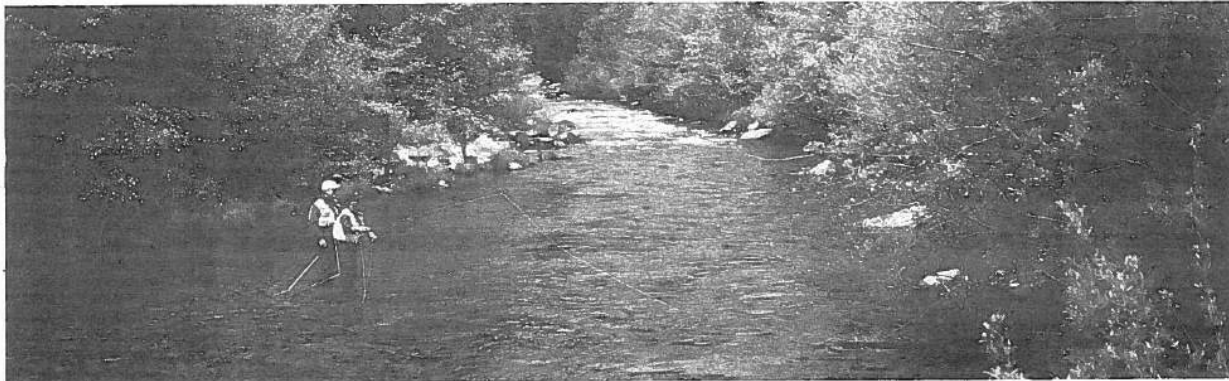


# THE RETURN OF THE



## UPPER SACRAMENTO

*Fishing the Calendar in Shasta Country: Part 5 of 6*

By Chip O'Brien

**E**ACH OF US SHARES COMMON MEMORIES OF THE monumental events of our time. The day JFK was assassinated. The invasion of Pearl Harbor. For me, my personal Day of Infamy is July 14, 1991 - the day the upper Sacramento River died.

You know the story: A Southern Pacific railroad tanker filled with metam sodium pesticide performed a rude half-gainer off the notorious Cantara Bridge loop, unloading a witch's brew of poison into one of the most magnificent trout rivers in America. Death poured forth, taking the life of every trout downstream.

When the noxious plume of poison began to dissipate, human predators cast shadows on the water as they lined up to feed on legal carrion.

Three years and much water has flowed under the Cantara Bridge since the spill. Southern Pacific Transportation Company has agreed to an out-of-court settlement with the Department of Fish and Game for \$32 million. While others fight over the remaining legal scraps, the rest of us are anxious to go fishing.

But what kind of river are we left with?

### RECOVERY AND HEALING

The upper Sacramento is a steep, mountain river fed by myriad springs and the snowmelt from Mount Shasta - a fast-moving stream of bright riffles, pocket water and sun-dappled pools. In the past, it had provided some of the finest rainbow trout fishing in California - ideal nymphing water by day, good dry-fly fishing in the evenings. The pre-spill density of the river was 7,200 fish per mile, according to Fish and Game statistics. Now it's put at 1,200 fish per mile - one-sixth of what it

was before the spill. Half the fish counted last year were already eight inches or longer, suggesting an abundance of trout food in the river.

Is the upper Sac on its way toward becoming the fishery it was before the spill? Most biologists who've examined the recovery think so. Since the derailment, every aspect of the river has been observed, probed, quantified, analyzed and interpreted by a swarm of scientists. Although we know more about the fishery today than ever before, there isn't much pre-spill data with which it can be compared. In other words, before the spill elevated the river to national prominence, the upper Sac was taken for granted.

What the scientists *can* tell us is that the insect populations are rebounding at a rapid pace. According to Steve Turek, DFG's Aquatic Team Leader for the Cantara Project, the insects have "recovered substantially," and populations seem "very healthy." Caddisflies, for example, have always been a big part of the trout's diet on the upper Sac; *Hydropsychids* and *Rhyacophilids* are coming back like gangbusters, while *Glossosomatids* and *Brachycentrus* are taking longer. The large October Caddis, *Dicosmoecus*, for which the upper Sac is so acclaimed, are recovering rapidly. *Baetis*, *Ephemerella* and *Epeorus* mayflies are abundant, as are the *Perlid* and *Perlodid* stoneflies.

Entomologists note, however, that the huge *Pteronarcys* stoneflies are particularly sparse where once they were abundant throughout the system prior to the spill. Because of the salmonfly's three-year life cycle, biologists are hopeful they will begin showing up in greater numbers this year.

R. VALENTINE ATKINSON

Trends for the wild trout population are similar to what's happened with the insects. Between 1992 and 1993, fish populations approximately doubled. Based on the vigorous spawning activity observed this year, biologists are predicting the population will likely double again between 1993 and 1994.

Last November, the Department of Fish and Game performed electroshock surveys at five sites along the river to determine fish abundance. I offer these statistics here only because they describe a profile of recovering resources, not as a map to catching bigger fish. (As an angler, I think fishing shouldn't be over-analyzed; it's about fun, not numbers.) You should also understand these stats say nothing at all about quantity of trout, and that the fish may well have shifted location since November '93.

Starting from Lake Shasta and moving up-river, these are the size classifications recorded for the wild trout population:

**McCardle Flat:** 27 percent are between 14 inches and 18 inches; 60 percent are between 8 inches and 14 inches.

**Sims:** 17 percent are between 14 inches and 18 inches; 78 percent are between 8 inches and 14 inches.

### Upper Sacramento Angling Regulations

**All tributaries between Box Canyon Dam and Shasta Lake:** The daily bag limit is zero trout. Only artificial lures with barbless may be used.

**From Box Canyon Dam downstream to the Scarlett Way Bridge in Dunsmuir:** The daily bag limit is zero trout. Only artificial lures with barbless may be used.

**From the Scarlett Way Bridge downstream to the mouth of Soda Creek:** The daily bag limit is five trout, with 10 in possession. Only barbless hooks may be used. (Bait is okay.)

**From the mouth of Soda Creek downstream to Shasta Lake:** The daily bag limit is zero trout. Only artificial lures with barbless may be used.

The fishing season runs from the last Saturday in April through November 15th.

**Soda Creek:** 2 percent are larger than 18 inches; 28 percent are between 14 inches and 18 inches; 68 percent are between 8 inches and 14 inches.

**Prospect Ave. (Dunsmuir):** 8 percent are between 14 inches and 18 inches; 52 percent are between 8 inches and 14 inches.

**Ney Springs:** 1 percent are larger than 18 inches; 10 percent are between 14 inches and 18 inches; 37 percent are between 8 inches and 14 inches; 40 percent are between 4 inches and 8 inches.

There seems to be vigorous spawning activity in the river, and it's happening unusually late this year. Anglers fishing during the first few weeks of the season should be on the look-out for trout redds and spawning fish. Don't let the term *Fish Squish* apply to your wading technique! Avoid walking on shallow gravel bars.

### HATCHERIES AND MISHAPS

Since at least 1938, about 25 miles of the upper Sac have regularly been stocked. Over the next two years, however, only six miles will receive hatchery fish. In essence, both hatchery-fish advocates and wild-trout advocates got their way (although neither side is necessarily satisfied with the resolution). Stocking practices will be up for review at the end of the two-year period.

In March, just under 28,000 hatchery trout were marked with an adipose fin clip and freeze-band - a dime-sized scar made with liquid nitrogen. Thousands of these brands have ulcerated and many fish have succumbed to infection caused by the *Columnaris* bacteria. Even the healthy fish appear to have tumors and there is fear the public might think there is still poison in the river. (There isn't.) Other fish are being used to stock the river, and are distinguished by clipped right ventral fins.

### NEW RULES

The entire river, tributaries included, from Box Canyon Dam downstream to Shasta Lake, is now open to fishing from the last Saturday of April through November 15. Barbless hooks are required everywhere.

The Dunsmuir stretch - Scarlett Way Bridge downstream to the mouth of Soda Creek - has been planted with hatchery trout. This is the only section where you can use bait and keep fish (five per day, 10 in possession). But please note - barbless hooks are even required here.

Except for the Dunsmuir stretch, the rest of the upper Sac is barbless hooks on an artificial lure or fly, and strictly catch-and-release.

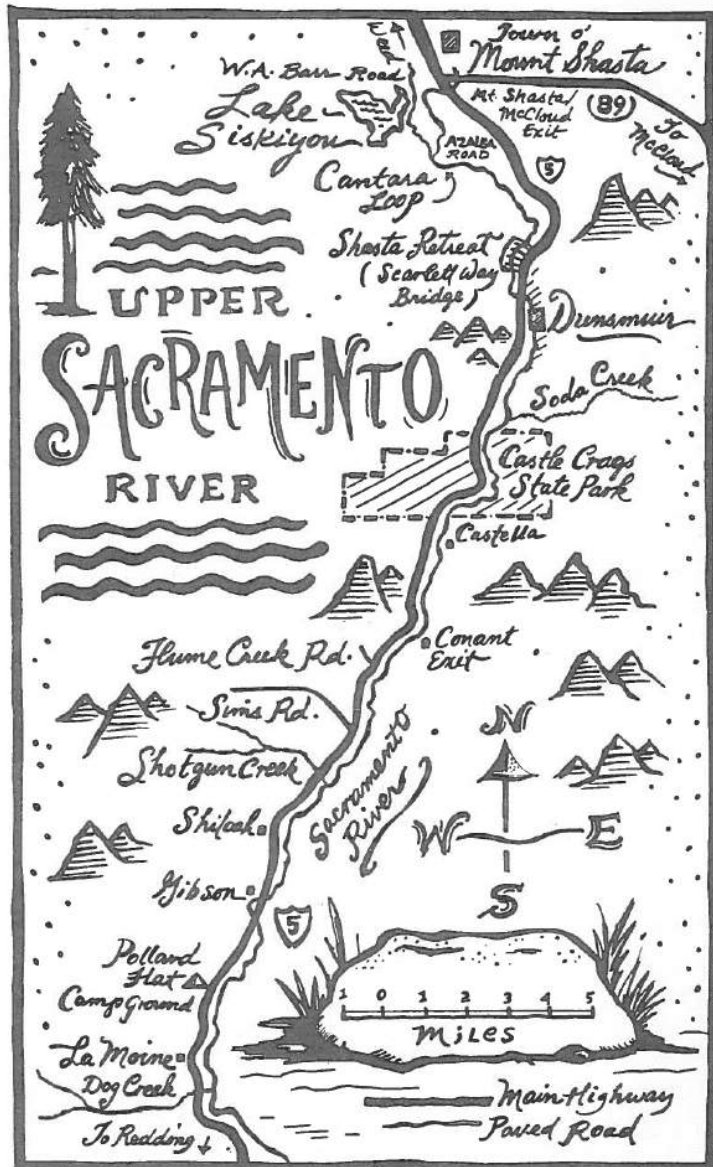
### THE OLD WAYS ARE BEST

Stoneflies have always been a popular springtime hatch on the river, so you might want to consider making your initial explorations with an appropriate imitation. For example, the recovery of

*Perlid* and *Perlodid* stones implies an opening tactic for May and June would be to nymph with flies that imitate these insects. Little Yellow Stone Nymphs, Red Fox Squirrels and Bird's Nest nymphs - all in size #14 - have been and should again be reliable patterns.

Remember too that the trout living in the upper Sac have never seen artificial flies (quit drooling), so almost any impressionistic fly fished with a dead-drift should catch fish. Try Pheasant Tails and Hare's Ears (#12 - #16) to imitate mayfly nymphs, and Adams and Light Cahills (#14 - #16) for the adults. Green Sparkle Pupa (#12 - #14) and Elk Hair Caddis (#14 - #16) will round out the caddisflies.

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## Upper Sac

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But while "virgin" wild fish might be ignorant at first, it won't take long for them to become selective. This is when you should consider studying the upper Sac's rich, colorful, and *effective* angling traditions. When it comes to fly-fishing this river, one man's name stands above all others - the late Ted Fay. Fay pioneered the two-fly, dropper style of fishing that is synonymous with the Sac, and his hand-tied flies have become objects of veneration.

Fay's tradition lives on in Joe Kimsey, co-owner of the Ted Fay Fly Shop in Dunsuir. Kimsey fishes the same two-fly, dropper technique that Fay learned from Ted Towendolly, a Wintu Native American, who originated this weighted fly system back in the early 1920s.

The key to using this dropper system is fishing a short line.

"Where people have their trouble is, they're not used to throwing *no line*," says Kimsey. "A long cast is about eight feet."

Kimsey uses a standard 7-foot, 3x leader. Up about 20 inches, he ties on a

double slip-knot loop (a single slip loop will slide up and down like a yo-yo). Then he cuts an eight to 10-inch piece of six-pound monofilament for the dropper, which is tied on to the slip-knot loop with a clinch knot - just the way you would tie on a fly.

For his fishing, Kimsey picks out seams, eddies and the potholes behind rocks - places where trout typically wait for food to drift past their noses.

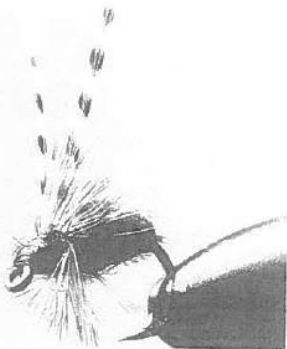
"Always fish upstream, against the current," says Kimsey. "Approach at a 45-degree angle from your target, real sneaky like. Drive those flies behind rocks, smashing 'em on top of fish. That ain't going to hurt nothing."

Kimsey insists that as soon as your fly lands on the water, raise your rod to a 45-degree angle with no more than two feet of fly line and your 7-foot leader trailing out beyond your rod tip.

"Once your flies come even with the rod tip," Kimsey says, "follow 'em down at the same speed as the current. Your line is short and tight, straight down from your rod tip. Watch the point where the leader enters the water. Look for hesitations, a twitch or anything that looks unnatural, then **CROSS HIS EYE-BALLS!** You want to use your whole

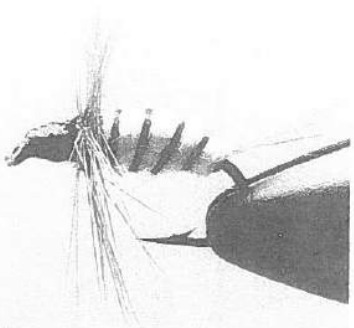
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## JOE KIMSEY'S FLIES - 2 EXAMPLES



### THE "BLACK SPENT-WING"

This weighted nymph is intended for use during the spring and summer. Joe Kimsey says it imitates "those big, black flying ants."



### THE "MARY"

With a yellow body and black thread, this nymph is similar to Ted Fay's "Yellowjacket," except it uses brown hackle rather than grizzly. The fly is named after sportswriter Larry Green's wife.

MARK KANE

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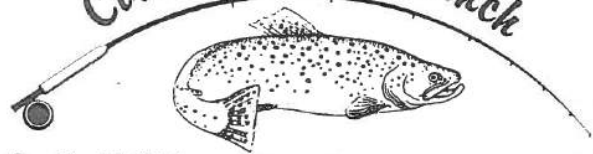


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