

In Southern California, you could start your day trout fishing in a mountain stream, drive to a lake and do battle with largemouth bass, head for the ocean and catch a corbina in the surf, then get on a boat and head out deeper to hook a tuna—all in the same day.

I had this revelation one day while lamenting how many years had passed since I'd been on the water. There are many avid anglers in the Southland who take advantage of the phenomenal fishing we have in our own backyard. Then there are people like me, who love to fish but have stopped making the time to do it.

I resolved to put an end to all that—to go back to some of my favorite fishing spots, to discover some new ones, and to finally go after big game.

I decided to start with some old stomping grounds: the trout lakes and streams in Bishop.

Gone Fishing

One man sets out to reconnect with a favorite pastime

BY BARRY STRINGFELLOW



Diamond Valley Lake offers some of the best largemouth bass fishing in the state.



On the Fly

I first went to Bishop 12 years ago. My friend Keith invited me to go trout fishing, and although I was dubious about the excitement of catching a two-pound fish, it was a road trip and it was fishing, so I was packed before we hung up the phone.

The drive took us through spellbinding landscapes, like Red Rock Canyon State Park and the Coso Volcanic Field. The Sierra grew mightier until we came to Lone Pine, a slice of the old West that sits in the shadow of majestic Mount Whitney. Once we got our lines in the water, it took me about 10 minutes to realize how wrong I was about the excitement of trout fishing. After that trip, Keith and I made Bishop an annual pilgrimage.

But in recent years, we'd let the tradition die. So when I got this itch to start making time for fishing again, the first thing I did was call Keith. I convinced him it was time to go back (it didn't take much). He convinced me it was time to try something new—fly-fishing.

I'd never tried fly-fishing. I always said it was silly to squander my free time learning a frustrating skill; I had golf for that. But honestly, I was

intimidated. To quote Steven Wright, "There's a fine line between fishing and just standing on the shore like an idiot." Nothing can make you look like an idiot faster than fly-fishing. But I lucked out. I found Beryl Rea.

Beryl's been guiding anglers around Bishop for the past 17 years. She's a handsome woman with the radiance of someone whose office is the great outdoors.

"I've been fishing since I was a little girl," she said. "The only time I stopped was when I had my two sons. Once, when I was fishing with my infant son in a backpack, I bent over to pick up a fish, and he went tumbling over my shoulders into the water. He's a fishing guide now in the Florida Keys."

Fly-fishing is as hard as pushing a string—which is essentially what you do. Beryl demonstrated with a fluid motion. "Don't bend the wrist," she said. "Poke the sky, and chop the chicken."

Sounded simple enough.

Once I realized the tempo was like an easy golf swing, it started to click. I was still a danger to myself and to those around me, but I couldn't wait to get on the water.

We headed for the South Fork of Bishop Creek. The landscape quickly changed from high desert scrub to thick forests of pine and aspen, miles of clear mountain streams, glacier-carved lakes, and towering snowcapped peaks. We looked for fish in the deep pools, where the water slows and the trout wait for their next meal.

Beryl tied on a "humpy," a dry fly made with deer hair, with a barbless hook to make

TROUT

The extremely helpful **Bishop Visitors Bureau** (bishopvisitors.com) can fill you in on what areas are open to fishing, what areas are fly-fishing only, and where you can rent boats, find guides, and book fishing-friendly lodging.



catch-and-release easier. “The nice thing about fly-fishing is that you can catch 50 fish in a day and release them all unharmed,” she said.

“I’m all for catch-and-release, but after I catch dinner,” I said.

“If you catch a rainbow, that’s fine, but if you catch a brown trout, I will wrestle you to the ground before I let you keep it,” she replied. Because the brown trout are wild fish, not stocked, she said it’s unethical to keep them.

I became so engrossed in casting, I forgot I was trying to catch fish. It was a thrill to watch my fly gently arc into a tight spot. It was a bigger thrill to see the water explode when a trout hit my humpy.

I only landed one fish the entire afternoon—barbless hooks definitely leveled the playing field. But the satisfaction of catching my first fish on a fly was worth every snag, every bad cast, and every tangle. I’m not giving up my spinning gear, but on my next trip to Bishop, I’m giving Beryl a call.

The Biggest Catch

Like many of the people who live in Southern California, many of the fish are transplants. The fish I’d lured in Bishop were a good example. Few of the trout in the Eastern Sierra are native. In the late 1800s, brown, rainbow, and brook trout were shipped from the eastern U.S., Great Britain, and Germany and planted by mule packers (including Beryl’s grandfather), who carried the fingerlings up the mountains in milk cans. The largemouth bass (a.k.a. black bass) was shipped here from Florida in the 1950s.

Largemouths are omnipotent omnivores. They flourish in brackish estuaries, prairie lakes, mining pits, tropical lakes, and water that freezes over for five months a year. They eat insects, fish, rats, and even baby ducks. They’re a tough bunch. And they’re spectacular fighters.

Twenty of the 25 biggest largemouth bass ever recorded have been caught in Southern California lakes. Considering that the bass thrives in every state except Alaska and has emigrated to Mexico, Central and South America, Europe, Asia, and Africa, this is a staggering figure.

“It’s because they feed year-round out here, and they get a healthy diet of trout from the DFW,” said my guide Charlie Weyer, referring to the Department of Fish and Wildlife trout-stocking programs. “Another reason is that catch-and-release is so heavily promoted here.” (Dottie, the legendary lunger from Dixon Lake, cracked the top-25 list three times before dying of natural causes in 2008.)

Charlie, a walking Wikipedia of bass fishing and a successful touring pro, suggested we fish Diamond Valley Lake, just outside of Hemet. Diamond Valley is the newest and largest lake in Southern California. It was built for fishing, with submerged PVC pipe caves, brush piles, and rock reefs providing the structure that fish seek for breeding and feeding. There’s also regular stocking and a ban on all watercraft except fishing boats.

“A lot of guides do four or eight hours,” he said while rigging a single-tail grub. “I’ll go as long as you want, from sunup to sundown. I’ll go till you can’t take it anymore.”

Growing up in Nebraska, Charlie learned to fish

Beryl Rea coaches the author, Barry, (left) and his friend Keith on their first time fly-fishing, at the South Fork of Bishop Creek. Rea, who’s been guiding anglers through Bishop for 17 years, started fishing when she was a little girl.



Diamond Valley Lake, just outside Hemet, is a manmade lake built for fishing. Barry and his guide, bass fishing touring pro Charlie Weyer (right), went after largemouth bass one recent winter day.

from his mom and dad. “We didn’t have a lot of money, but we always went fishing together as a family,” he said. “That’s one of the things I love about fishing. It doesn’t matter how much money you have, you can always afford to fish.”

Although I’d done my share of bass fishing, a few hours with Charlie made me realize how little I knew. The fish were deep and finicky, as they tend to be in prespawn season. Still, Charlie managed to catch eight fish. I had several hits—but I missed them all. No matter. I spent a January day on the water, fishing in shorts and a T-shirt, taking in the snow-covered San Bernardino Mountains under a chalky blue sky, and wondering how my fishing buddies back east were faring during a record deep freeze.

Surf Fishing Safari

You can go to any beach in Southern California, and depending on the time of year, you can catch perch, croaker, leopard shark, angel shark, thresher shark, halibut, and shovel-nose guitar fish (I’m not making that up). Recently, striped bass, a fish that’s flourished in the Bay Area since being shipped in from New Jersey in the 1880s, have started to show up. By far, the most common catch is the barred surf perch, named for the brassy vertical bars on its side. They’re not big; most average about eight inches. But they’re feisty, plentiful, and ideal for entertaining beginning fishermen and kids with video-game attention spans.

Perhaps the most prized beach catch—and certainly the most elusive—are the corbina. They aren’t around for long (late June through October), and they’re extremely difficult to catch. Pound for pound, corbina are one of the strongest fish around. Cast a soft-shell sand crab in the path of a cruising corbina, and you can suddenly find your line singing off the reel.

Manhattan Beach’s Shellback Tavern is the headquarters for the Shellback Annual Corbina Tournament. Tom Amorosi, a bartender at Ercole’s Bar, started the tournament 10 years ago, and, fittingly, it’s a laid-back affair.

BASS

Besides the fishing facilities, **Diamond Valley Lake** (dvlake.com) also has an aquatic center with water slides and pools, as well as the Western Center for Archeology and Paleontology, home to the Ice Age animals excavated during the building of the lake, including “Max,” the largest mastodon unearthed in the United States.

“Surf fishing is as simple as it gets,” Tom said to me one afternoon while casting past the splash of a feeding corbina. “All you need is your license and a basic rod and reel. After that, everything is free. You can use sand crabs or knock a few mussels off the pier for bait. You can fish all year for what you pay to go on a half-day boat trip. And if the fish aren’t around, you can grab a beer, take a dip, watch beautiful women...”

Almost on cue, a willowy volleyball player passed by on her way to a postgame dip.

Tom shrugged. “What more could you want?”

“A fat corbina would be nice,” I said. We moved to a quieter spot and started casting.

Later, Tom got into a knock-down-drag-out with a shovel-nose guitar fish. I had a few adrenaline spikes when I cast into the path of a feeding torpedo, but I didn’t get any takers. My desire for a fight ebbed with the tide. My pulse had synchronized with the languorous waves. A spectacular sunset was on its way. Catching a fish had become incidental.

“Let’s get a beer,” Tom said.

Ten Days on a Boat

When I stopped in at Bob’s Sporting Goods in West L.A., owner Mike Naoe was building a rod that was a work of art, and clearly intended for big game. I asked Mike for the skinny on a good tuna boat, and without hesitation, he said “American Angler. Brian and Sam [the captains] always find fish—and they have the best crew in the business.”

Captains Brian Kiyohara and Sam Patella have fished together for 25 years. Lori, Sam’s wife, is the heartbeat of the operation. When I called looking for a three-day trip, Lori told me the next available slot was on a 10-day trip in November.

“Ten days on a boat?” my friends asked, looking at me like an entrée they hadn’t ordered. Yes, 10 days on a boat. No cell phones, no Internet, no traffic. And I was finally going after big tuna.

The yellowfin tuna is the Shelby Mustang of sport fish: a muscular, prized classic, built for speed, with lightning acceleration. It has a gold racing stripe running down its metallic blue-green body, with bright yellow finlets and sickle-shaped



Participants in the Shellback Corbina Tournament try to land the biggest corbina while surf fishing, then retire to the Shellback Tavern, where Tom Amorosi (above) weighs the fish.



SURF FISHING For information about the 2010 Shellback Corbina Tournament, go to shellbacktavern.com.

fins that slice through the water at speeds well over 40 mph.

We all gathered in San Diego. Being the only newbie on the trip, I was a little nervous, especially when I saw the enormous arsenal of gear each guy brought along. But I was immediately struck by the camaraderie. The crew knew I was a rookie and made sure to put me at ease.

Sam bombed it to the Lower Banks, an underwater mountain range about 700 miles to the southwest. This was where you found the “cows,” yellowfin ranging from 200 to over 300 pounds.

“It’s not like we hit the same spots every trip,” Sam said. “It’s a giant chess game. Sometimes it’s easy. Sometimes it’s not. I just love the hunt. I live for it. I’m probably making 22 cents an hour. The guys who do this for the money don’t last.”

Mike was right about the crew. They were unfailingly upbeat, and they went about their duties with military discipline and Zen-like focus. Equally impressive were the two chefs, who whipped up fabulous meals in a kitchen the size of a garden shed, often while swaying like wiper blades (not coincidentally, they’re both surfers).

Over the next three days, Sam found fish—lots of them. Shouts of “Boil!” filled the air over and over. A pod of tuna can instantly turn a bunch of



On an American Angler tuna boat trip out of San Diego, the passengers and crew fished for yellowfin tuna in an area where most tuna weigh 200–300 pounds. Barry (right) landed his first really big fish on the journey.

tired men into exuberant boys, none more so than Sam and his crew, even though they've seen this thousands of times.

Reeling in a yellowfin is like pulling a refrigerator up 10 flights of stairs, assuming the refrigerator fights back. You might think you have the upper hand—until the fish takes out a hundred yards of line, and there's nothing you can do but prepare for the next round.

At 124 pounds, my first tuna was a spectacular creature. I had a moment of sadness as it was quickly killed. I silently gave it thanks, as a Yakima Indian once taught me, as I know my friends and family will do when I serve fresh ahi for dinner.

Go Fish

Whether it's a two-pound trout or a 200-pound tuna, the jolt of adrenaline when a fish hits your line never gets old. But there's more to fishing than that. As Zane Grey put it, "If I fished only to capture fish, my fishing trips would have ended long ago."

My adventures in angling got me out of my rut and out of the house. They took me out of my comfort zone and out of my car. They filled my lungs with fresh air and cleared my mind of stale thoughts. They led me to spectacular scenery, which this state has in abundance.

Here in Southern California, I can fish all year round. And I can't wait to get out there again. **W**

Barry Stringfellow is a freelance writer based in Hermosa Beach and a frequent swapper of fish tales at Ercoles Bar in Manhattan Beach.

TUNA BOATS For more information on American Angler Sportfishing trips, call (619) 223-5414, e-mail office@americanangler.com, or go to americananglersportfishing.com.

Angling for Adventure

Make sure to get your license. You can apply for it online, and learn about California Fish Regulations, at dfg.ca.gov.

If you intend to eat your catch, check "**Safe Eating Guides for Southern California**" at oehha.ca.gov/fish/so_cal/socal061709.htm.

Westernbass.com is an excellent directory for all kinds of fishing, with links to webcasts, fishing clubs, guides, and fish reports.

California Fishing (Moon Handbooks, 2008, \$24.95) by Tom Stienstra is an exhaustive guide that gives brief, frank, and often amusing descriptions of more than 2,000 fishing spots in California, with maps, fishing tips, and recipes.