



Cuyamaca on the Fly

BY PAUL SHARMAN
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Lake Cuyamaca in San Diego County is somewhat of a rarity amongst the other man-made lakes in this largely desert environment. Located at a height of 4620 feet in the mountains an hour to the east of San Diego itself and 10 minutes from the famous ‘apple pie’ town of Julian, it is the only lake that is able to stock trout year round (usually around 40,000 lb’s annually) thanks to its cooler climate. Surrounded by Pine and Oak forest of the Cuyamaca Rancho State Park, it is like a little slice of the Alps in Southern California, further reinforced by the Austrian owners of the lake restaurant and their home-inspired dishes often found on the dinner menu.

At 110 acres, the main lake is not overly large and it is possible to walk around the whole perimeter in an hour or two if you don’t mind a scramble or a squelch here and there. In years of excess rainfall however, as with this past wet winter, the meadow below the dike also becomes flooded and creates a much larger ‘east’ lake. When this happens, the fish that find themselves flushed over the top happily land in a smorgasbord of food and pack on weight rapidly. This was evidenced this past spring and early summer by numerous fly-fishers wading the shallow water amongst rapidly growing weed-beds for feisty rainbows that grew fat and strong in double-fast time. This fishery is short-lived though and the east lake has already dried up for this year. No matter, the main lake is still a magnet for the San Diego area fly-fishing community for good reason, being a mainstay of the sport year round with good summer fly hatches and a large population of stocked rainbows with a few bonus browns too. There is also a large population of crappie, along with bluegill, largemouth bass, channel catfish and bullheads plus some smallmouth bass and sturgeon introduced a few years ago in an attempt to establish a local population of these species. In fact the Sturgeon seem to be doing well as there have been several incidental catches over the last couple of years including a handful over the minimum legal size of 46 inches! Not likely to be caught on a fly-caught any time soon, it is still pretty amazing to see one of these leviathans breach as they are sometimes prone to do. Makes you wonder what it would feel like to have one pulling on your line.

Tackle and Flies

The rainbow trout are the main quarry sought by the fly angler, usually on a 4 or 6 weight setup and you can’t go far wrong with targeting them with Matukas or Woolly Buggers in black or olive if you had to choose only a couple of flies and colors. These do a good job of imitating various natural food sources such as leeches, damsel and dragonfly nymphs and even small fry of the bass and crappies.

During the Spring and Fall the lake can have a very good dry fly bite, particularly during the first and last hours of daylight. At this time the best dry flies are typically *Callibaetis* emergers, Comparaduns or any midge imitations in light tan or green in sizes 14 through 20. I also like to have the old standbys like an Adams, Black Ants as well. Thanks to the typically stained water, a standard leader of 9 feet will usually suffice. Although the majority of fish will be in the 1 to 2lb range, the outside chance of a lunker trout or bass leads me to prefer 4x or 5x tippet for most situations coming down to 6x or even 7x for the smaller DFG planters or the crappie. I have not found the fish to be shy when they are hungry.



THE AUTHOR WITH HIS 20-PLUS-POUND CHANNEL CATFISH THAT WAS CAUGHT ON A BLACK WOOLLY BUGGER AND 6-POUND-TEST TIPPET.

Once the water heats up during the hottest days of the summer around July and August, the trout often take siestas and early and late fishing is often therefore the best for them. However, come September and on into fall the water temps start dropping back and the trout become more active during the day once more. With all the fish fry in the water this is the time to start thinking about trying a streamer or fry imitating pattern, something with some mylar or flashabou to provoke a predators basic instincts. This is the time when a larger Rainbow or Brown may turn up as they are instinctively putting on fat to help survive the winter cold. Look for weed edges where the bait shoals may hide up and be ready for a Largemouth or even one of the lakes elusive Smallmouth bass too! The same Matukas and Woolly Buggers that were mentioned already will still work at this time also.

If you choose to wade, which is often the best bet, a floating line with a sinking fly will serve you well in the margins which often hold most trout and are seldom more than 10 feet deep and often a lot less. There is a rental boat fleet though as well as a launch for your own boat or the option to use your own kayak or float tube (see restrictions in sidebar). These can sometimes be helpful in getting you out beyond the large weed-beds that often form in the summer so you can fish back in towards their outer edges or to find a little deeper or even quieter water as there can be a lot of bank-side pressure on weekends and especially holidays. If you can make it during the week you will find you have a lot less competition and are able to pick your spots almost at will. Be prepared for bass to also be lurking along these weed edges too of course and have a popper or two handy just in case. If you are fishing for trout the crappie and bluegill will find you – don't worry! Unfortunately they are a little stunted due to overpopulation and the lake has a strict no release policy designed to help try and alleviate this problem. Of course no-one wants to waste fish and taking home a bagful of palm-sized crappie might seem like more trouble than it's worth but console yourself with the thought that it is to the long-term benefit of the lake.

Where to Fish

There are several well known areas of the lake for a first timer to try and the tackle shop has a very handy map which marks them out for you. It is worth seeking out Willard Lepley, the head ranger and lake manager if you can as he is a mine of information on current catches, hatches and locations to try being out on the water as much as he is. They have also put together a gps map of the lake which marks all the structure they have put in

place and gives you the coordinates to plug into your handheld gps unit to find them. A very novel approach and one the previous lake manager, Hugh Marx, instigated and then took with him to Lake Jennings, the other lake operated by the Helix water district.

The best-known of the trout hot spots is the “Lone Pine Tree” area and that shoreline is often lined with bait fisherman and patrolled by boats just out of casting range. It is marked by - what else - but a lone pine tree. This is a good area of level bank and makes for easy wading when you have some space to yourself and for some reason the trout do seem to congregate there very often. Just north of that area are some weed beds where brown trout seem to be found more regularly than anywhere else – although I have yet to get my own but there are some beauties waiting to be caught as recent catches have shown with fish of 4 or 5lb’s.

Another hot-spot is “Pumphouse Cove” near the dike, and it is often the downwind corner of the lake and therefore a classic food trap for the trout. It also occasionally has water being pumped in from any winter rains that pooled up in the meadow below. This mix of oxygenated water and the food items it also brings with it also act as a fish magnet. It can be hard to fly fish when busy but again if you find it empty it is definitely worth a try. For me though the beauty of Lake Cuyamaca is walking a bit further, away from the crowded spots to find my own little piece of the lake where I can fish in peace while watching the Ospreys and an occasional Bald Eagle going about their business, usually in a more efficient manner than me of course.

Other Interesting Options

If you want to try for something a little out of the ordinary for a change, consider wading the shallow south end of the lake in the late winter and spring before the weeds have had a chance to grow and choke the area. The creeks that flow into the lake here, once complete with winter rains, provide a rare spawning opportunity for the larger naturalized trout who seek them out and often stage around the south end for a while. Both rainbows and browns give in to their natural urges and run up the swollen creeks and those in the know who get there at the right time have reported some very nice fish. I arrived on that scene late this year, but I was happy to find some obviously naturally spawned young fish in the early summer complete with parr marks in the deeper remnants of the creek mouths.



WADING AND CASTING A FLY ALONG WEED BEDS IS OFTEN A SUCCESSFUL WAY TO FISH LAKE CUYAMACA.

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What I also found on the flats there were catfish, *big* channel catfish that were willing to take a fly no less. I had been hopping a beadhead black Woolly Bugger along when I had a take that felt like hooking the bottom. Then it ran, and ran, and ran! First the fly line left the reel then 50-plus yards of backing before the fish slowed. The water was so shallow I could follow the wake up the lake and inbetween weed-beds. Using a pumping action more the norm on a saltwater sport-fish, I gently worked the fish back towards me before it took off again on another smaller run. Finally I was able to work the fish up into the shallows where after several unsuccessful attempts I finally was able to lift it with a hand through the gill onto the shore. 14lb’s of angry muscle writhed and twisted before finally settling down to its fate.

Wondering if this was a fluke I turned to cast again and this time was aware of some boils made by fish turning under the surface. I worked the fly back again imagining it hopping along the muddy bottom stirring up intriguing little puffs of silt wherever it landed, and attracting the attention of these bottom feeders. It wasn’t

long before I had pretty much the same battle over again, this time with a little larger fish of 14 ¾ lbs and the inkling of stumbling across something new. I returned the following two weekends and bettered my luck with channel cats of 18lb and then 20 ½ lb all on 6lb tippet and the same black woolly bugger all of which would have beaten the current IGFA record of 12 ½ lb's. I also caught several smaller cats too of 3 or 4 lb's.

Once the water level drops and the weeds take over this action subsides for another year but you can bet I will be back there next spring to try again. That's the beauty of Lake Cuyamaca, it really is a year round fishery with the trout still biting in the dead of winter when the ice settles in your rod rings between casts. Don't forget to call the lake if you can the day before to make sure it is not iced over which can happen. However, if you go prepared well enough to avoid the cold, you will often be one of the few there enjoying the stark winter scenery along perhaps with the occasional Bald Eagle who thinks this is actually quite mild!

Cuyamaca's one downfall is the wind that often whips up and turns an otherwise perfect day into a battle with the elements. Just be sure to have an extra jacket in the car as even in these conditions as long as you are warm there is usually a sheltered corner you can tuck yourself into and some fish just waiting to be caught.

If You Go.....

Lake Cuyamaca is open from 6am until sunset 7 days a week. Both motorboats and rowboats are available to rent but if you go at the weekend make sure you get their early as they can sell out fast particularly if the weather is good. You can also launch your own boat at their ramp as long as it is over 10 feet long according to the lake website. You can also take your fishing kayak up there which can be a nice way to relax too. There is a 10mph limit over the whole lake so there are no wakes to worry about.

Float tubes are allowed on the water from Mon-Fri all day but at weekends and holidays they are restricted to the last 3 hours of daylight – which happily of course is often the best time to be on the water. All the usual safety regulations are in force such as wearing an approved flotation device and having a horn or whistle to warn other boats of your presence and you must wear waders due to the no water contact rule.

You can find a wealth of information at Lake Cuyamaca's website , www.lakecuyamaca.org. The GPS map of the lake can also be accessed from this site. If you're interested in camping, Cuyamaca offers 40 RV sites and 14 tent sites; reservations are recommended (phone 877-581-9904). A nearby state park offers an additional 140 camp sites.