

The Lower Sacramento River

A few sage words about a big river

And I followed you, Big River, when you called.

— Johnny Cash

At first glance, the Lower Sacramento River, from Redding to Red Bluff, appears so immense that it seems you could never figure out just where to fish it. On top of that, its flows are always changing, determined primarily by the irrigation needs of agriculture. The river doesn't become comprehensible as a fishery until you take it apart. Successful anglers search out features that meet the needs of fish.

Although the lower Sac can be waded, as with any big river, a drift boat provides fly fishers the benefit to explore numerous spots while fishing the water as they float along. I prefer the use of a drift boat on the lower Sac because there are so many fish and so many excellent holding places that it's to the angler's advantage to move frequently. Once you have adequately covered a piece of water with your fly and shown it to potential takers, it is time to drift to another spot. Additionally, due to the amount of private property along the banks, wading is more often than not limited to public access points.

Strategy, Gear, and the Drift

Although other species — king salmon, shad, and striped bass — also thrive in these waters, I tend to target rainbow trout and steelhead. Through years of fishing, I've learned how to find productive waters and to ignore those waters where trout and steelhead aren't to be found. I seek out spots where fish are going to hold and rest. Two areas I focus on when fishing the lower Sac are riffles and current seams. Both are places where fish position themselves to get out of the big river's stronger current.

From now to October, nymphing the riffles of the lower Sac can be very productive. Trout in riffles are typically feeding. Unfortunately, we anglers often cannot see the features that break the current and provide fish with a resting place. As a result, I pass on extremely shallow riffles that lack obvious holding structures and focus on those with obstructions that are visible.

Current seams are another excellent place to find fish. A seam is formed when two currents flowing at different speeds meet. Water directly adjacent to a riffle, between the fast-moving water of the riffle and slower-moving flows, shelters fish from the

current and constantly carries food. On the lower Sac, as on many rivers, trout will hold in the slower of the two currents. An easy way to locate a seam is to follow the water's foam line or bubbles. Additionally, along the lower Sac, there are large gravel bars. Water breaks from the bars into deeper pools. Anglers should fish these spots as well.

A large and nicely formed lower Sacramento rainbow.



On the lower Sac, a nymph fished deep with split shot and strike indicator is deadly. A 9-foot 6-weight fly rod works well for nymphing from a boat. About 99 percent of the rigs I see anglers using while drifting the lower Sac incorporate a Thingamabobber. My basic setup instead begins with a floating tricolored line. To this I tie a 9-foot leader and a single weighted fly. I flip my fly out and then lift my rod as the line comes closer. If the line stops, pauses, or pulls, chances are it's a fish that does it. With this setup, I can fish shallow or deep water without making adjustments to an indicator. To get my fly to the bottom in fast water, I attach BB split shot two feet up from the fly and, in slower water, I adjust or remove the split shot.

When I switch to a dry fly while fishing from a boat, I tie on a single piece of straight monofilament. I do not use a tapered leader or any setup with knots in it. Knots tend to cause microdrag when fishing the faster water. Microdrag affects the way a dry fly drifts. Whether nymphing or fishing dry flies on the lower Sac, drag free drifts are crucial for success.

An assortment of caddisflies, mayflies, and stoneflies can get you through a year of fishing the lower Sac. From October through December, anglers also can target the large rainbows feeding on the eggs of spawning salmon. Water clarity dictates the color of the egg fly I'll fish. Egg patterns I like to use when the water appears cloudy with low visibility are bright chartreuse or red. As the water clears, I fish with yellow or orange patterns. And, when the water is gin clear, I fish with white.

When wading, casting a fly with a light Spey rod has proven to be productive. I'll cast a nymph upstream into fast-moving water and let my fly swing through. With this setup, I use a fast-sinking line and a couple of split shot to get my fly down to where the fish are. Big fish are sitting on the bottom.

Fish prefer to be in the most efficient place possible, where they expend the least amount of energy while getting food. Make sure you cast to the tails of pools or runs, because fish often lie there, resting. Although few and far between on the lower Sac, exposed rocks are fish attractors, as well. The current breaks around the rocks and forms a seam. Fish will hold directly in front of rocks in the hydraulic cushions that are created when water is directed around the rocks. Always fish the cushion of water in front of rocks, as well as the seams behind them.

The lower Sacramento River is an incredible fishery. It's a special place that is also one of the best fishing destinations in the state. Whether you float it or wade it, I strongly recommend that you experience the splendors of this magnificent river. Even though there appears to be constant angling traffic and daily pressure, the river continually delivers. It is healthy, peaceful, and teeming with fish. You can expect to hook large fish on a regular basis and experience a sense of enchantment that will keep you coming back.

Notes

The Lower Sacramento River is located adjacent to Interstate 5 and open to angling year-round. Please review current fishing regulations, especially if you intend to keep fish. Numerous food and lodging choices are available nearby. The Fly Shop in Redding (www.theflyshop.com) is a good source for up-to-the-minute angling information and flies, among other services.

Enjoying a day adrift on the lower Sac.

