing by them. Still, put in your time and fish a variety of water and you can enjoy consistent success.

Flies to Try

Putah is not known for dry-fly action, but regulars enjoy some success with foam hopper patterns. In low water, a Fat Albert with a midge pattern tied to the dropper is a productive combination. The creek produces a variety of hatches, but the fish seem to prefer midges, probably because the creek emanates from a deep reservoir that is loaded with Chironomids.

Loft says his clients also do well with larger patterns; size 18 is considered a larger pattern on Putah Creek. Size 16 Fox's Poopahs, size 18 Flashback Pheasant Tails, and size 18 Hogan's S&Ms are successful patterns on the creek. Blue-Winged Olive mayflies hatch primarily in the fall and spring, but the nymphs are present year-round, so imitations such as Mercer's Micro Mayfly, BH Pheasant Tail Nymphs, or the aforementioned Hogan's S&M, to name a few, are effective.

Most of the fish I've caught on Putah have taken size 18 and smaller midge patterns. Given the effectiveness of small subsurface patterns, it makes sense to use an anchor/dropper two-fly rig, with one fly representing a BWO nymph (size 18) and the dropper being a size 20 midge imitation. That way you can't go wrong. Loft says that when the water gets especially low in the fall, you may need to drop down to size 22s.

Located close to large urban areas, Putah Creek attracts lots of anglers, yet even when you find plenty of vehicles parked along the road or in the parking lots, once you walk down to the water, you can usually find ample room to fish—at least on weekdays. Don't let the fishing pressure dissuade you—Putah has plenty of fish.

Many anglers work the stretch downstream from the SR 128 bridge, parking at an unimproved lot at the south end of the bridge. The other parking accesses generally do not have much in the way of trails parallel to the shoreline or if they do, those trails are short. Parking lot #3, however, offers a good trail that follows the creek downstream for about a hundred yards. Parking lots #4 and #5 are less than a quarter mile apart and their trails end up in the section where the creek splits around an island that blunts the velocity of the flows in each channel, making for easy wading. The other turnouts along the highway usually have unimproved trails to the creek, though they are typically steep.

Seasonal variations in flows directly affect the fishing on Putah Creek. Releases from Monticello Dam are de-



PHOTO BY GREG VINCI

Putah Creek's steep banks create holding water along the edges of swift flows. Be sure to fish such areas thoroughly.

Putah Creek NOTEBOOK

terminated by agricultural needs downstream and by the amount of precipitation in the drainage. From May 1 to September 1, flows are high as the creek feeds water to agriculture. At more than 500 cubic feet per second (cfs), Putah Creek can be difficult to wade, though many experienced Putah anglers say the fishing is better at these higher flows.

On September 1, flows decrease to below 200 cfs, making the stream more accessible throughout. The flows stay relatively low unless winter precipitation causes modest increases after November. During major storms, the creek can blow out.

Anglers visiting Putah Creek might enjoy exploring the area's other attractions. Situated along the creek at the base of the foothills, Winters is a quaint town where 100-year-old restored brick buildings now house trendy brewpubs and restaurants, such as the iconic Buckhorn Steakhouse; across the street is the Palms Playhouse, a regular stop for top Americana, folk, and jazz musicians. The town also has excellent bed-and-breakfasts. Moreover, Putah Creek is but 30 minutes from the famous Napa Valley wine country.

Lake Berryessa, the source of the Putah Creek tailwater fishery, was rated as the sixth-best bass lake by *Bassmaster* magazine in its 2017 rankings and during the course of a couple of days, fly anglers can fish one of California's most intriguing trout fisheries and also more than one of the nation's best bass fisheries. An hour's drive to the southeast is the Sacramento/San Joaquin Delta, rated the nation's fifth-best bass fishery by *Bassmaster*. A 90-minute drive to the north delivers you to the *Bassmaster* third-best bass fishery, Clearlake.

Of course, Putah Creek itself can make you forget all about those nearby waters. It's a great destination for locals, who can fish for a few hours after work on a summer evening, and for visitors from afar, who might consider booking a guide, such as Richard Loft, who is sure to regale you with tales from his many years on the creek. 🍷

Greg Vinci, www.california-flyfishing.com, is the author of Flyfisher's Guide to California, and a frequent contributor to Northwest Fly Fishing magazine.



PHOTO BY GREG VINCI

When: Year-round.

Where: Halfway between Sacramento and San Francisco, about 24 mi. west of Davis and 25 mi. northeast of Napa. About 3.2-mile stretch of creek with public access.

Headquarters: Numerous small towns in the area provide all services and amenities.

Appropriate gear: 4- and 5-wt. rods, floating line, 10-ft. leaders, 4X-6X tippetts.

Useful fly patterns: Zebra Midge (red, black, bright green), WD-40, Rojo Midge, Cracked Back Midge, Mercer's Micro Mayfly, Mercer's Poxback Baetis, Copper John, Flashback Pheasant Tail Nymph, soft hackles, Elk Hair Caddis, Quigley Cripple.

Necessary accessories: Polarized sunglasses, waders, warm layers for winter fishing, wading staff, long sleeves to protect against abundant poison oak.

Nonresident license: \$15.69/1 day, \$24.33/2 days, \$48.34/10 days, \$130.42/annual.

Fly shops/guides: *Citrus Heights:* Fly Fishing Specialties, (916) 722-1055, www.flyfishingspecialties.com. *Napa:* Sweeney's Sports, (707) 255-5544, www.sweeneyssports.com. *Pleasant Hill:* Creative Fly Shop, (925) 938-2255, www.creativeflyshop.com. *Sacramento:* Kiene's Fly Shop, (800) 410-1222, www.kiene.com. *Napa Valley Fly Guides* (Richard Loft), (707) 294-4738, www.napavalleyflyguides.com; Home Waters Guide Service (Mark Pinto), (209) 581-3474, www.pintoshomewaters.com; Putah Creek Fly Fishing Guide Service (Greg Bonovich), (800) 480-5285, www.putahcreekflyfishing.com; Nor Cal Fly Guides, (530) 354-3740, www.norcalflyguides.com.

Books/maps: *Flyfisher's Guide to California* by Greg Vinci. Stream Map USA, (215) 491-4223, www.StreamMapUSA.com.