

# BEAR CREEK BONANZA

By Don Vachini

The day was waning under a steadily clouding sky. Sunny patches and dark gray shadows took turns enveloping us. A storm was imminent. Moving away from the trail, we took off our backpacks and leaned them against a fallen tree. Despite the threatening weather, we would continue our endeavor here: to try to catch 4 species of trout from the same body of water!

Our party was around 8,000 feet elevation, in the John Muir Wilderness, overlooking a section of Bear Creek noted for its brown trout population. This locale is in California's Sierra National Forest, about 95 miles east of Fresno.

We had spent three days backpacking and fishing the upper courses of the creek. Now, we were on our way back to the trailhead, to pursue the elusive browns.

The party consisted of my three sons, Chris age 13, Matt age 11, Jason age 9 and me.

Bear Creek originates in the ice-carved granite spires of the Sierra Nevada Crest. Most of its flow is from constant snow and ice melt, providing good flow all year long. From its headwaters, located well above 10,000 feet, it tumbles in a southwesterly direction roughly 16 miles and drops around 4,000 feet in elevation before meeting the South Fork of the San Joaquin River near Mono Hot Springs. At most places the creek measures roughly 30 - 50 feet in width and flows over a granite, rock-strewn bed.

It was during the spring of 1980, while planning a golden trout trip to Bear Creek with my sons, that I stumbled across an interesting fact. A Department of Fish and Game representative in the Fresno office told me, "Bear Creek contains goldens, brookies, browns and rainbows. The goldens and brookies are found in the creeks upper stretches, the browns and

rainbows in the lower courses. It's one of the few streams in California where 4 species of trout can be caught."

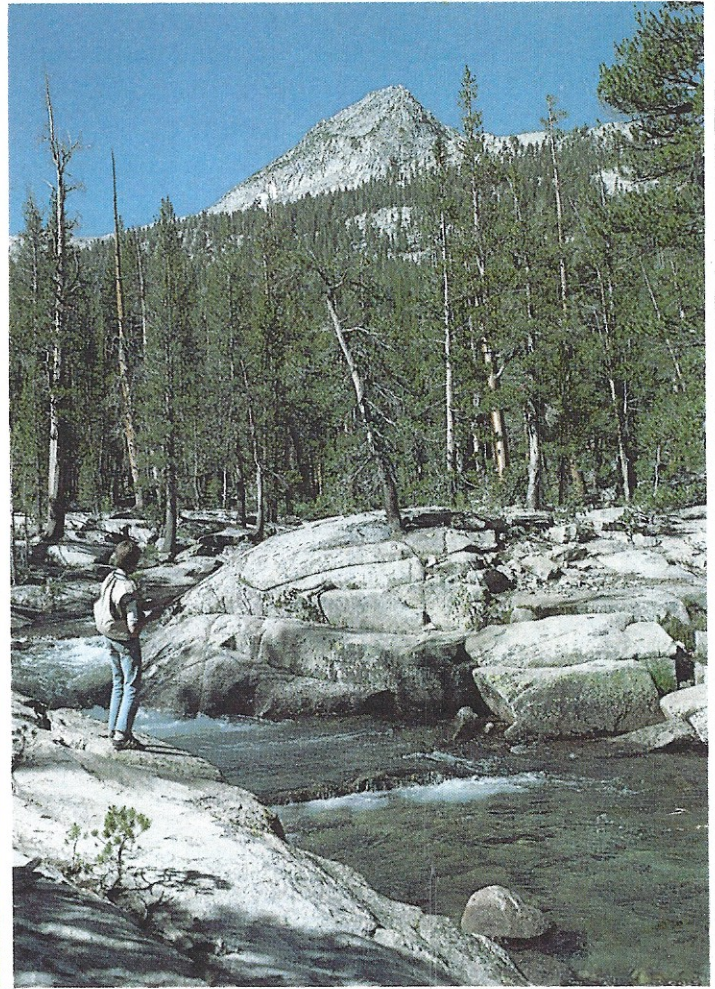
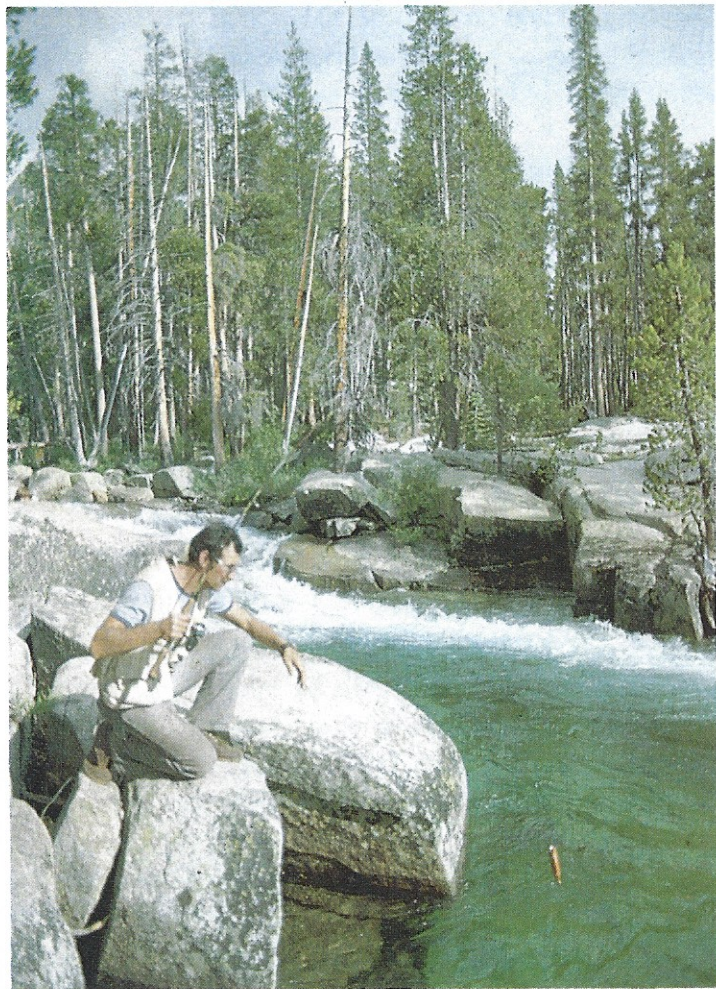
The adrenalin began to flow almost at once! I consider it a bonus to encounter more than one type of trout on a body of water, and often plan trips to fish for more than one species. This situation seemed made to order. A maintained trail follows the banks of Bear Creek virtually all of its fishable length, making it feasible to try for all 4 species.

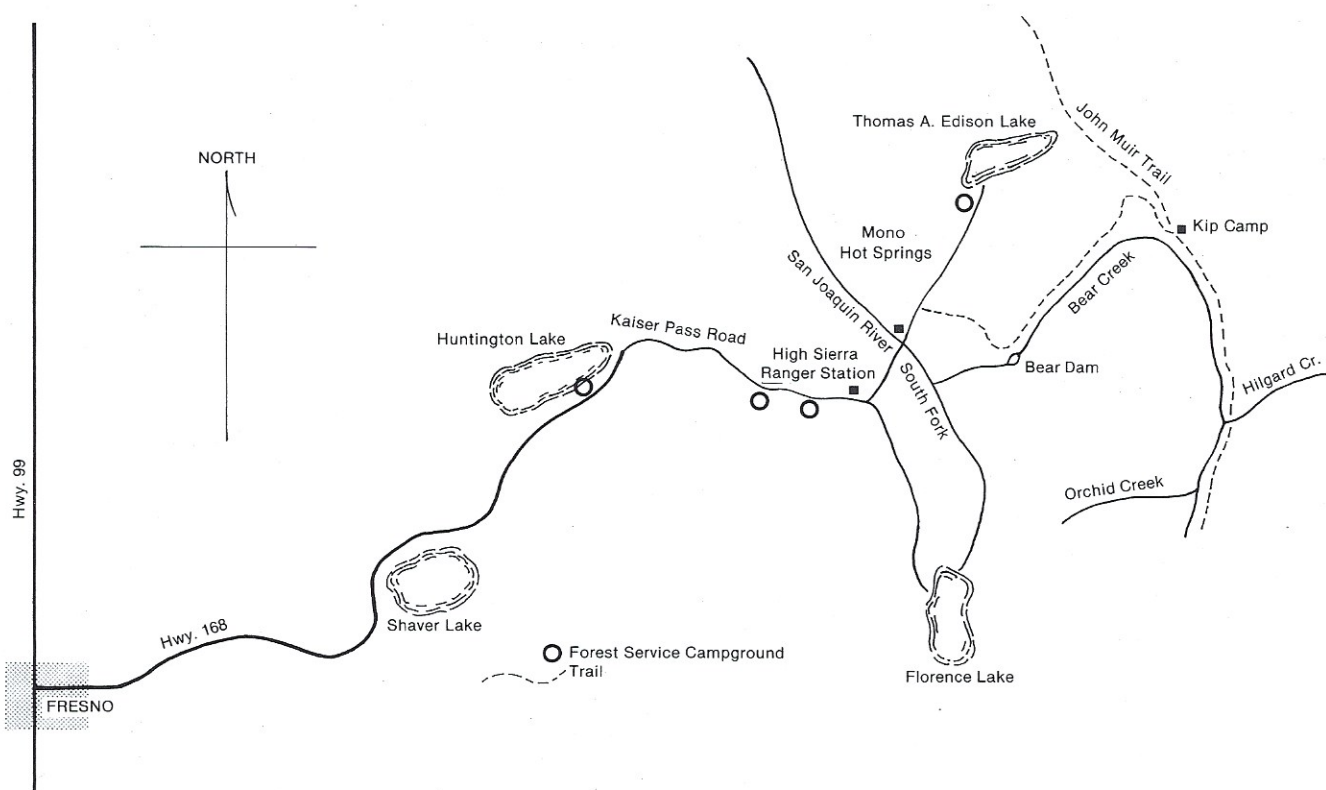
After obtaining the required wilderness permit from the High Sierra Ranger Station, the 4 of us began our trek. This would be my third visit to Bear Creek, my sons' first.

From the trailhead (7,000 feet elev.), about 1 mile above Mono Hot Springs, we followed the Bear Creek Trail, climbing steadily as we traversed the 3-mile granite field of Bear Ridge until we reached Bear Diversion Dam (7,300 feet elev.). (Below this dam the creek's flow is minimal, since much of the water is diverted to Huntington Lake generating power).

From the dam upstream, we followed the briskly flowing creek up the narrowing canyon, passing small stands of cottonwood and patches of wildflowers amidst the Jeffrey pine forest cover. About 2 miles up the trail becomes rocky underfoot. It continues in a steeper ascent for the remaining 3 miles to a large open area below the confluence of Bear Creek and Cirque Creek. Here, there are two waterfalls side by side, known simply as twin falls. Between the diversion dam and twin falls, brown trout are predominant, along with a healthy population of rainbows. This stretch is considered the lower courses.

We saw many prime looking fishing spots on the





lower courses, but we were trying to cover 11 miles in one day, so we continued on, making mental notes of them for our return trip.

From twin falls, the trail veers away from cascading Bear Creek and we began a steep and steady ascent for 2 miles alongside the north wall of the canyon. As we neared the end of the ascent, the moderate forest cover thinned and we crossed another granite field before reaching at the rocky saddle at the top. Our chests heaved and our lungs seared, attesting to the physically demanding climb we had just completed.

The sharp descent back to the creek brought us a spectacular view of the Mono Divide. The stark granite spires of Recess Peak and Mt. Hilgard framed the skyline in a stunning display of beauty.

We hiked a mile down to rejoin the creek in the Kip Camp area (9,000 feet elev.) not really a camp, but an open area suitable for resting or camping). Quaking aspen and cottonwood still lined the banks, but Lodgepole pine had replaced Jeffrey pine as the major forest cover.

From Kip Camp upstream, golden trout abound, with good populations of brook trout mixed in. Above Kip Camp to the headwaters is known as the upper courses.

About a mile above Kip Camp, the trail ascends to join the John Muir Trail, which continues to follow the creek to its headwaters.

It was in this area we made camp, a mere 100 feet away from a magnificent looking piece of water. There are no maintained campsites in the John Muir Wilderness, only rough sites suitable for a short stay.

This area is truly one of the most beautiful in the Sierra Nevada. Amid the trees the creek, with its emerald pools and sparkling riffles, runs clear and cold. Granite peaks and spires towered over us and colorful wildflowers could be seen among patches of white granite.

The trout we were after were basically small, so our gear consisted of ultra-light spinning rods and reels loaded with 4 lb. test line and 2 lb. leader. With this equipment we could easily cast flies with a bubble and lures without having to carry 2 separate outfits. (When backpacking in high country, every ounce of gear you *don't* take makes a big difference.)

Most of the time we were going to be using flies so we rigged up with small clear plastic bubbles 3 - 4 feet above the fly and leader. A small BB shot pinched on the line above and below the bubble held it securely in place. The bubble gives proper casting weight and also acts as an indicator for strikes. We are more accustomed to spinning gear and this setup meets our needs on most California mountain streams. Wet and dry flies work equally well with the bubble and longer, more accurate casts can be made—especially where you must contend with overhanging trees and brush. The bubble can be cast

overhand, sidearm, or flipped underhand easier than fly line. Wading is out of the question (the water is too cold and weight limitations don't permit waders). Thus, the bubble is more efficient on most parts of Bear Creek.

To use a lure, we simply tie it onto the 2 lb. leader, minus the bubble, and add varying amounts of small weights.

For us, the spinning rod and reel is very adaptable, allowing a change from fly to lure in mere minutes.

After spending most of the day on the trail, we were anxious to find out what these high elevation waters held in store for us.

While I set up camp, the three boys headed for a series of pools and riffles near our site. Chris chose a size 14 Black Gnat and pinched on a BB shot a foot above the fly to fish it wet. Matt selected a size 14 Mosquito, dry, and Jason a size 14 black Woolly Worm, wet.

Within 10 minutes, the boys, laughing and shouting, came running back to show off their first goldens ever. I was both thrilled and proud as we admired these sleek 7 and 8 inch fish. Now, however, it was time for me to join in the action.

Stepping out onto a rock, I cast my size 14 Royal Coachman upstream and allowed it to drift into some pocket water behind a rock. It swirled for an instant in the eddy, then was engulfed by a bolt of red and gold lightning, which immediately headed for fast water. I pressured the fish shoreward and with each spirited run its cadmium sides flashed in the late afternoon sun. Beached on the granite bank, it looked as though an artist had splashed it with an array of iridescent autumn colors. Even though I have caught many goldens, I have never ceased to be stirred by their resplendent beauty. I admired the 9-incher briefly, then returned it to its domain where it shot away like a gilded arrow.

The golden is strictly a high elevation trout, existing only in the west at altitudes above 8,000 feet. Originally native to California's upper Kern River tributaries, have been planted in other waters, at first nearby and then in some other western states (Wyoming, Idaho, and Montana to name a few). However, they have not become widespread and remain abundant only in certain California waters above timberline. Waters with self-sustaining populations have been designated golden trout waters and are dedicated to perpetuating that species by the Department of Fish and Game. Bear Creek, in its upper courses, is one such example. The upper 8

miles (above the impassable falls) is prime golden water.

Another item of interest is the golden's unusual coloration. Colors vary somewhat, but mainly they are dark olive on the back, crimson on the gill covers and, along a swath on the lower side, a brilliant orange-gold. The rear portion of the body, including the tail, is covered with black spots, as is the dorsal fin. Parr marks are usually present even in adult fish. It is accurate to say that no written description—nor even a photo can accurately capture a golden's stunning array of colors. Its unique beauty has resulted in the golden trout being named the State Fish of California.

Goldens seldom grow large. In their high-elevation habitat the food forms are small and the growing season is short. A 10-inch fish is considered large, with the average stream golden going about 6 to 8 inches. Since they are high elevation trout, no roads touch golden waters and rightfully so. Backpacking or packtrain are the only ways to reach them.

During the next three days we enjoyed fantastic fishing for goldens. With the abundance of goldens throughout the upper courses it is hard to imagine that, prior to 1914, the drainage was barren.

At that time, according to Fish and Game, 200 goldens from Volcano Creek (now renamed Golden Trout Creek), Tulare County, were transplanted to the West Fork of Bear Creek, below Marie Lake, by packtrain (in water cans). They became established so well that in 1928 their progeny were further transplanted in all the principal branches and main lakes of the drainage. There is no doubt they have maintained a healthy and thriving population.

Bear Creek has every type of water to interest the trout fisherman. It has flat stretches, riffles, deep pools, and white pocket water. In some places it runs through brushy forested areas, in others it traverses open, rocky terrain with little vegetation.

The further upstream we followed Bear Creek, the more the surrounding area took on the appearance of an open valley. About 3 miles above Kip Camp, the quaking aspen and cottonwoods disappear and the pine forest cover thins. Also, the stream's gradient is less steep in this valley-like stretch.

Supplementing the feisty *Salmo Aquabonita* catch was the eastern brook trout (actually a char). We caught brookies throughout the upper courses, and in some areas they were more abundant than the goldens.

One such spot was a short walk downstream from our camp. A small island diverted the flow into two separate channels for about 75 yards. A mass of driftwood had accumulated here, slowing the flow and allowing scrub willows and other brush to grow along the undercut banks.

While standing on a pile of driftwood, I managed to dab a size 14 Royal Coachman, dry, under some overhanging brush and watched it float about 3 feet. At that point, a circle developed around the fly and I was fast on to a scrappy fighter. Avoiding a hangup, I first led it to open water and then derricked it onto a moss-covered flat. The whole sequence took little more than 30 seconds.

As the fish lay on the grass, I was able to observe blue halos encircling red dots on its side. The black and white bordered lower fins and wormlike vermiculations on its back firmly identified it as a brook trout. It was a mature male, adorned in spawning orange, yet it was, at the most, only 8½ inches long.

Eastern brook trout were originally planted by the Department of Fish and Game in some of the lower elevation lakes of the drainage during the mid-1930's. They made their way down to the main creek by two methods: 1) They were washed down to the main creek via the lakes outlet creeks; and 2)

backpackers and well meaning prospectors carried them in coffee pots or cans, transplanting them in the main creek, where they now thrive as well as the goldens. They too attain an average size of 7 - 8-inches on Bear Creek.

Some persons consider them a threat to the goldens but the fact that both species co-exist and prosper here suggests otherwise. That these fish survive in the cleanest of waters is a tribute to the excellent condition of the drainage.

Generally speaking, we caught most of our brook trout in the quicker moving water near the tails of the pools. They seemed to favor the more brushy sections of the creek and rose to dry flies readily.

No matter what type of water we fished our spin/fly arrangement was highly effective. The technique was basic. We would locate a promising holding spot, cast the bubble well above it and allow the fly to drift toward the holding fish. Proper presentation was essential. We had the best results keeping the line to the bubble tight, enabling us to detect strikes more readily. Most fish struck at the end of a drift, or after the fly had passed the holding area and was swinging around to be retrieved.

Not surprisingly, we found the goldens and brookies of the upper courses to be very





Our spin/fly technique in action.

unsophisticated and unselective. They showed no preference for one fly over the other, nor did they neglect our lures. This is typical of high country trout, where competition for food is great. We used barbless hooks and released well over 200 fish during our stay. To us, there is a special aura surrounding the golden and brookie and we kept only a token few for the frying pan. Incidentally, they are fine tasting trout and their flesh greatly enhances freeze-dried meals.

Our fourth day began under a cloudy sky. After a brief session on the creek (two goldens, two brooks), we enjoyed a hearty breakfast of freeze-dried eggs, potatoes and hot chocolate. We broke camp and bid farewell to a truly beautiful setting.

Almost two hours later we arrived at twin falls again. Between twin falls and Kip Camp, where the trail veers away from the creek, is a large impassable falls providing a natural barrier between the species (golden and brook above, and rainbow and brown below).

Under the two waterfalls lies an emerald green pool at least 200 feet wide. We began to fish for the other two species from here down.

Water swirled around the pool in varying currents. As I concentrated, I felt something tap my size 12 Black Gnat and instinctively set the hook. My rod was transformed into a parabolic arc as the trout took off for the center of the pool. Soon however, the fish subdued and I held up a bright, silvery 8-inch rainbow—a sharp contrast to the gaudy goldens we'd been catching only hours before.



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Below twin falls, the creek still cascades freely but not as steeply as in the upper courses. It has longer and deeper pools with much more brush cover. Rainbows are fairly abundant in these deep holes and we caught them on a variety of larger (size 12) dark patterned flies, most notably Wooly Worms and Black Gnats fished wet. The smaller (size 14) light patterns were unproductive during our brief encounter.

Browns, though more abundant, are wary and harder to come by than the rainbows, especially in the large pools. About 3 miles downstream from the dam, brush overtakes the banks of the creek and it has more white pocket water and cascading riffles. Browns predominate in this section, but the brush makes access difficult—further insuring the brown's dominance.

The Fish and Game people say rainbows and browns were initially planted in the lower courses near the dam. The trout have since spread throughout the lower courses, establishing and maintaining a self-sustaining population. Now, it is a wild trout stream, and no plants having been made in it for several years.

Two hours and several rainbows later, our confidence was diminishing. We were having problems connecting with a brown on water supposedly dominated by them.

As we took off our backpacks to rest, I noticed a wide slick feeding a small waterfall. Below the falls, a frothing white pool stretched under some cottonwood branches. Easing through the brush and onto a rock, I cast my bubble and size 14 Black Gnat into the foaming white water. In the speed of the current, the hook practically set itself and I was satisfied to feel a

surging force on the other end of my line. I led the fish out of the fast water and slid a nice 10-incher to my hand.

My heart rate had increased upon setting the hook, but it definitely accelerated when I identified the trout. A quick inspection revealed heavy black spots with some red dots and a pale yellow hue throughout its body—definitely a brown!

In a scant half hour's time all of us had connected on browns (10-11 inches) from this 200-yard long brushy section. Successful flies were size 14 black Wooly Worms, Black Gnats and Mosquitos, all fished wet. A brown Rooster Tail spinner (size 0) was also productive. We fished the flies and spinners deep and allowed them to drift under the brush, as there was almost no room to cast.

Afterward, we capped off the successful wilderness experience at Mono Hot Springs. A steaming hot bath, served to wash off trail dust and soothe tired muscles.

As previously mentioned, the only access to the Bear Creek wonderland is by foot or packtrain. Personally, I prefer to backpack into the area because much of the enjoyment I have is derived from the effort to reach it.

By backpacking, the opportunities to fish and explore the drainage are endless. You'll find "An Anglers Guide to the Lakes and Streams of the Bear Creek Drainage," issued by the Department of Fish and Game is valuable when planning a trip to the area. Also of use are the following maps for reference: Sierra National Forest Service map, U.S.G.S. map of Mt. Tom and Mt. Abbot 15 minuted quadrangles.

I like to head up in August or September. In the

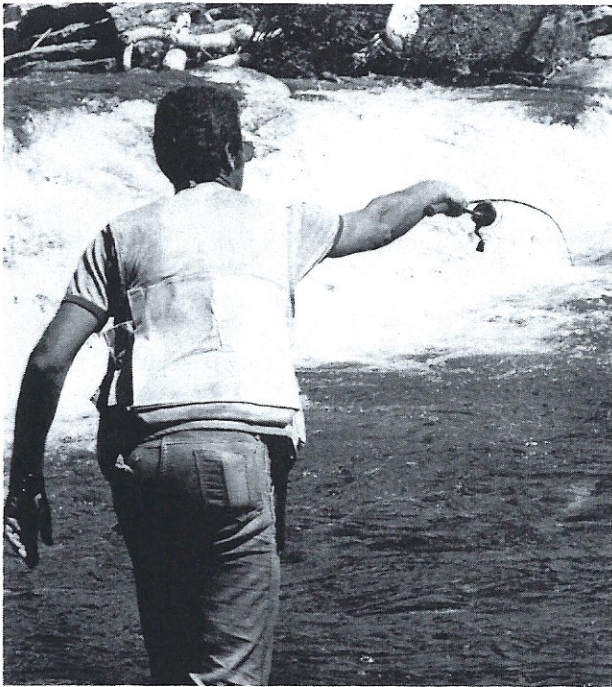
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early season, all the high water literally washes away most of the fishing. Then, too, in the late season (after Labor Day), you'll have far more chances to find solitude—another virtue of the High Sierra.

What to take? Equipment, other than fishing gear, should include a backpack tent with a rain fly, a sleeping bag suitable for high altitude (polargard is good), freeze-dried foods, a backpacker's stove and fuel, and a mess kit. Also, a first-aid kit and a durable, lightweight poncho.

The Department of Fish and Game, Region 4 located at 1234 East Shaw Avenue, Fresno, CA 93710 can give you up-to-the minute information on fishing conditions.

Two pack stations located in the area are very helpful with trail information and backcountry advice. They are:

1) Department of Fish and Game Pack Station (summer) P.O. Box 156, Lakeshore, CA 93634, (209) 893-3220. (winter) Box 82, Raymond, CA 93653, (209) 689-3383.

2) High Sierra Pack Station (summer) Mono Hot Springs, CA 93653, (no phone). (winter) P.O. Box 396, North Fork, CA 93643, (209) 877-4283.

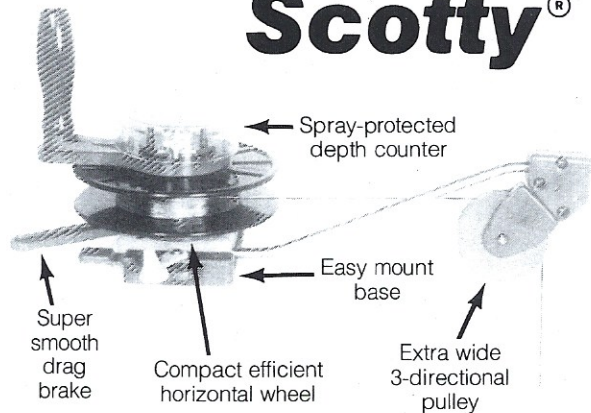
Good footwear is a must. Remember, you are packing your essentials on your back and your feet will be taking the brunt of the punishment. Make sure your footwear is comfortable, is broken-in well, and provides adequate support.

There you have it—goldens, brook trout, rainbows and browns—all in a handsome creek of crystalline purity, and all in a setting of unparalleled alpine splendor. What more could you possibly ask for?

*Angler / Don Vachini*

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