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Try for the ultimate angling feat in this California basin.

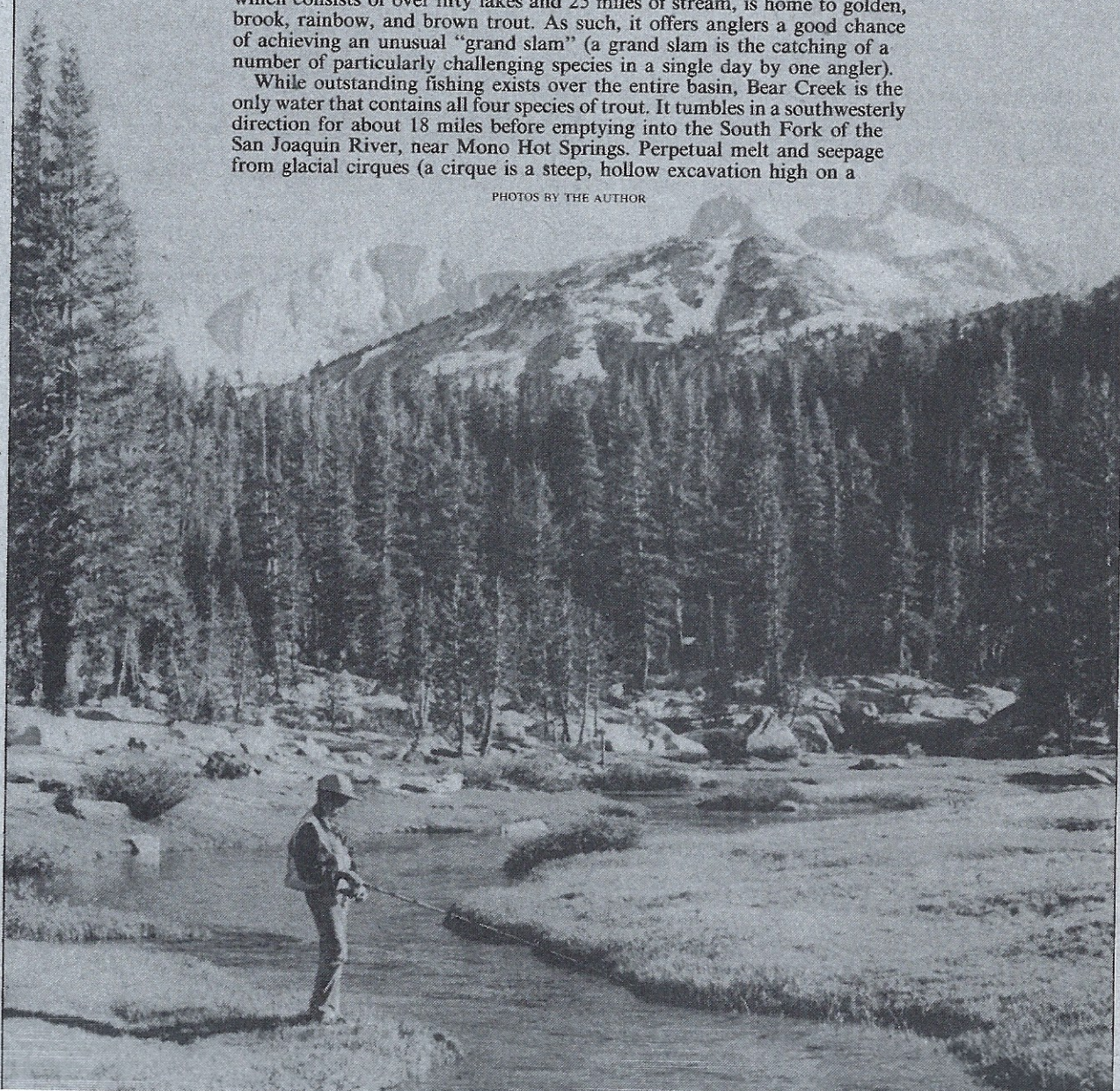
BEAR CREEK GRAND SLAM

BY DON VACHINI

Golden State anglers who enjoy combining a rugged hike or pack trip with their fishing should look into a trip to the Bear Creek Drainage, located about 100 miles east of Fresno in the Sierra National Forest. Nestled near the clouds in the John Muir Wilderness, this basin, which consists of over fifty lakes and 25 miles of stream, is home to golden, brook, rainbow, and brown trout. As such, it offers anglers a good chance of achieving an unusual "grand slam" (a grand slam is the catching of a number of particularly challenging species in a single day by one angler).

While outstanding fishing exists over the entire basin, Bear Creek is the only water that contains all four species of trout. It tumbles in a southwesterly direction for about 18 miles before emptying into the South Fork of the San Joaquin River, near Mono Hot Springs. Perpetual melt and seepage from glacial cirques (a cirque is a steep, hollow excavation high on a

PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR





mountainside made by glacial erosion) near or above the 11,000-foot mark steadily supply Bear Creek with cold water, while its granitic, rock-strewn bed is characterized by flat stretches, pools, riffles, and pockets.

Inherent in the pursuit of a grand slam is the quest for the golden trout. First transplanted here from their native upper Kern River system, this colorful California state fish has established abundant populations all over the upper drainage. Bear Creek is now a designated golden trout water because of the transplants.

I caught my first golden from an emerald pool on Bear Creek years ago. As my fly drifted past a submerged boulder, a crimson shaft darted after it. A few minutes later, I gently unhooked the brightly colored 8-inch fish and released it. Its vivid colors flashed in the water as it made its way back to its lair. Its Latin name, *Salmo aguabonita*, translates quite accurately to "pretty in the water."

The upper courses of Bear Creek, including the East, West, and South Forks, and the Hilgard and Orchard

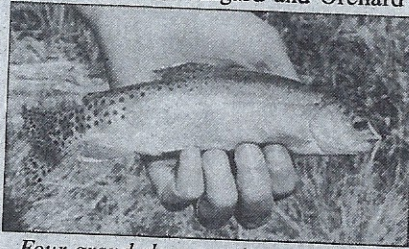
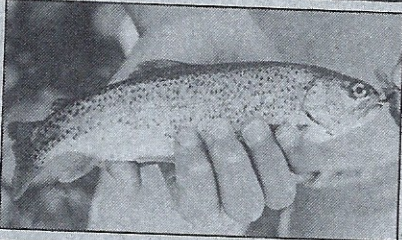
Creek tributaries, all contribute their flow to the main branch. An abundance of feisty goldens, ranging in size from 7 to 10 inches, populate the clear, turquoise pools and riffles of these waters between steep bedrock slicks, or chutes.

A number of high-altitude lakes, ranging in size from 124-acre Lake Italy to small, gem-like, half-acre tarns, feed these streams. While a few of these waters harbor goldens 17 inches or better, the majority are home to multitudes of pan-sized fish.

"Fishing the inlets and outlets right after ice-out proves most consistent," says John Cunningham, co-owner of the High Sierra Pack Station, Dept. FS, P.O. Box 1166, Clovis, Calif. 93613, telephone (209) 299-8297. "Depending on the previous winter's snowpack, most trails into the area are open by late May. In a normal year, the lakes located near the 10,000-foot elevation will open from mid-May to late June, while those above 11,000 feet ice out even later."

While many golden trout waters are located above timberline and in areas largely devoid of trees, Bear Creek differs. The stream is lined with quaking aspen and cottonwood trees amid a predominantly lodgepole and Jeffrey pine forest cover. Colorful wildflowers adorn the area in season, and the jagged spires of the Sierra Nevada's backbone are an impressive backdrop. The Rose-Marie Meadows and the Seven Gables areas are particularly beautiful.

As beautiful as the gem-like golden is, it's not the only jewel in the basin's crown. Bivouacked at Rose-Marie Meadows, my sons and I made



Four grand-slam nominees make their home in Bear Creek itself. Photos on left, top to bottom: brook, rainbow, brown. Photo above, golden trout.



GETTING THERE

The trail systems in the area surrounding the Bear Creek Drainage allow for a variety of routes into or out of the basin. Approaching from the west, the trails are moderate but long, and from the east, trails are steep but shorter. Popular west-side trailheads, reached via State Highway 168 and Kaiser Pass Road, originate at either Bear Dam or Edison Lake, at 7,643 feet elevation. Entry from the east is by way of Pine Creek, north of Bishop, over Italy Pass, at 12,300 feet elevation. Deemed unsafe for pack and saddle stock by the Forest Service, this trail is not maintained and is usually snowbound until August.

A day's walk on the John Muir Trail should bring most people into the heart of the drainage. By establishing a base camp at the confluence of the South and East Forks of Bear Creek, at 9,500 feet elevation, opportunities to explore the headwater lakes are endless. Once in this locale, day trips without heavy packs allow plenty of time to sample the fishing in nearby lakes such as Apollo, Orchid, Lou Beverly, Sandpiper, Medley, Three Island, and Rose.

A physically demanding 5-mile hike up the East Fork brings the Seven Gables and Vee Lakes chains into view. Even more remote lakes sit above these waters, such as Little, Big, Black, and White Bear Lakes, as well as Ursa and Bearpaw Lakes. These are all fine golden trout waters. From here, anglers can either backtrack downstream or continue on over a small divide to Brown and Teddy Bear Lakes before joining the Hilgard Creek Trail, near Lake Italy. This trail descends steeply to Bear Creek, 6 miles below, completing a rugged, taxing 15-mile loop.

a short jaunt upstream to Marshall and Marie Lakes, which lie in tandem near Selden Pass at 10,875 feet. The brook trout in these waters were hungry, and hit our flies with abandon. The California Department of Fish and Game does not stock brook trout in the Bear Creek drainage, but populations of them flourish in Marcella, Hilgard, Bear Twin, and Marshall Lake waters. These fish populations are the result of "coffee can plants" made years ago by non-Department of Fish and Game personnel.

Since growing seasons are short and most food forms small, high-country trout are usually always hungry. For this reason, matching the hatch isn't essential. I usually rig up with tiny, dark wet flies, because carpenter ants, flying ants, mosquitoes, and damselflies are staples of the trout. I've had good results with Royal Coachman, Woolly Worm, Black Gnat, Zug Bug, mosquito nymph, dragonfly nymph, and damselfly nymph patterns in sizes 10 to 14.

The trout in the lakes feed heavily on scuds, shrimp, and small midges. In addition to the patterns mentioned above, I've had success fishing for trout in the lakes with dry patterns such as Adams, Humpy, Mosquito, Ginger Quill, and Renegade.

Since the fish tend to be on the small side, tackle should be geared accordingly. An ultra-light or light-action rod and reel matched with 2- to 4-pound-test line is a very good choice. I've found that a spinning rod is the most versatile tool on these waters. Used with a clear plastic bubble, the spinning rod can offer you the

option of fishing with flies as well as lures and live bait.

Good lures to use in the Bear Creek area are small brown or gold Rooster Tail, Mepps, and Panther Martin spinners, Super Duper and Dardevle spoons, and Kastmasters. A good bait to use is red salmon eggs, rigged with a small amount of weight and fished in moving water.

A series of large falls below Kip Camp, at 8,800 feet elevation, forms a natural boundary between the upper and lower creek. The "lower courses," the 8-mile-long section below the falls downstream to Bear Diversion Dam, is dominated by brown and rainbow trout. While the falls form an impassable barrier for fish from below, brookies and goldens frequently wash down from above. On one particular fishing trip, a half-dozen casts within a 50-foot stretch of brush-lined, sandy-bottomed creek produced three fish—a brown trout, a brookie, and a golden. Though golden, brook, rainbow, and brown trout inhabit the Bear Creek drainage, this is the only area where all four species are found together.

Generally, the rainbows frequent the heads of larger pools, where they lie in wait to ambush food. While red salmon eggs work extremely well on rainbows, I have also had good results with flying ant, black gnat, and grasshopper patterns in sizes 10 to 12. At times, dredging spinners through the larger pools also produces fish.

Bear Creek brown trout tend to be very wary, usually offering anglers a greater challenge than the other three species in the drainage. They tend to hold near brush and in difficult-to-fish

places, and are usually more active early and late in the day. Small bait-fish-imitating lures and flies produce good results. Some of my favorites are Muddler Minnows, Sculpins, and Marabou streamers. Worms and salmon eggs also work well for brown trout.

Other than fishing gear, your equipment should include a backpack tent with a rainfly and a sleeping bag suitable for high elevations and the area's unpredictable temperatures. Freeze-dried foods, a backpack stove and fuel, a mess kit, first aid kit, mosquito repellent, and a compass are basics. A durable, lightweight poncho is good to have in case of unpredictable thundershowers.

When planning a trip, a topographic map of the Mt. Abbot Quadrangle is invaluable. For more information on obtaining this map, contact the Western Distribution Branch, U.S. Geological Survey, Dept. FS, P.O. Box 25286, Federal Center, Denver, Colo. 80225.

A wilderness permit is required of all persons venturing into the Sierra National Forest, where the Bear Creek Drainage is located. For more information, contact the Pineridge Ranger District, Dept. FS, P.O. Box 300, Shaver Lake, Calif. 93664, telephone (209) 841-3311.

A Sierra National Forest map is useful in locating campsites in the Bear Creek area. For more information, contact the Sierra National Forest Headquarters, Dept. FS, 1130 O St., Fresno, Calif. 93721, telephone (209) 487-5155.

The "Anglers Guide to the Lakes and Streams of the Bear Creek Drainage" is a very handy booklet, depicting the trails and fishable waters in the area. It is currently out of print. Contact the California Department of Fish and Game, Resources Bldg., Dept. FS, 1416 9th St., Sacramento, Calif. 95314, telephone (916) 445-3531, to find out where a copy may be obtainable.

For additional fishing information and information on limits and other regulations for the Bear Creek Drainage, contact the California Department of Fish and Game Regional Office, 1234 E. Shaw Ave., Fresno, Calif. 93710, telephone (209) 222-3761.

An annual nonresident fishing license costs \$37, and a nonresident ten-day license costs \$13.25. A resident annual fishing license costs \$13.25. Licenses are available from vendors in Fresno.



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■ The Department of Fish and Game strongly encourages anglers to make full use of the watershed, especially the more remote waters. Bear Creek trout fishing remains good from mid-June through September.

The Bear Creek Trail, which merges with the John Muir Trail near Kip Camp, offers anglers the best chance of completing a grand slam, since it follows the creek from Bear Diversion Dam to the headwaters 20 miles away. The impassable falls are reached by following the abandoned packer trail from where the main trail stepladders over Bear Ridge.

Due to the distances and elevations one must travel, hikers should be in good shape. Proper fitting and well-broken-in footwear is essential. A four-to-five-day trip allows plenty of time for acclimation.

For those not willing or able to enter the wilderness on foot, pack stations with sure-footed mountain horses and mules provide other alternatives. Located near trailheads on both slopes of the Sierra, spot or extended trips are available. In a spot trip, the packer takes people in, leaves them, and returns later to take them out. With an extended trip, the packer and stock remain with the party the entire time. Itineraries are separately and individually planned for each party. These packers cater to either first-time or seasoned riders.

From the west, contact John and Jenise Cunningham, Dept. FS, High Sierra Pack Station, P.O. Box 1166, Clovis, Calif. 93613, telephone, (209) 299-8297.

From the east, contact Brian Berner, Dept. FS, Pine Creek Saddle and Pack Train, P.O. Box 968, Bishop, Calif. 93514, telephone (619) 387-2797.

Don Vachini, a California-based outdoor writer, visits Bear Creek often.