

Backpack Fishing Venture for California Golden

Our quest for "gold" leads us on a backpack adventure into California's rugged High Sierras in search of its glittering prize — the gaudy golden trout!

By DON VACHINI

The term "gold fever" first originated in the mid- to late-1800's in the Sierra Nevada foothills, coinciding with the discovery of gold. After a lengthy time, the gold boom died out. Recently, however, with the price of gold skyrocketing to over \$500 an ounce, there is a re-kindled interest in the valuable ore.

My sons and I had caught a bad case of "gold fever," and were now high in the Sierra Nevada Range pursuing the object of our affliction. However, unlike the 49ers of the past era, we were not packing the customary picks, shovels, and gold pans but were equipped with fishing rods and reels, having foregone the precious metal for a different kind of gold—that of the golden trout.

Our party was at around the 9,900-foot elevation in the John Muir Wilderness, overlooking a section of Bear Creek which we were going to "prospect" during the next three days. We had just completed an 11-mile backpack along the Bear Creek Trail in one day to arrive at the junction with the John Muir Trail. This area is located in the Sierra National Forest and is about 100 miles east of Fresno, California.

Our group consisted of my three sons, Chris (age 13), Matt (age 11), Jason (age 9) and me.

This was my third venture into the Bear Creek drainage. My boys were making their initial golden trout pilgrimage, and were emotionally as high as some of the surrounding peaks.

Bear Creek is a tributary to the South Fork of the San Joaquin River. It originates among glacial cirques and ice-carved

granite spires of the Sierra Nevada Crest. Most of its flow is from perpetual melt and seepage from snow and ice, thus providing clear and cold flow all year long. It tumbles roughly 16 miles over its predominantly granitic course.

The golden trout has always fascinated me. It is strictly a high elevation trout, existing in western altitudes between 9,000 to 12,000 feet. They are found naturally only in California, originally being native to the upper Kern River tributaries. From there they have been transplanted in other waters, at first to nearby waters (by prospectors) and later to some other western states (Wyoming, Idaho, and Montana, to name a few). They became established in some waters above timberline. Waters in California that have self-sustaining populations have been designated golden trout waters and are dedicated to the perpetuation of that species by the Department of Fish and Game. Bear Creek, in its upper courses, is one such designated water. The upper eight plus miles, above the impassable falls, is prime golden water.

Another interesting item about the golden is its unusual coloration. Their color varies a little, but basically they are dark olive on the back, crimson on the gill covers and along a swath on the lower side, and orange-yellow to gold over much of the rest of their body. The rear portion of the body, before and including the tail, is covered with black spots, as is the dorsal fin. Parr marks are usually present, even in the adult fish. Actually, no written description or photo can accurately capture the true array of colors.

They must be seen to be fully appreciated.

Golden do not reach large size in most cases, being residents of high elevations where the food forms are small and the growing season short. A ten-inch fish is about as large as one will come by in a stream. Some remote lakes contain fish up to three to four pounds, but they are the exception rather than the rule. The average stream golden is approximately six to seven inches.

The golden trout is the state fish of California.

It can be said that the appeal of the golden trout is in its coloration and lack of accessibility. No roads reach golden waters. Rightfully so; hiking or pack-train is the only way to gain access to their domain.

Since we are basically stream fishermen, or creek freaks, we sought to find places where golden could be caught in a stream environment. Bear Creek fit this bill and was the choice of my sons for their first fling at golden trout.

After obtaining a wilderness permit (one was necessary since we would be entering a designated wilderness area), the four of us began our trek.

From the trailhead (7000-foot elevation) we followed Bear Creek Trail, climbing steadily as we traversed the long granite field of Bear Ridge until we reached Bear Diversion Dam (7300-foot elevation) three miles later.

From the dam upstream, the trail closely follows the creek and we hiked through stands of quaking aspen and cottonwood amid a Jeffrey pine forest cover. We plodded along the trail in a steadily increasing ascent for five miles, until we reached Twin Falls, an open area characterized by two large waterfalls and a large emerald green pool.

From the Twin Falls area we proceeded up the trail as it veers away from the creek. For two more miles we ascended a steep, staircase type section, watched the forest cover thin and crossed another open granite field. This was the most demanding stretch and we rested quite frequently. We were all glad we had been training for over two months for this physically exerting event.

After a good rest at the summit, we began a sharp descent back toward the creek. As we hiked down, we were afforded a breathtaking view of the Mono Divide. Stark granite spires outlined the skyline as we all gaped in wide-eyed wonderment.

After a one-mile descent to the creek,
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Cascading Bear Creek with its emerald pools and sparkling riffles is a fly fisherman's dream, offering a variety of water types.

BACKPACKING FOR CALIFORNIA GOLDENS

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we began a moderate uphill climb to the Kip Camp area (9000-foot elevation, not really a camp, just a large open area suitable for resting and camping). Walking another mile, we reached the junction with the John Muir Trail. It was in this section that we staked our claim and made camp a mere 100 feet away from the banks of 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 one of the most beautiful in the Sierra Nevada. Most golden trout waters are well above timberline and offer little in the way of forest cover and campsites. Here, however, aspen and cottonwood still lined the creek's banks, but Lodgepole pine was now the predominant forest cover. The cascading creek with its emerald pools and sparkling riffles ran clear and cold. Granite peaks and spires towered over us and an abundance of multi-colored wildflowers were visible on patches of white granite fields.

After spending the better part of the day on the trail, the boys were ready to burst with anticipation. They had paid their dues to reach these high elevation waters and now wanted to see what treasures they held. I couldn't blame them, as I felt the same.

Since the trout we were after were basically small, our gear consisted of ultralight spinning rods and reels loaded with four-pound test line and two-pound leader. With this equipment we were afforded both lure and fly fishing without bringing two separate outfits (a backpacking fisherman has to be weight conscious).

We were mostly going to be fly fishing, so we rigged up with small clear plastic bubbles three to four feet above the fly and leader. A small BB split shot pinched on the line above and below the bubble secures it in place. The bubble gives proper casting weight and also acts as an indicator for strikes. Since we are more accustomed to spinning gear, this setup meets our needs on most California mountain streams. We can use both wet and dry flies equally well with the bubble. Longer and more accurate casts can be made, especially with overhanging trees and brush to contend with. The bubble can be cast overhand, sidearm, or flipped underhand easier than fly line.

For lure fishing, we simply rig up the lure to the two-pound leader, minus the bubble, and add a varying amount of small weights.

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

With fumbling fingers we assembled our rods and reels and hastily tied flies on our lines after stringing on bubbles.

Chris and Matt headed for two separate pools while Jason and I followed and patiently watched for the time being.

Chris chose a size 14 Black Woolly Worm and pinched on a small BB shot 12 inches above it to fish it wet. After several casts into the clear pool, his line twitched as it neared the slower water. His rod arched as he was fast to a fish,

which he promptly hoisted onto shore. It appeared as a bright shaft of orange and yellow light.

Meanwhile, Matt had chosen a size 14 Mosquito, dry, and was busy casting to a small swirl under some overhanging brush. At the precise moment Chris landed his fish, Matt's bit of fluff disappeared in a ring, and he too quickly landed a gaudily attired trout. The whole sequence took maybe 50 seconds! They were a proud pair, grinning ear to ear while displaying their first goldens, typical seven- to eight-inch specimens.

Leaving them to continue, Jason and I, anxious to get into the action, proceeded

downstream to a small drift, broken by some rocks, forming good pocket water. Jason placed his size 14 Black Gnat, fished wet, behind one of the rocks. After several misses, his rod bowed and quivered under the fight of another 8" scrapper. As he landed his first golden, I couldn't help but notice the glimmering orange flash lying on the bank with the sun reflecting off it, adding more color to an already bright wonder of nature.

It was really a thrill beyond words, watching all three of my sons accomplish what roughly 90 percent of all trout fishermen have not. Only ten percent of all trout fishermen have reportedly caught goldens, according to a local paper.

However, I could stand to watch no longer, and chose to join the action. Stepping out onto a small rock, I drifted my size 14 Royal Coachman into a small pocket. Before it completed its drift, it was engulfed by a bolt of carmine lightning and headed for fast water. Putting a lot of pressure on it, I prodded it shoreward. Leaving little doubt as to what it was, it flashed its cadmium sides several times before succumbing. It was a nine-inch trophy.

In less than an hour of "prospecting," we had all struck "gold" on Bear Creek!

That evening we enjoyed a few broiled goldens, which added to the flavor of our freeze-dried chicken and rice. A gourmet meal at 9900 feet, eaten in full view of Recess Peak (12,836 feet elevation), a humbling sight as the daylight faded. Surrounding a campfire, enjoying its warmth with full stomachs, we relaxed, listening to the running creek and various fishermen's lies. We soon sunk into our sleeping bags looking up at the starry sky, silently reflecting the day's events and anticipating the future days.

During the next three days we were in an angler's paradise. Using barbless hooks on our flies and spinners, we caught a multitude of gem-like trout, releasing most of them to fight another day.

Bear Creek contains every type of water of interest to trout fishermen. It has flat stretches, riffles, deep pools and white pocket water. In some places it runs through brush and in other places it courses open, sparsely forested areas.

We explored and fished every type of water over approximately a five-mile stretch during our stay and found an abundance of feisty *Salmo aqua-bonita* in most types of structure. In fact, there wasn't any potential trout water that didn't produce at least a few goldens.

Also entering into our catch was an occasional brook trout, present in these waters but not as abundant as the main attraction.

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

We also explored two tributaries of note. Hilgard Creek flows into Bear Creek about three miles above Kip Camp and Orchid Creek about five miles above. Both are cascading waters in their upper courses, most practically fishable only in their lower courses, near their confluences with the main creek.

As I approached tiny Hilgard Creek, I peered around a streamside tree into the clear, yellow-bottomed water. I saw several fish forms and couldn't resist. Dabbing my size 14 Royal Coachman above them and letting it drift brought me a memorable sight. Six streaks all made a beeline to the moving tidbit. Only the quickest nine-incher intercepted it, and was soon lying on a streamside bed of moss, still carrying the fly that betrayed it in its lip. In the morning sun, it looked as though an artist had splashed the trout with an array of iridescent autumn colors. My heart skipped a beat and I silently gasped in awe. With Mt. Rose towering over me, I slid the "jewel" back into its domain, watching it shoot like a gilded arrow to an undercut bank.

Orchid Creek courses an open meadow below its feeder lake, and small goldens abound here too. Dry flies are the ticket in the slow-moving section.

With the abundance of golden trout throughout the whole upper drainage, it is hard to imagine that prior to 1914 the whole drainage was barren. According to the Department of Fish and Game, 200 goldens from Golden Trout Creek (formerly called Volcano Creek), Tulare County, were transplanted by packtrain (in milk cans) to the West Fork of Bear Creek below Marie Lake. They established themselves so well that in 1928 they were further transplanted to all principal branches and the main lakes of the drainage. There is no doubt that they have maintained a healthy and thriving population.

Even though a major trail follows most of its upper courses, Bear Creek remains basically underfished. The Department of Fish and Game urges anglers to fish it and its tributaries as much as possible.

The golden trout in Bear Creek are, for the most part, very unselective and unsophisticated. They showed no preference for one fly over another, and dined on a steady diet of sizes 12-14 Royal Coachman, Black Gnat, Woolly Worm and Mosquito as well as sizes 0-1 Rooster Tail lures. This is typical of high country trout, due to the small amount of food available plus the amount of trout in competition for the food.

To us, there is a special aura surrounding the golden, and we released most of them, keeping only a small token for the frying pan. Incidentally, goldens are among the finest tasting trout. We remembered that good sportsmen take only what they can use and then use what they take. We will long remember the tasty flesh of the golden trout but will also remember the countless numbers we released.

As previously mentioned, the only access into this scenic wonderland is by foot or packtrain. Personally, I prefer to backpack into the drainage because much of the enjoyment I have is enhanced by the effort to reach it.

Much of the Sierra Nevada high country is awe-inspiring and breathtaking, virtually unsurpassed anywhere in the world. Any trip into this area is a success to begin with.

By backpacking, the opportunities to fish the Bear Creek drainage are endless. The drainage has 32 lakes and several creeks containing golden trout. Many times the outlet creeks, where conditions permit, augment the lake fishing. An *Angler's Guide to the Lakes and Streams of the Bear Creek Area* issued by the Fish and Game Department is beneficial when planning an extended trip to the area.

The best time of the year to plan for a trip is August and September. In the early season high water cuts down on selected waters. Late season (after Labor Day) also increases chances for more solitude, another virtue of the High Sierras.

In backpacking, you carry your essentials on your back. Therefore, a high quality packframe is essential. There are some items of utmost necessity, such as a backpack tent with a rain fly, a sleeping bag suitable for high altitude (polargard is excellent), freeze-dried food, a back-packer's stove and fuel (many times firewood is not available), and a mess kit. A first aid kit and survival gear should also be included as well as rain gear (a light poncho is suitable). A visqueen tarp comes in handy as a ground cloth.

Good footwear, properly broken in well before the excursion, as well as several changes of socks, is not to be taken

lightly. Since you are carrying your "house" on your shoulders, your feet must be well cared for both before and during your trip or else you're in trouble.

Last, but certainly not least, don't forget the fishing gear, to include rod, reel, flies, lures, leader, and vest.

Bear Creek (above Kip Camp) offers a complete wilderness experience. My sons benefited immensely by being in close contact with the great outdoors. They gained a healthy respect for many things we take for granted, such as transportation, easily prepared meals, a roof over their heads and some of the other finer pleasures of life. A friend of mine likened the trip to a mother bear taking her cubs into the woods to let them experience the ways of the wild. Experience is a great teacher.

Also a thrill for me was being a part of their highly successful quest for golden trout. I'm sure their first search for gold left them fulfilled. Like the early 49ers prospecting for gold, they marveled at the beauty of their treasure. Unlike the 49ers, however, they replaced most of their "gold," simply content to see it, gaining enjoyment and contentment from the simple experience of observation.

The bottom line for all of us was that we just plain had a lot of fun, enjoying our wilderness experience.

Like a true case of "gold fever," the more we obtained the more we sought. We are already planning another venture into Bear Creek next summer to attempt to curb our relentless greed for "gold." We now know for a fact that "thar is gold in them thar hills!" □

SPRING RUN CUTTHROAT TROUT

(Continued from page 69)

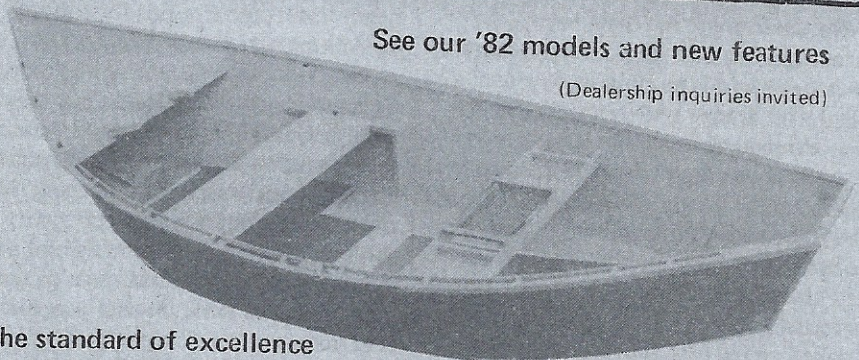
begin until a major hatch has begun. During the spring months the predominant hatches on the local rivers will be the large March Browns (Nos. 10-12), and the smaller Blue Duns (No. 16). Under normal spring conditions, they begin at 11:00 and continue until 3:30 in the afternoon. Cutthroat automatically tune in on the drifting duns and position themselves into feeding stations for the duration of the hatch. Its rise forms are very sly and inconspicuous. At a casual glance, it would go completely unnoticed. Oftentimes, its dorsal will protrude the water's surface and can be seen with a keen eye porpoising while it leaves small dissipating rings. Do not cast until you locate surface feeding fish. Very

seldom will random casting produce. Not to rule out the possibilities of nymphs, emergers, or any other sub-surface methods, but, a major problem for some anglers when cutthroat angling is water that is void of fish. Until one discovers those consistent holding waters, a surface rise is a good indicator of a feeding cutthroat and direction for one's presentation.

When approaching feeding cutthroat it is best to apply chalk stream tactics. Observe the rise carefully and make sure it is a feeding cutthroat and that you have his lineup (old dark winter kelts

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