

The upper Owens River is the largest tributary to Lake Crowley near Mammoth Lakes, California, and is open to open to catch-and-release fishing all year. It winds through a large meadow for easy casting, and is surrounded by the majestic and often snowcapped peaks of the Sierra Nevada.

STOLEN WATER & JUSTICE



SCOTT LINDEN

CALIFORNIA'S OWENS RIVER, AND
THE LONG ROAD TO BECOMING A
TROUT PARADISE IN THE DESERT

GENTLY SLID THE WIDE-EYED LITTLE BROWN INTO THE SAME SPARKLING POOL
IT HAD DARTED FROM TO NIBBLE TENTATIVELY AT MY GOLD-RIBBED HAIR'S EAR.
I TOUCHED WET HAND TO BACK OF SWEATY NECK, A KIND OF ANOINTING WITH OWENS RIVER WATER
THAT'S BEEN A PART OF ME FOR MANY DECADES.



JIM STIMSON - PHOTO

The Wild Trout Section of the Lower Owens flows about 16 miles from Pleasant Valley Reservoir down to Five Bridges Road near Bishop, California. At one time this section of river was a dry riverbed, but a series of lawsuits forced Los Angeles to maintain minimum flows.



Scott Linden discovered fly fishing four decades ago, and created the fly-fishing TV show *Cast & Blast* for Outdoor Channel. He is also creator and host of the *Wingshooting USA* television series, hosts the *Upland Nation* podcast, and blogs at findbirdhuntingspots.com. Scott's book *Training and Hunting Bird Dogs: How to Become a Better Hunter and Dog Owner* (Skyhorse Publishing) is now available. His previous story for FLY FISHERMAN was "Crooked River Redbands" in the Aug-Sep 2022 issue.

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I released that trout a while ago, when the trout was a pioneer, hunkered against a cut bank in a riverbed that had been dry and dusty for most of a century. I'd stopped on a whim, out of curiosity at news of its rewatering, and upon releasing that fish, remembered a Ray Wylie Hubbard lyric about days when gratitude exceeds expectations making for good days. He was right.

The Owens River was a part of me long before that brown tugged at my leader and my heart. I'd drunk from it, showered in it, and washed my first car with it. When you grow up in Los Angeles, that's your Owens River, its history full of unsavory deals, greed, and lust for power to quench a giant city's insatiable thirst. Nowadays, anglers stalk along a more idyllic stream. In fishing it, you too might come to believe that without one we wouldn't have the other.

UPPER OWENS

From the base of the Sierra Nevada's White Wing Mountain, crystalline tributaries burble and meander east, south, then join in the lush Owens Valley where they water private fishing resorts and cattle pastures. A gate marks the end of the road and the beginning of public access courtesy of the Los Angeles Department

of Water & Power. This is the storied Upper Owens, running south past Benton Crossing campground and offering challenging angling for big fish, until the river catches its breath in Crowley Lake. If you've ever seen a photo of a big Owens fish, its likely being held by a puffy-coated angler with ice on his guides. He may have winched that "snowbow" from this part of the river in mid-winter following its upstream migration from Crowley.

Summer fishing here is decidedly more placid, with verdant pastures cleft by a winding, chalkstream-like Owens where a few resident fish rise leisurely and sporadically. Diehard summer anglers are serenaded by grazing cows and the cuck-cuck of sage grouse, making excuses while citing the incredible scenery as reason enough to fish here. As homage to the pre-1911 Owens, we did too. But we'll leave this stretch for a January day, instead heading for the downstream reaches most of us visit when sunburn is the risk, not frostbite.

THE GORGE

By 1911 the City of Los Angeles owned most of the real estate and water rights in the area. They dammed, channeled, and piped the water south, pausing only long enough to wring hydropower from

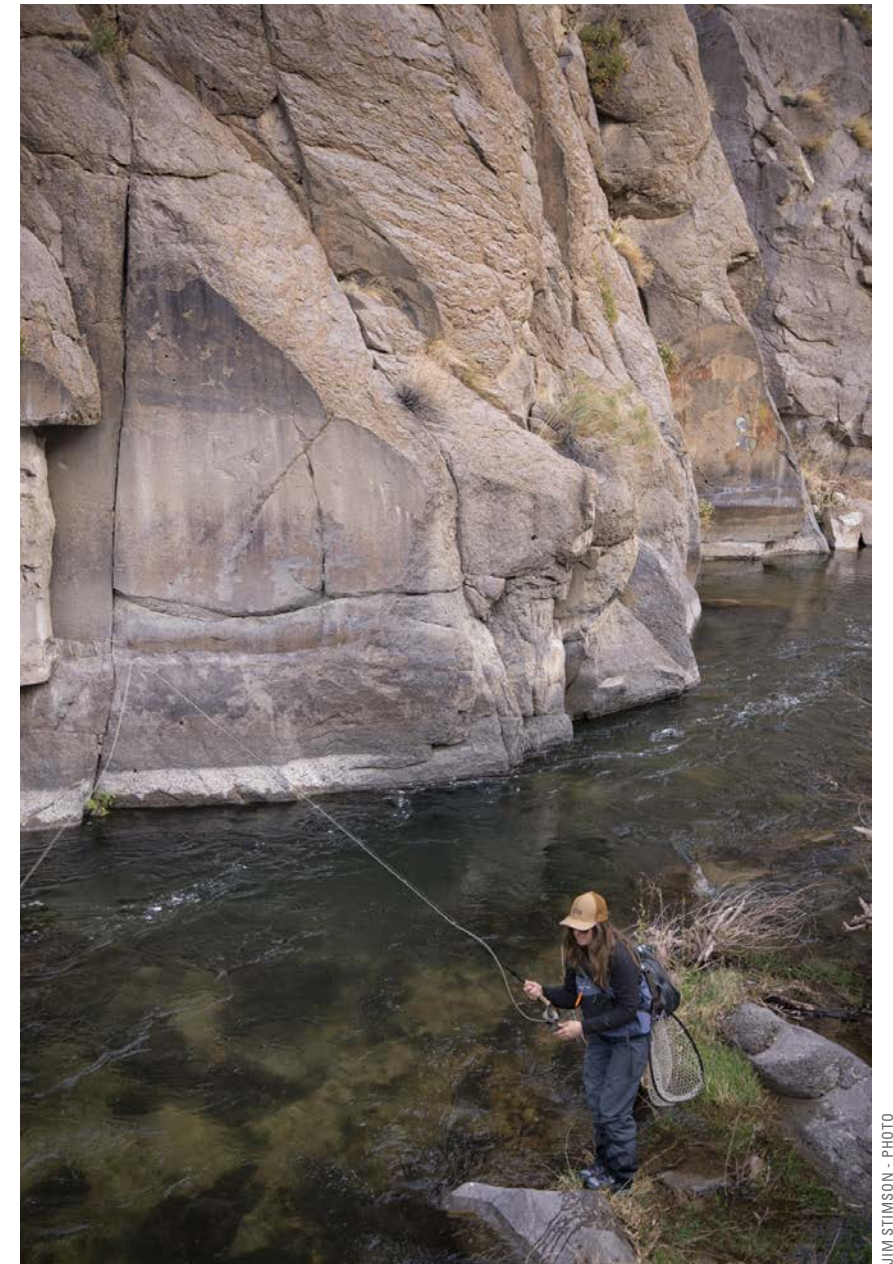
it. In the late 1980s, Long Valley Dam or infrastructure that created Crowley Lake sprang a leak, re-watering the 20-mile "Gorge" section of the Owens downstream. Legal battles ended in 2006 when the hydro-industrial complex grudgingly restored five percent of the former flow, creating a tailwater fishery like few others: complex, confounding and intriguing.

At Crowley's outlet, small and mid-sized browns fin in current resembling a spring creek, gin-clear and unforgiving. There's even a beaver pond or two. You'll work for fish, first on the white-knuckle descent, then when trying to put your first cast in the right place. Your reward is often a feisty, vividly-colored trout that has seen few if any anglers. Landing one of these hermit trout isn't the only reason to pause and reflect. Consider that you're fishing below the dam repair job performed by the lowest bidder. Or you could instead just enjoy the magic of small attractor dry flies, a light rod, and untouched fish.

A sun-parched, creaky wooden bridge shaded one small flat holding two rainbows selectively picking off tiny mayflies like a dowager at the buffet. My first bow-and-arrow cast was lame and caught on a wild rose. The second attempt bounced off the bridge, alighting in the placid pool. (Over beer that night I assured listeners it was intentional.) An energetic 8-inch brown came to hand after I'd slid down the embankment, bringing a few rocks with me and kyboshing further prospects.

Access to the remainder of the Gorge is via Los Angeles DWP service roads (most gated, you walk) or trails best suited to mountain goats. Now a rollicking free-stone creek, the Owens is chock-full of pockets and pools dappled by the shade of alders. There are energetic runs, rifles, and bubbly drops, each hosting one or more fish—mainly browns. Friend and pro guide Jarett Coons (Sierra Mountain Trout Guide Service) showed us browns that punched well above their weight, fighting with leaps and runs more like rainbows. We caught them on small attractors and nymphs, sometimes several from the same pool. Coons' Tenkara-style rod was put to good use here, where the stream is at most 15 feet wide. Czech-style nymphing is a go-to strategy, whether your rod has line guides or not.

The Gorge, sometimes called the "Middle Owens," is a wonderland of sharp tang from sage, hot sand and wet rocks, fruity aroma of streamside willows and the clack of dragonflies. Red-tailed hawks circle overhead and lizards bounce their heads



JIM STIMSON - PHOTO

The Owens River Gorge below Crowley Lake is sometimes called the Middle Owens River. It's loaded with pocketwater, large boulders, and brown trout up to about 18 inches. Nymph fishing in the deep pockets is often a key to success here.

in approval when you cast well. There is the buzz of high voltage lines and monolithic concrete structures sending Los Angeles electricity and water. But compose your photos right, and nobody will know what's outside the frame. And go ahead, hold the fish closer to the lens.

In the Gorge, bigger fish are right where you'd think: oxygenated gurgly stuff under drop-offs, or skulking in the shaded pools. Don't forget to look up once you've released your trout. There is a feast for your eyes: massive boulders, wildflowers like that scene from *The Wizard of Oz*, towering hoodoos, and jagged pinnacles.

But ultimately it's the sweet, sweet solitude and 20-inch browns that will motivate you to 15 more minutes on the stair machine. Stone-clad caddis cases litter the rocks; take the hint. Light colors are the order of the day.

As the sun beat down, we rotated through the soft water of a shaded, quiet pool. After a few refusals, my buddy Dave's parachute Adams got a slashing rise. Surprisingly, the rainbow-like leaps were made by a 15-inch brown, but-tery belly and spotted back as black as a moonless night. He ran the length of the small pool until its bounds apparent, he



JIM STIMSON - PHOTOS



The Lower Owens River (above) is a trout oasis in a high desert with 16 miles of special-regulation water and plenty of foot access. This access tunnel (left) cuts through a horseshoe bend in the Gorge, allowing access from one side of the bend to the other. Because much of the river is used to meet the water demands of Los Angeles, the Gorge and Lower Owens are often high and difficult to fish in the summer. The best times are often late fall, winter, and early spring.

dashed for downstream rocks. Coons was closest to the net, and while Dave coaxed the brown from a root ball, he splashed downriver, losing his glasses but netting the fish.

LOWER OWENS

You can spend an entire visit to Bishop, California, exploring the nooks and crannies of the Owens River Gorge, but most anglers make a pilgrimage to the wild trout section or “Lower Owens.” Downstream from Pleasant Valley Reservoir, it’s just a few miles northeast of Bishop. It runs with muscles flexed, like a winding, friendlier irrigation ditch. That’s the bad news.

The good news is that “ditch” is the re-watered natural stream course, full of sparkling riffles and enticing pools. Lazy bends belie robust current, a conundrum

anglers must unpack to coax a rise from jaded trout. The Owens winds through stark desert, framed by chalk bluffs with the lofty Sierras in the distance. You trudge through crackling dry grass to the streamside, where lush willow groves daunt timid anglers unwilling to earn their way to the cut bank. The few bare places are well-trod, harboring selective trout for careful casters.

Walk along the willows, listen for the chuckle and bloop of broken water, grovel toward the crumbling bank. The crawling and occasional ticks are mere annoyance, worth the effort, as the Owens holds big rainbows here. Just don’t freak out when a leviathan carp makes a leisurely circuit of the pool you’re working. Go ahead, try to tempt it. Everybody does.

Then, focus. Envision the dripping 4-pound rainbows you saw in local fly shop photos. Suss out the hatches in the morning

or evening (only mad dogs, Englishmen, and magazine writers work mid-day when temperatures soar into triple digits). Deep nymphs (#18 Perdignons) in deeper pools are another morning strategy. Here’s where the advice of a grizzled local angler resonated with me: keep casting. The strong flow and winding course create complex currents and eddies, and a flurry of 50 casts might yield just two or three good drifts.

MAGIC HOUR

As nighthawks and swallows flit overhead, the dry-fly action begins with caddis, PMDs, and Yellow Sallies. A lifetime resident, Coons recommends a dry-dropper combination of #16 tan Sparkle Emerger caddis fished in the film, ahead of a lightly dressed beadhead Sparkle Pupa. The key to the kingdom according to the legendary originator Gary LaFontaine is the body material—trilobal Antron dubbing, reflecting the waning light in a most buggy manner.

As the moon rose, we resorted to a high-riding Elk-hair Caddis even our bloodshot eyes could see. It worked, too.

We caught trout in glassy runouts below narrowed stream banks, at edges of swirling back eddies, tight against cut banks, and in slower margins of the far bank where cattails sheltered the biggest fish. When you're lucky enough to find two or three of those characteristics alongside each other, make a cast. Your entire repertoire of mends, backhand, puddle, slack-line and cross-chest casts will be called on.

Dave pounded one channel relentlessly, most drifts bollixed by current that towed his caddis imitation like a water skier. Wind and luck finally put the line upstream with a hook to it, and the brief moment of dead drift was enough. Later, we saluted that 14-inch rainbow while rehydrating on the tailgate, watching bats feast overhead. On the Owens in the summer, always fish until full dark.

WARMWATER WONDERS

First and foremost, the Owens River remains a water and electricity delivery system for Los Angeles. The river gives its last gasp on the alkali-tinged bed of what was Owens Lake, east of the town of Lone Pine. Between the wild trout section and the playa lies some fishable water stocked with rainbows. Sagebrush and sand dominate the valley floor and water

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slows, much of it diverted to aqueducts and pipelines. While ostensibly open to angling, the area is choked with willows and cattails on both banks. Of late, the area has received some love with the Lower Owens River Project. It puts water into a warmwater fishery and waterfowl refuge populated by largemouth bass, bluegill, catfish, and carp. Occasional browns allegedly lurking in the murky depths.

We should love and hate Los Angeles for what the megalopolis has done for, and to, the Owens River. Without their appropriating most of the water it might have irrigated cattle pastures and crops with no regard for the fishery. While its feet were held to the fire by courts, at least L.A. provides minimum flows. We might not have been so lucky dealing with a thousand different irrigators. After almost a century, anglers can again find serenity, wonder, and once in a while, satisfaction at a good

cast, drag-free drift, and sip of a big rainbow as the moon rises.

We tried our luck on that southernmost, last accessible reach in the Lower Owens River Project, simply to brag we'd worked the entire fishable part of the river in one trip. A few suicidal bluegills took tiny nymphs on a Tenkara rod, not a single carp slurped on the surface. It was a low-key, fitting final chapter in a book writ large with beauty, controversy, hope, challenge and more fishable habitat than you'd think a mega-hydro project should have.

I went back to the very bend in the Owens where I'd caught that brown the first year it had water in it. It had been a delight to be a pioneer then, and when a 10-inch great-great-grandson of that fish grabbed my nymph, it was delightful again. I was reminded that on the Owens, as in life, one takes the good with the bad and hopes the scales remain balanced. —



DAVID LAMBROUGHTON - PHOTO

The Owens River has both wild rainbows and browns. In the tailwater sections you should focus on small flies that imitate midges and Blue-winged Olives. In the Upper Owens, large trout migrate into the river from Crowley Lake in the fall, winter, and early spring. You can often coax predatory strikes from these migratory fish with dead-drifted egg patterns, Squirmy Wormies, and streamers.