

Virginia Lakes, CA

Sierra Nevada Road Trip

By Bob Gaines

I have four plastic replica fish mounts that grace the walls of my home: one of a brook trout, roughly the size of the football, caught at Kirman Lake; one of a giant rainbow caught by my wife, Yvonne, at Bridgeport Reservoir, and the largest trout caught on the Sierra Nevada opener in the year 2000 (the fish graced the cover of *Western Outdoor News*); one of a toothy brown that I caught at Crowley Lake; and one of a beautiful rainbow from Little Virginia Lake.

Also, I have a skin mount of another fish, but this one didn't age well, and was relegated to garage storage. It's a big rainbow that I caught at North Lake above Bishop, on my birthday. As I was slipping the fish onto a stringer, a stranger came up to me and asked,

"Would you like to have that fish mounted?"

Turned out he was a representative of Davidson's Fish Mounts in Ridgecrest, and was on his way up north to Ken's Sporting Goods in Bridgeport to collect all the trophy fish waiting to be mounted, currently being displayed in Ken's sidewalk freezer.

What the hell, I thought. It's my birthday and handed him the fish.

When I caught and released a humongous king salmon while fly fishing California's Smith River with guide Andy Martin, he recommended a colleague who made replica fish mounts for him. When I told him I already had five mounts, Martin replied, "You can't have too many fish mounts."

I explained that what I actually meant was that my wife had vetoed any additional fish mounts. "That's too bad," Andy consoled, and then added, "I like fish mounts."

But it's that rainbow replica from Little Virginia Lake that brings back the fondest memories. It was caught shortly after I married Yvonne. We'd already formed a

fishing team; she netted my big fish and I netted hers. I hooked the fish on very light line, and played it out carefully during multiple long runs. When the fish was close enough, Yvonne was ready with the net, but the line



PHOTO BY YVONNE GAINES

In addition to regular stockings of rainbow trout by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, Little Virginia, Big Virginia, and Trumbull Lakes are periodically stocked with rainbows ranging from 3 to 10 pounds, courtesy of Mono County's trophy trout enhancement program (above). Big Virginia is the largest and deepest lake in the basin, featuring planted rainbows, a robust population of wild brookies, and elusive wild browns that can reach massive proportions feasting on smaller fish (left). Photo by Bob Gaines

snagged on a log. She waded out chest deep, and at the moment the line snapped, and the fish was momentarily free, but stunned, Yvonne made a great upward sweep of the net, with the fish in it, then held it up in celebration. So you could say that she really was the one who caught that fish. Team effort.

I have a picture of the two of us with that fish, both grinning ear to ear, exuding youth, happiness, and optimism about the future, when chances are that more of your life lies ahead of you than behind, and the path ahead is paved in dreams, laid out in one wide lane leading who knows where.

While that fish evokes great memories, it wasn't the largest rainbow we've ever caught as a team, not by a long shot. The biggest rainbow came not from Alaska, but while float tubing Conway Ranch Pond, only 5 miles southeast of Little Virginia Lake as the crow flies, at the base of Conway Grade on US Route 395, not far from the shore of Mono Lake.

When Yvonne hooked the big fish, she didn't say anything, so I didn't really notice much out of the ordinary

until I saw the fish peeling line and the serious look on my wife's face. I probably would have yelled, "Big fish! Big fish!" but she didn't say anything. It wasn't until I netted it that I realized how big it truly was—the biggest rainbow I've ever held, it taped 35 inches long and 23 inches in girth. I didn't get an accurate weight before releasing it because it bottomed out my 15-pound scale, but by the standard calculation (length times girth squared divided by 800), it weighed 23 pounds.

The Conway Pond closed in 2016 because of battles over water and politics. But just up the hill, Little Virginia Lake fishes much like a trout pond, due to its diminutive size and the fact it's planted weekly by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) with starved rainbows, supplemented with trophy trout plants.

It's only a 6-mile drive from Conway Summit on Highway 395, just south of Bridgeport Valley, up to the Virginia

of 1923. Development was far from easy, and the road up to the lakes from Highway 395 needed constant work to maintain. Things got off to a bad start that first year when Walter buried an axe into his leg. Little Virginia Creek ran red with Walter's blood that day, but the icy water stifled the bleeding enough for Anita to bandage the wound and drive him to Bridgeport, where a surgeon repaired 17 severed arteries and a severed tendon. Despite the setback, they built two cabins that first season.

Tucked into a corner of the lodge store is a tiny but nifty fly shop featuring many patterns tied by Carolyn Webb, who owns and manages the resort along with her husband, John. If you're lucky enough to catch her there, she's always willing to give tips on how to fish a certain lake if you ask the right questions. Take any advice she offers you to the bank—it's the gold standard, based on her four decades of experience fishing the Virginia Lakes Basin.

Just across the parking lot from the store is Little Virginia Lake, a shallow, clear, 10-acre lake perfect for float tubing, with a user-friendly launch just steps from your car. The deepest section of the lake, in the southwest corner, is about 20 feet deep, but can be difficult to approach from a float tube, since it is usually well-guarded by shore anglers who have a tendency to cast as far as they can to see if they can hit your float tube—their way of marking their turf.

The lake has a self-sustaining population of wild brook and brown trout, and receives heavy weekly stocking



PHOTO BY YVONNE GAINES

Little Virginia Lake is one of the most user-friendly lakes in the basin for float tubing, allowing you to launch just steps from your car.

Lakes Resort, which consists of a small store and restaurant, and a string of cabins nestled among whitebark pines at an elevation of 9,770 feet. To the north rises the great crumbling granite cathedral of 12,374-foot Dunderberg Peak and to the south, the hulking mass of 11,760-foot Black Mountain. Nestled between the great peaks, in the Virginia Lakes canyon, are a total of 10 lakes, all above 9,500 feet. Three of these are by the road: Trumbull, Little Virginia, and Big Virginia; the other seven alpine jewels are accessible via a short hike from the trailhead that begins at Big Virginia Lake.

Virginia Lakes Resort was the brainchild of Walter and Anita Foster, who first planted roots there in the summer

of CDFW rainbow trout during the season (as do Trumbull and Big Virginia), along with a bonus 400 pounds of trophy trout, which weigh 3 to 10 pounds, stocked several times during the season, courtesy of Mono County's trophy trout enhancement program.

I've notched more 50-fish days at Little Virginia than any other lake I've fished. The little wild fish are easy to catch on dry flies and small nymphs, and the CDFW rainbows, stocked hungry, are most easily caught. I've been there on several occasions when just as I thought the action couldn't get any better—like a strike or a hookup on every cast—the CDFW hatchery truck shows up and dumps

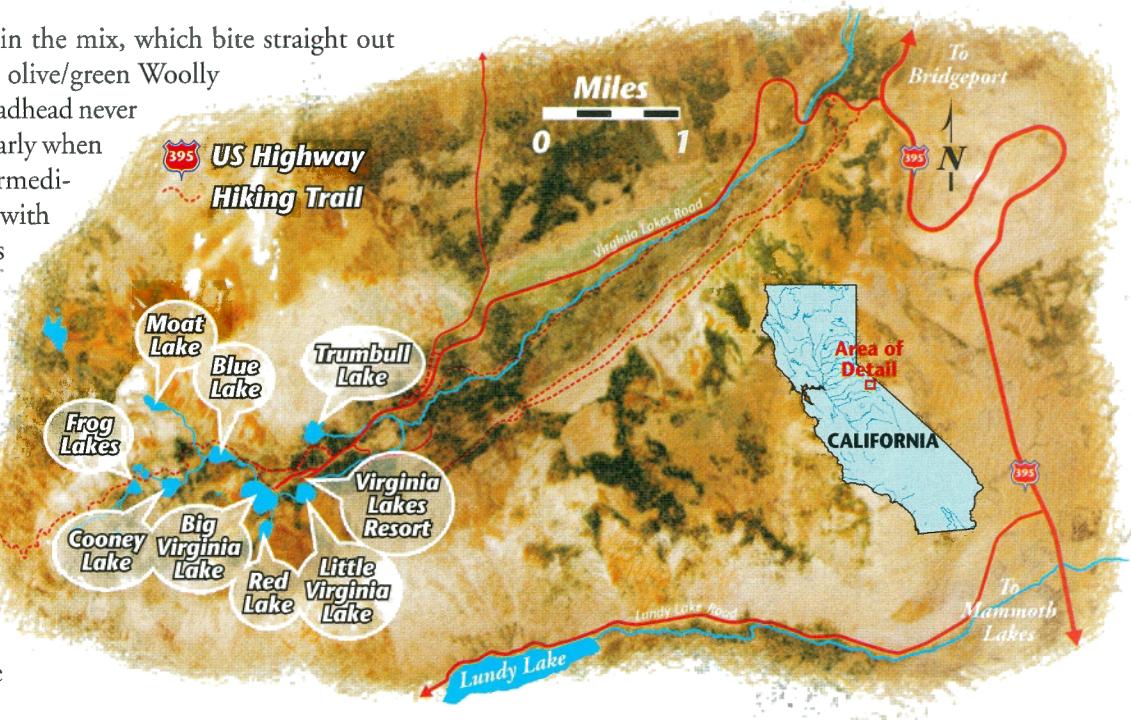
even more rainbows in the mix, which bite straight out of the gate. A size 12 olive/green Woolly Bugger with a gold beadhead never seems to fail, particularly when fished on a clear intermediate line, and retrieved with rapid 2-inch pulls over the top of the weedbeds. In the deeper southwest corner of the lake, counting down as the fly sinks deep, then waiting till you get a strike is equally effective; then just repeat the countdown and retrieve at the magic number.

Very rarely a big wild brown is fooled, like the 9-pound hook-jawed brown that was caught and released by a float tubing fly fisherman in October 2006.

Carolyn Webb fishes Little Virginia Lake almost exclusively using dry flies, and in particular, her Virginia Lakes Style X-Caddis pattern. "I fish mainly backcountry waters when I get time off, but when I'm working, I fish Little Virginia in the early morning, or from dusk until 10 minutes after the bats hit the water chasing their meals," she says. She prefers to fish from a small rowboat (motors are not allowed on Little Virginia), working the west side of the lake at the inlet, "...casting on either side of the inlet about 15 to 20 yards out, relocating the fly along the entire inlet seam that runs in a lazy S out across the lake, so as not to spook the cruisers."

She developed her Virginia Lakes Style X-Caddis pattern to more realistically mimic an adult caddisfly. "Normally," she explains, "caddis patterns should follow the coloration of the naturals. According to Craig Mathews and John Juracek [creators of the X-Caddis], the typical X-Caddis pattern represents a crippled caddis, an adult that has not successfully emerged from the pupal case."

She notes that her twist on the pattern incorporates a different thread color and body material. "When the fly gets wet, the red thread shows through the peacock herl, which appears as hemoglobin," Webb explains. "I also



change the color of the Antron shuck to a bright lime on occasion. After continued refusals, I make minor adjustments with nail clippers by shortening the shuck to a nub and cutting a center section of the deer hair on top of the body, leaving only about six to eight hairs on each side, making it my Naked Caddis."

The only downside to Little Virginia is that it can get so crowded with float tubers on weekends and holidays that it resembles a giant bowl full of Cheerios. Just uphill, at the end of the road, Big Virginia, by contrast, feels like a breath of fresh air.

Like Little Virginia, Big Virginia has a convenient boat/float tube launch area just steps from your car. From the parking lot to the right of the boat put-in, kick out just far enough to avoid the shore anglers and you'll see the hues change as a shelf drops off into deeper, darker water. Working the drop-off with an intermediate or sinking line toward the small inlet to the north can be very productive.

Big Virginia is the largest (27 acres) and deepest (90 feet) of the lakes in this alpine valley,

and is known to harbor big browns that rise up from the depths to attack planted rainbows or small brookies. Several years ago, a fly fisherman caught and released three 9-pound browns in a single day on a fly pattern that remains secret.

Virginia Lakes Style X-Caddis

Tied by Carolyn Webb



Hook: Mustad 94840, TMC 100, or Dai-Riki 305, sizes 12–16

Thread: Red, size 8/0

Shuck: Amber or bright lime Z-lon

Body: 3 strands of peacock herl

Wing: Soft, dark mule deer hair

PHOTO BY NORTHWEST FLY FISHING

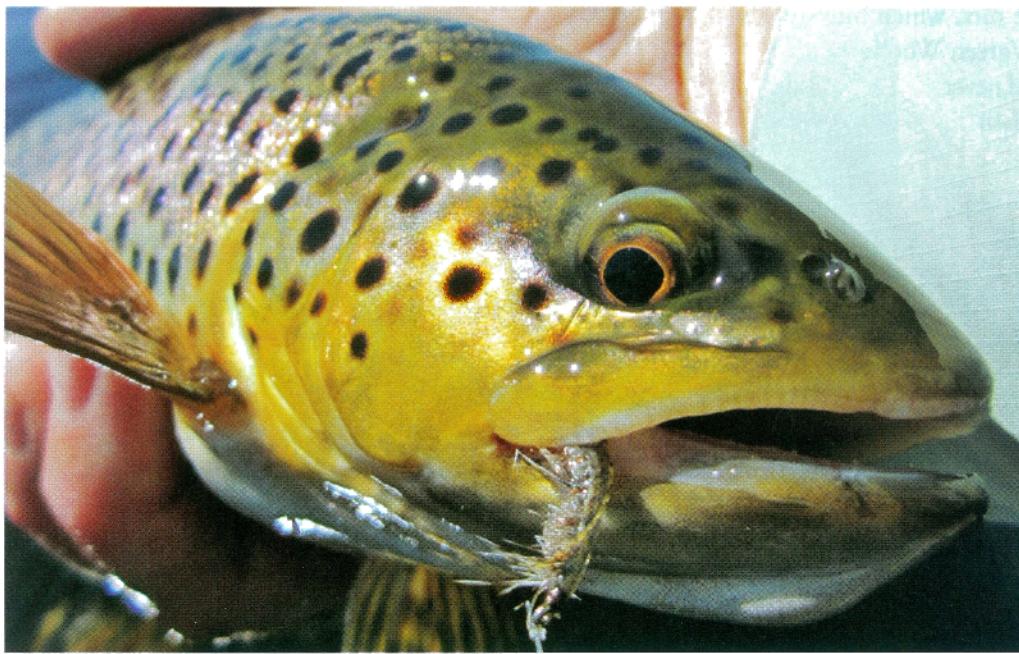


PHOTO BY YVONNE GARNES

Little Virginia Lake is home to a sparse but self-sustaining population of wild browns (above). Rustic and accommodating, Virginia Lakes Resort was founded in 1923 (below).

"The big browns are usually caught when the weather is the absolute worst: windy, raining, snowing," says Webb. In 2015, a fly fisherman caught and released a 14-pound brown on a fly she handed to him.

When I asked her how she'd approach tackling the brown trout challenge at Big Virginia, she didn't hesitate to answer: "I'd take out a green canoe and drift along parallel to the drop-off on the western shoreline, with a full-sinking line fished with a streamer about 12 to 15 feet down."

Backcountry Lakes

From the trailhead at Big Virginia, a string of alpine jewels is accessible via good trails, all less than 1.5 miles from the parking lot, and teeming with wild brookies and browns, and aerial-stocked CDFW rainbows that make up for their diminutive size with their vibrant colors and scrappy fight.

About 15 minutes up the trail, 11-acre Blue Lake often produces phenomenal dry-fly action in the early evening at the southeast corner. Griffith's Gnats or mosquito patterns in size 16 or 18 are excellent. Blue offers excellent fishing for 8- to 12-inch brook and rainbow trout, and you'll probably catch about five rainbows for every one brook trout. The inlet at the northwest side of the lake can also be a hot spot.

Just up the trail from Blue Lake, a spur trail leads to a strenuous climb north up to 10,560-foot-elevation Moat Lake, which used to hold golden trout,

but now features only brook trout. Subjected to less angling pressure than easier-to-reach waters, the lake produces bigger fish. The steep, arduous hike from Blue Lake to Moat Lake takes about 45 minutes and gains 800 feet in elevation, but you'll be rewarded for your effort with a spectacular bird's-eye view of Little Virginia, Big Virginia, and Blue Lake far below.

Continuing up the main trail from Blue Lake, you'll next find 11-acre Cooney Lake at 10,160 feet, with rainbows and brookies

running about 8 to 12 inches, and averaging slightly larger than the fish in Blue Lake. The northwest corner at the inlet is the hot spot. Just a quarter mile farther up the trail are the three Frog Lakes, the largest being about 5 acres in size; the other two, about an acre apiece, all teem with tiny, wild brook trout.

On these alpine lakes, Webb favors the X-Caddis, and adds, "The X-Caddis fished over a Prince Nymph can be deadly."

For subsurface fishing, she recommends a sinking line and a 9- to 12-foot leader fished carrying a tandem of flies: a streamer first and Prince Nymph as the point fly.

To preserve these pristine natural waters, Webb urges fly fishers to refrain from using fluorocarbon tippets, even

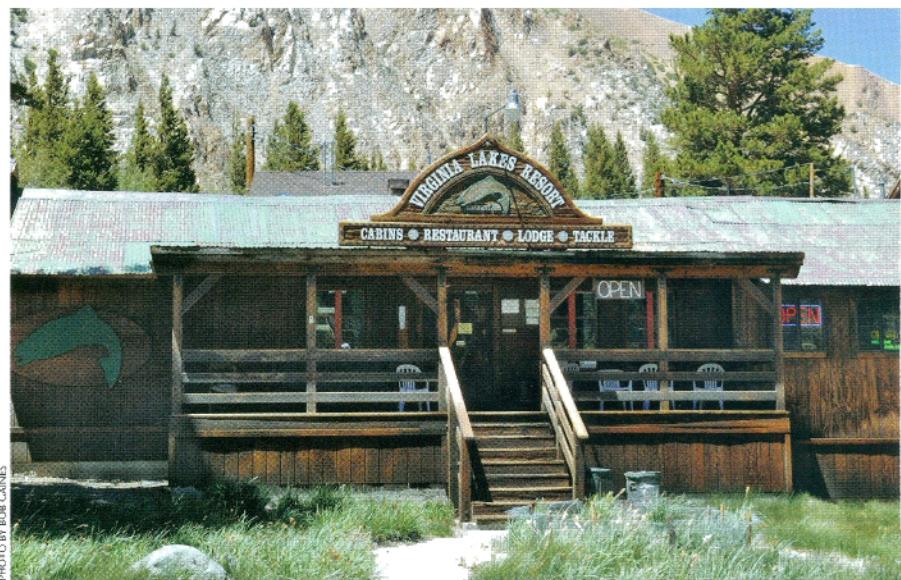


PHOTO BY BOB GARNES

though they are possibly more effective in the ultra-clear water, and instead use nylon, since fluorocarbon takes forever to break down.

"The possible more fish you catch cannot outweigh the detriment of discarded fluorocarbon material," she explains.

Packing in a lightweight float tube, pump, waders, and fins is a great way to fish these lakes. As I've gotten older, I think more about the weight of my pack. The lightest float tube I've found is the Wilderness Lite Backpacker Pro (3.4 pounds). If you have a pack with side straps and a top flap, you can roll the float tube up like a burrito then drape it in a U-shape on top of the pack, then cinch it tight to the sides of the pack.

The Lodge

Walking into the Virginia Lakes Lodge store, one is overcome with a sense of nostalgia. In the dark corners hang big brown trout fish mounts from the old days, and the smell of hamburgers and pies wafts out from the kitchen. The Webbs have the distinction of holding the longest tenure as owners and managers, 44 years, and have upheld the traditions started long ago by Walter and Anita Foster, who ran the lodge from 1923 to 1954.

Back in those early days, just getting to the Virginia Lakes from Los Angeles was a multiday epic, and running the lodge was an exercise in self-sufficiency. Anita Foster, in her book, *I Caught a Fisherman*, reveals some initial trepidation about the venture: "Perhaps if I had known just what I was letting myself in for, it might have taken a lot of persuasion. The first few years were really tough ones, but we were both young and Walter, at least, was so full of enthusiasm I guess enough of it rubbed off on me to overcome any reluctance I might have had in embarking on an undertaking so far removed from what I had previously known."

She continues, "But once we were in it to our 'babes in the woods' necks, there was no turning back. The beauty and the majesty of the high country really got under my skin. And there was the romance and thrill of pioneering—the zest and joy of creating something.... As time went on and the place—our dream place—took on form and substance and became a reality—after the rough places had been smoothed out—and after we had made friends of so many wonderful people, then was when the real dividends came in and I was reasonably happy."

The twists and turns along the road of life are unpredictable, and sometimes, the proverbial two roads diverge in a yellow wood, to paraphrase Robert Frost, and a choice presents itself. In Anita's case, the path she chose was Walter's path, the less traveled one, but ultimately perhaps the most satisfying, as she had a companion for the road, and they travelled it together most of the way.

Virginia Lakes NOTEBOOK



PHOTO BY BOB GAINES

When: Last Saturday in April to November 15.

Where: Eastern Sierra Nevada, south of Bridgeport, CA., 6 mi. west of US 395 from the Conway Summit on Virginia Lakes Road.

Headquarters: Virginia Lakes Resort, (760) 647-6484, www.virginalakesresort.com.

Appropriate gear: 5- to 6-wt. rods; floating, intermediate, and sinking lines; 4X–6X tippets.

Useful fly patterns: Woolly Bugger (olive, black), Hornberg, Stillwater Nymph, Gold-Ribbed Hare's Ear, Prince Nymph, Zug Bug, Copper John, Pheasant Tail Nymph, scud patterns, Zebra Midge, Griffith's Gnat, Black Gnat, Blue-Winged Olive, Adams, Mosquito, Irresistible, Gray Hackle Yellow, Cutter's Perfect Ant, Yellow Humpy, X-Caddis, Virginia Lakes Style X-Caddis.

Fly shops/guides: Ken's Sporting Goods, (760) 932-7707, www.kenssports.com; The Trout Fitter, (760) 924-3676, www.thetrottfitter.com.

Books: *High Sierra Fly Fishing* by Billy Van Loek; *Fly-Fishing Stillwaters for Trophy Trout* by Denny Rickards; *I Caught a Fisherman* by Anita Foster.

In the last sentence of her book, Anita reveals her final dream that sadly would never come true, as Walter died the year the book was published, in 1968: "Now that it's finished I think I would like to be a gaddin' gal for a couple years: take off in a house trailer, free as the birds—just me and the fisherman I'll always be glad I caught."

My hope is that before Anita died, in 1991, she hitched up an Airstream trailer and hit the road. ➤

Bob Gaines is a freelance writer and photographer who lives in Southern California. He is the director of Vertical Adventures Rock Climbing School and the author of numerous books about rock climbing.