



## Cascade Lakes Highway, OR

### Fish-Filled Days on the North End of Century Drive

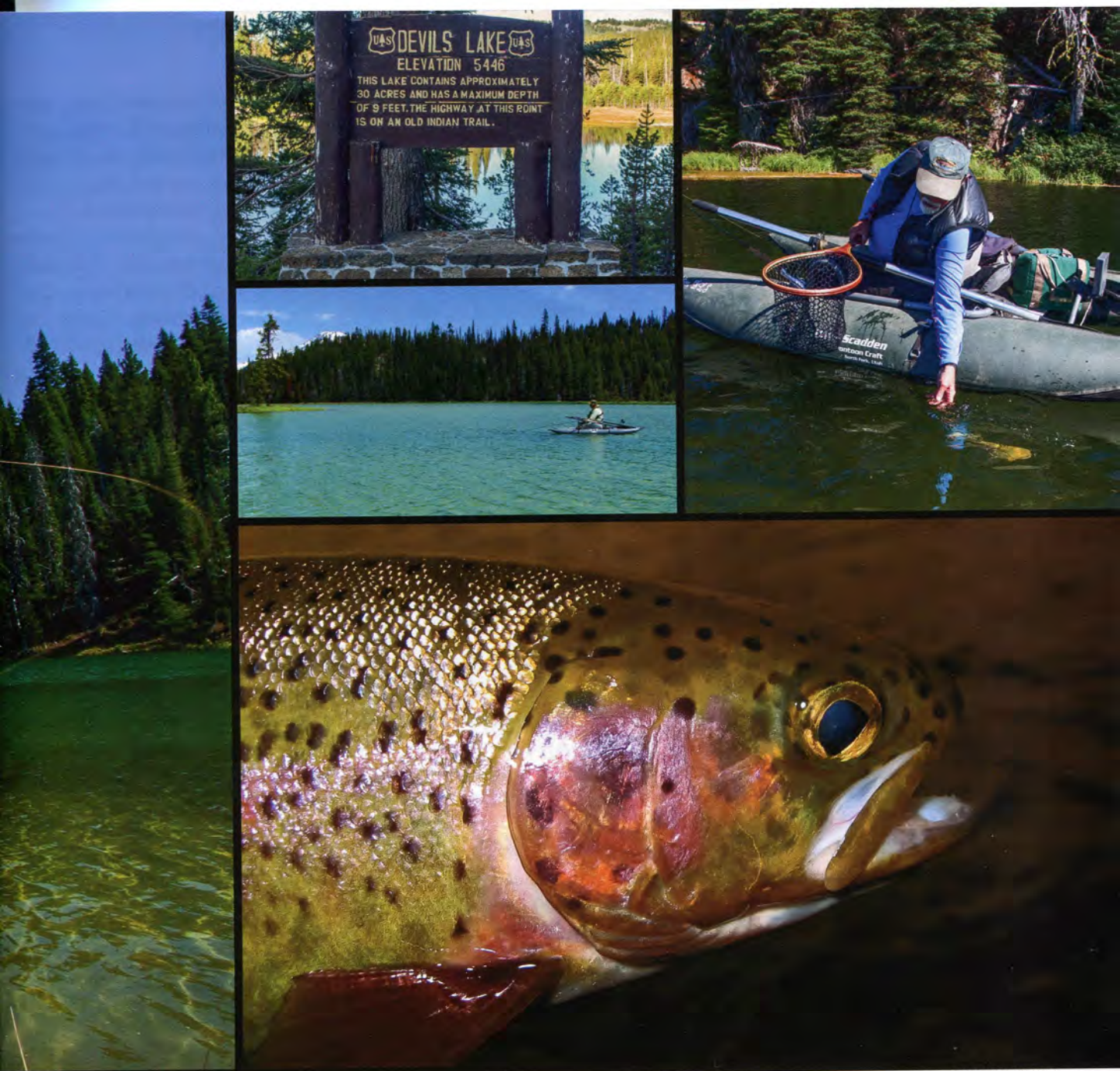
*By Glenn Zinkus*

---

**P**roductive, pretty, accessible, and diverse, the lakes along the Cascade Lakes National Scenic Byway, west and south of Bend, are among the best fishing locations in the Pacific Northwest. This iconic route begins as Century Drive in Bend at the comically nicknamed “flaming chicken” roundabout at Galveston Avenue and 14th Street. The locals’ moniker for the spot derives from the bright-red metal sculpture, actually named “Phoenix Rising,” in the middle of the rotary.

Soon thereafter, the route leads from town and becomes Cascade Lakes Scenic Byway, or, if you ask most anglers, simply “Cascade Lakes Highway” or simply “Century Drive,” which was named for what was once a 100-mile loop past Mount Bachelor and into the lakes area. Once east of Mount Bachelor (the famous ski area), the road courses





PHOTOS BY GLENN ZINKUS

Easily accessible along the Cascade Lakes Highway, Devils Lake offers fun fishing for 8- to 12-inch rainbows. Start early to avoid the “paddler hatch,” as this scenic lake is popular with stand-up paddleboarders (top middle). Steve Lichtenberger releases a rainbow along the shoreline of Lava Lake on a fine September afternoon. Pontoon boats are excellent for fishing all of the lakes along North Century Drive (top right). During June, Callibaetis mayflies begin their daily emergences on the lakes of Century Drive. Here, Norm Domagala fishes a Callibaetis nymph just before the hatch begins on Hosmer Lake (middle). Rainbow trout are routinely stocked in several of the lakes along Century Drive, and in some waters they can reach impressive sizes. This colorful specimen came from Little Lava Lake (bottom). Gary Hickman hides in the grass and sight-casts to rainbows on a flat along the bank of the Upper Deschutes River flowing out of Little Lava Lake. Such opportunities are rare at Little Lava, but this experience was an unexpected reward for hiking along the riverbank that day (left).

through a verdant montane landscape with views of volcanic peaks, including Broken Top and the Three Sisters, then passes through ancient lava flows and into forests and meadows replete with lakes and streams.

The route can be considered in two sections. The southern half delivers anglers to well-known fly-fishing waters such as Crane Prairie Reservoir and Davis Lake. These waters get all the press, so to speak, but—Hosmer Lake notwithstanding—the north half of the Cascades Lakes Highway offers a variety of less-famous fisheries.

West from Bend, past Mount Bachelor, the first lake along the route is Todd Lake; then comes Sparks Lake, Devils Lake, Elk Lake, Hosmer Lake, Lava Lake, Little Lava Lake, and the headwaters of the Deschutes River. The upper Deschutes River flows southerly from Little Lava Lake through Crane Prairie Reservoir and Wickiup Reservoir, where it turns eastward and then northward toward Bend.





Perin also hints that “ants can be killer at times on Todd, with that abutting meadow and a windy day during the summer.”

In addition to ant patterns, carry *Callibaetis* mayfly patterns, leeches, and beetles. Floating and intermediate lines are both useful. Todd Lake is technically open year-round, but this section of the Cascade Lakes Highway is closed for the winter, and the lake freezes over. In late fall, you can see brook trout staging in the shallows for the spawning season—probably a time to leave them be and just enjoy watching them.

### Sparks Lake

Oregon’s only photographer laureate, the famed landscape photographer Ray Atkeson, once shared with a friend that he considers Sparks Lake to be the most stunning landscape in Oregon. In fact, the 2.4-mile Ray Atkeson Trail begins at Sparks and provides superb views, with the South Sister looming to the north. The scenic beauty attracts lots of paddlers, but not a lot of anglers.

While not typically an angling destination in and of itself, fly-fishing-only Sparks Lake can be an interesting fishery for brook trout and stocked cutthroat trout. The lake is shallow, with hundreds of acres of shoals. During the early season, trout cruise these flats. The deeper sections, typically less than 10 feet, also hold fish

### Todd Lake

At 6,150 feet, Todd is the highest lake along the Cascade Lakes Highway and is reached by a short walk from a designated parking area. Unlike most of the natural lakes along the byway, Todd occupies a wide glacier-carved valley surrounded by forest, with towering volcanic peaks forming a stunning backdrop.

Although incredibly popular with day hikers and picnickers, 29-acre Todd Lake sees only modest angling pressure despite good fishing for enthusiastic wild brook trout. These brook trout spawn in the feeder streams so stocking them is unnecessary, but the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) does stock this lake with rainbow trout fingerlings on an annual or biannual basis. Todd’s firm-bottom shallows allow for productive wade-fishing, which is unusual for lakes in the Cascades. The entire shoreline is accessible, and Jeff Perin, owner of The Fly Fisher’s Place in Sisters, recommends Todd Lake for anglers who don’t have a watercraft.



PHOTO BY JOHN SHEWEY

Brook trout inhabit several of the lakes along North Century Drive. This one came from Todd Lake, where anglers willing to hike in a mere quarter mile can wade-fish extensive shallows, or drop a float tube in, which is especially effective during the height of summer (above). Lakes along Century Drive provide excellent camping options and pleasant summer nights (right).



throughout the year. Gates to the campground and the boat ramp can be closed to June, so an early-season foray may involve walking in with floating craft. Even during early-season prime time, typical angling pressure is very low.

Besides the striking visuals, anglers can be rewarded with large, wild brookies. Brett Hodgson with the ODFW told me about his own late-summer surprise at Sparks during a fish survey project. The water level was low, as is typical by late summer, but this time, the lake was so low that Hodgson and his colleagues even had trouble maneuvering inflatable kayaks from the boat ramp area. In the deeper area at the south end of the lake, they were surprised and pleased to net brook trout ranging from 16 to 18 inches.

## Devils Lake

Perhaps the first noticeable feature of Devils Lake is its stunning turquoise green color. About a mile south of Sparks Lake, 22-acre Devils Lake provides easy access for shore fishing or personal watercraft. Devils was formed by lava flows, evident by the masses of volcanic rock on the east end. The usual launching spot is a short, steep slope alongside Cascade Lakes Highway.

Devils Lake, a catch-and-release fishery, is stocked two to three times annually with rainbows that typically reach about 12 inches. It's too shallow (10 feet at the deepest spots) for them to survive the winter. Devils is seldom fished by most fly anglers, though recreational paddlers can swarm the lake at times during summer. Like nearby Todd Lake, Devils is what I call a minimalist lake—you can fish from the banks, especially along the wadable side opposite the road, or simply drop in a float tube, pontoon, or paddleboard.



PHOTO BY GLENN ZINKUS

You won't need much gear. Troll around trailing a tandem rig consisting of a leech pattern and a Flashback Pheasant Tail Nymph is generally as complicated as it gets, and at times Devils even produces good dry-fly action.

## Elk Lake

About 4 miles south of Sparks Lake, Elk Lake, formed by a natural lava-flow dam, is underappreciated by fly anglers, but very popular with gear anglers, campers, and boaters. Elk Lake covers about 250 acres and reaches a maximum depth of 62 feet, with an average depth of 18 feet. It sits at 4,884 feet, with a commanding view of Mount Bachelor to the northeast and the Three Sisters to the northwest.

Elk Lake offers wild brook trout, along with kokanee, and the kokanee—landlocked sockeye salmon—are so numerous that anglers are allowed 25 per day with no size limit. However, brook trout are the primary target for the few fly anglers who visit Elk Lake.

Hodgson says, "There are excellent brook trout opportunities [for anglers] in Elk Lake, with brook trout in the 14- to 18-inch range."

Elk Lake is productive for brookies as soon as it is accessible in early summer, but autumn is perhaps the best time on this fishery. By then, brook trout are colored up for the spawning season, and often aggressive in the cooler water brought on by cold nights. Throughout the summer and fall, fishing is best early and late in the day. Leech patterns are excellent, and while the lake is not particularly fertile, it does produce *Callibaetis* hatches. However, most of the time, slowly trolling a leech pattern (sizes 6 through 10) is effective. Use a clear or camo intermediate line and target drop-offs as well as the bay on the north end.

Don't let the summer crowds dissuade you. Outstanding scenery, great facilities, and warm water—

## Cascade Lakes Mayfly Nymph



<b>Hook:</b>	Daiichi 1270, sizes 10–14
<b>Thread:</b>	Gray Veevus, size 14/0
<b>Tail:</b>	Medium dun Whiting saddle hackle fibers
<b>Body:</b>	Gray dun Wapsi mink dubbing
<b>Rib:</b>	Nylon paintbrush fibers dyed gray dun
<b>Legs:</b>	Medium dun Whiting saddle hackle fibers
<b>Wing case:</b>	Nylon paintbrush fibers dyed gray dun
<b>Coating:</b>	Thin UV cement over wing case and head



sometimes upper 60s during the height of summer—make Elk a crowd pleaser, and it offers a palpable nostalgia for anglers who remember those old-fashioned family trips to mountain lakes with rustic lodges. Elk Lake Resort offers rooms, a restaurant, and rental watercraft, and the lake is served by four campgrounds, three launch sites, picnic sites, and even designated swimming areas. Because the wind often howls across the lake—another reason to fish early and late—Elk Lake draws lots of windsurfers and sailboaters.

## Hosmer Lake

As you descend southward along Cascade Lakes Highway, pull into the southernmost Elk Lake Loop road to Hosmer Lake. At an elevation of 4,996 feet and sprawling nearly 200 acres, Hosmer Lake is composed of two different pools connected by an interesting serpentine channel, often visibly filled with fish. The northern, or upper lake, is the larger and shallower; the southern, or lower lake, is smaller and deeper.

Hosmer is one of the gems of the Cascades, and the love everyone has for this lake is evident on any summer day. Anglers arriving late in the morning will find the parking lot at the boat ramp full, largely owing to the “paddler hatch,” composed of prodigious numbers of kayaks, stand-up paddleboards, and the occasional canoe. Get onto Hosmer early, or wait until later in the day when the paddlers have had their fill; the lake has two campgrounds that can fill quickly on weekends. Besides, the best fishing often occurs early and late. All is not lost, however, if you sleep in and need to park on the gravel road leading to the boat ramp. During midday, when the paddle flotilla endlessly loops around the lakes, fish the edges of the extensive tule bulrush stands—the fish love

these areas and you’ll be out of the way of the paddlers.

Effectively fishing from Hosmer’s banks is nearly impossible, so you need a boat. Some anglers emulate the paddlers by using paddleboards or kayaks, but most fly fishers prefer a pontoon, drift boat, or float tube. Electric motors are allowed, but only for traveling—you cannot use the motor while fishing.

Beginning in the 1950s, Hosmer was stocked with a landlocked variety of Atlantic salmon as well as brook trout. For years, the salmon, along with a chance of big brookies, drew fly anglers to this scenic lake. But in 2013, the ODFW switched to cutthroat trout and “Cranebow” rainbow trout. District biologist Hodgson says, “We are quite pleased with the current Hosmer stocking program, elevating what was already a high-quality fishery.”

Because the brook trout reproduce in Hosmer, the ODFW also reduced the rate of stocking of brookies to prevent overpopulation and keep the growth rates up. The fish continue to grow large in Hosmer, and the sight of a Jurassic-size brook trout underwater excites anglers and paddlers alike.

Jeff Perin says the Hosmer Lake fishery is as good as he’s ever seen it, and touts the ODFW’s decision to discontinue stocking salmon and switching to cutts and ’bows as the reason. Perin adds, “Hosmer has such a great damsel hatch. There is probably no better central Oregon lake than Hosmer for damselfish.”

Take note of that statement if you head for Hosmer during summer. The fertile lake also has prolific populations of *Callibaetis* mayflies, traveling sedges, alder flies, Chironomids, leeches, and other fish foods, including terrestrial insects. Balanced Leeches and Squirmy Wormies fished under indicators, or other leech patterns in olive and orange, are highly effective during those rare times when nothing is hatching.

## Lava Lake and Little Lava Lake

Perched at just above 4,700 feet, 370-acre Lava Lake reaches a maximum depth of more than 30 feet along the eastern shoreline. Little Lava Lake is smaller, at 138 acres, and reaches a depth of 15 feet. Both are excellent rainbow and brook trout fisheries that host impressive hatches of *Callibaetis* mayflies and midges. Lava Lake has no permanent inflowing stream. Rather, most of the water comes from seeps and springs in Wire Meadow, a marshland on the southeast shore. During periods of high water, there is some flowage south through an open channel from Lava into Little Lava Lake. This occasional connectivity allows a



PHOTO BY GLENN ZINKUS

*With snowcapped volcanic peaks as a backdrop, the lakes along the north end of Century Drive are wonderfully scenic. Here, 10,358-foot South Sister looms over Hosmer Lake.*



few large trout from the big lake to migrate to the smaller one, making for rare, but memorable catches for anglers in Little Lava.

The best midge hatches occur during the late spring, in May, and daily mayfly hatches begin by late May and continue all through summer. A *Callibaetis* cripple pattern or emerger fished on a floating line in the shallows is super effective from late morning through midafternoon. In the absence of hatch activity, fish subsurface with Chironomid patterns or Balanced Leeches. Early in the year, in the absence of insect activity, I generally rely on leech flies, particularly slender black/mint green patterns. Experiment to find the proper depth and retrieve cadence—variables that change from day to day. Most of the action is during mornings and evenings. Midday and afternoon fishing can be slow, but action frequently picks up as the sun sinks toward the mountains late in the day. By late fall, leech patterns and streamers are best, especially along the eastern shore of Lava Lake and the north/northwest cove on Little Lava.

Lava Lake lives up to its name, with remnants of prominent lava flows along the east shoreline. Drop-offs near shore along this eastern edge of the lake, as well as prominent shoals on the north and west sides, attract both rainbow and brook trout. Lava Lake has a campground, a resort, and a boat ramp large enough to handle the lines of motorboats, especially on the weekends. Little Lava, source of the famous Deschutes River, is more tranquil. Often, I find myself alone on the lake, enjoying the peace and quiet, the scenic beauty, and the oft-excellent fishing. Little Lava has a campground and boat launch area for small craft.

Whether enjoying a tranquil day fishing Little Lava, sharing Hosmer with my fellow anglers, wading the edges of Todd Lake for colorful brookies, or exploring the other waters of Century Drive's north end, I'm often amazed that so many excellent still-water fisheries are packed into such a beautiful area. And should the fishing or the weather deteriorate, Bend and its myriad brewpubs are just a short drive away. 🐟

*Oregon-based freelance writer and photographer Glenn Zinkus is a frequent contributor to Northwest Fly Fishing magazine.*

## Cascade Lakes Highway NOTEBOOK

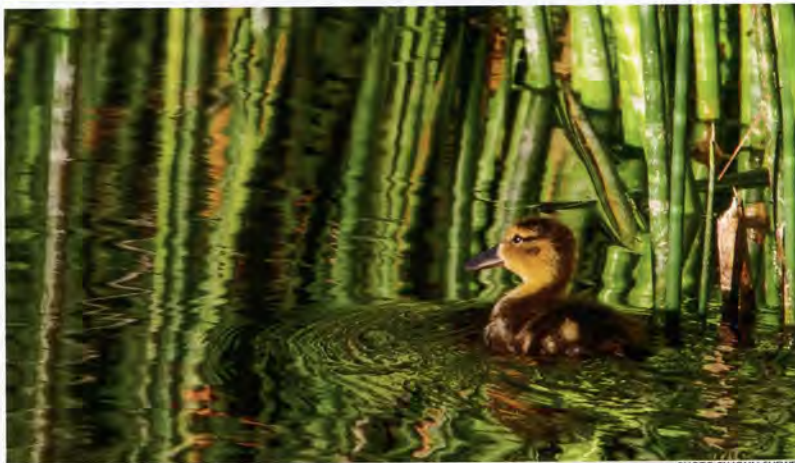


PHOTO BY JOHN SHEWEY

**When:** April–October, sometimes into November.

**Where:** Central OR southwest of Bend.

**Access:** Best fishing is by personal watercraft or small boat; some wade/bank fishing available, particularly at Todd and Devils Lake.

**Headquarters:** Bend, Sunriver, and La Pine. **Information:** Visit Bend, (541) 382-8048, [www.visitbend.com](http://www.visitbend.com). **Lodging:** Elk Lake Resort, (541) 480-7378, [www.elklakeresort.net](http://www.elklakeresort.net); Lava Lake Resort, (541) 382-9443. **Camping information:** [www.recreation.gov](http://www.recreation.gov).

**Appropriate gear:** 4- to 6-wt. rods; floating, intermediate, and sinking lines; fluorocarbon leaders.

**Useful fly patterns:** AP Nymph, Pheasant Tail Nymph, BH Pheasant Tail Nymph, *Callibaetis* Mole Fly, Quigley's Film Critic (*Callibaetis*), *Callibaetis* Mirage, Cascade Lakes Mayfly Nymph, Ice Cream Cone, Summertime Chironomid Buzzer, Balanced Leech, Sparkle Bugger, Thin Mint Leech, Cope Damsel Nymph, Hula-Damsel, Squirmy Wormy foam ants, foam beetles.

**Necessary accessories:** Polarized sunglasses, waders, wading boots, fins, float tube/pontoon boat, net, life jacket, sunscreen, insect repellent, Northwest Forest Pass.

**Nonresident license:** \$21/1 day, \$38/2 days, \$54.50/3 days, \$84.50/7 days, \$103.50/annual.

**Fly shops/guides:** *Bend:* Fly & Field Outfitters, (541) 318-1616, [www.flyandfield.com](http://www.flyandfield.com); Bend Fly Shop, (541) 389-6151, [www.bendflyshop.com](http://www.bendflyshop.com); Confluence Fly Shop, (541) 678-5633, [www.confluenceflyshop.com](http://www.confluenceflyshop.com); The Patient Angler Fly Shop, (541) 389-6208, [www.patientangler.com](http://www.patientangler.com). *Sunriver:* Sunriver Fly Shop, (541) 593-8814, [www.sunriverflyshop.com](http://www.sunriverflyshop.com); The Hook Fly Shop, (541) 593-2358, [www.hookfish.com](http://www.hookfish.com). *Sisters:* The Fly Fisher's Place, (541) 549-3474, [www.flyfishersplace.com](http://www.flyfishersplace.com).

**Books/maps:** *Complete Angler's Guide to Oregon* by John Shewey; *Flyfisher's Guide to Oregon* by Gary Weber; *Fishing Central Oregon* by Gary Lewis. *Oregon Atlas & Gazetteer* by DeLorme Mapping; *Oregon Lake Maps and Fishing Guide* by Gary Lewis.