



By Don Vachini

# HIGH SIERRA GOLD

As I crawled from the tent and grabbed for my flyrod, cool mountain air caressed my face. The sun was barely illuminating notched Four Gables Peak, and within minutes, I was following a nearby stream that unhurriedly cascaded to merge with the lake a hundred paces or so below. The sonata played by the gurgling, running waters helped me forget stiff, aching muscles incurred from the previous day's demanding backpack trip.

Set like a blue jewel in a white ring of granite and reflecting a replica of the serrated sentinel-like peaks above, the lake radiated beauty, with its glassy surface being disturbed only by an ever increasing number of concentric rings. Within moments of my first cast, the tan *Caddis* disappeared in a brilliant swirl. Golden sides flashed through the crystalline water like neon lights as the eight-inch trout danced vigorously, but in vain, against my 2-pound tippet. Wriggling in my hand prior to its release, I admired the handsome specimen, splashed in iridescent crimson, lemon yellow and orange hues. Small wonder that California's golden trout has been labeled the "crown jewel" of the salmonid family.

My son, Matt, guide Joe Faint and myself were fishing in California's rugged and majestic High Sierra, sampling 10,900-foot Elba Lake (one of the more remote waters in the French Canyon drainage) in our search for "gold." Unlike the bearded prospectors of another era, we had foregone the precious metal for another kind of treasure — that of the rare and mysterious *Salmo gairdneri*, or golden trout.

The origin of the golden trout, a product of what scientists refer to as variation by isolation, has always fascinated me. The last ice age created an isolated valley 2,000 feet above the main Kern Canyon, stranding a

population of Kern River rainbows. Here, and nowhere else in the world, these fish evolved through countless generations, changing in coloration to match the light colored volcanic sands paving the bottom of the tiny tributaries feeding the South Fork of the Kern. Their genetic integrity maintained by their isolation, these trout successfully dwelled for centuries in the broad meadows and meandering streams lying in the shadow of Mount Whitney.

Discovered by pioneers who first probed this southern Sierra plateau in the late 1800's, the brightly colored golden trout were soon introduced to nearby waters. Coffee pot-transplants to the Cottonwood Lakes produced a thriving population there by 1895. At the turn of the century, Department of Fish and Game personnel were using Cottonwood stocks for their initial plants to other waters, transporting the fish via horse and muletrain. By 1915, a 100-mile swath of previously barren waters tucked along the Sierra Nevada backbone contained healthy numbers of golden trout. Designated the state fish in 1947, this true native trout of the Golden State remains abundant between the Kern Plateau and Yosemite National Park at elevations of 9,000 to 12,000 feet. As part of the current DFG management plan, suitable waters in these lofty locales are dedicated to the perpetuation of this species, which to many, has become a symbol of the High Sierra.

Lying just north of the Kings Canyon National Park boundary, French Canyon and Humphrey's Basin are two areas where the goldens thrive. Situated entirely within the vast, half-million acre John Muir Wilderness (between Fresno and Bishop), the combination of 67 lakes and 25 miles of stream in the two areas collect seepage and melt from ice carved cirques and spires of

the Sierra-Nevada crest, ultimately feeding excess flow into the South Fork of the San Joaquin River. As part of the largest concentration of golden trout in the world, these waters are good places to get on intimate terms with this exotic species.

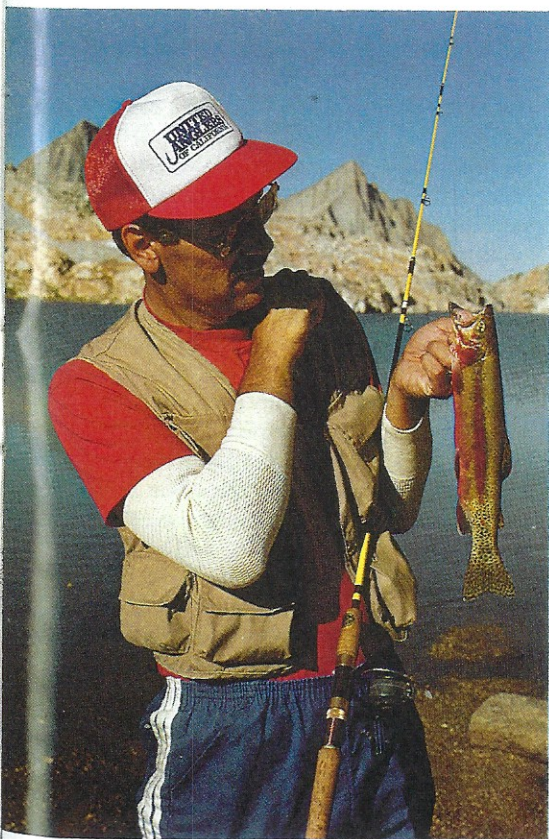
We arrived at Elba Lake near dusk, having climbed nearly a mile in elevation since leaving the trailhead. Joe Faint suggested this lake (one that is noted for numerous pan-sized goldens) because it offered a wooded campsite and would allow us to day-pack to 15 other nearby waters above the timberline.

Our backcountry fishing gear consisted of 4-piece, light action spinning and fly rods, reels loaded with either 2- to 4-pound monofilament or floating fly line with a sink tip, a minimal selection of flies and lures, and small, clear plastic bubbles, thus providing us with several angling options.

Over the next few days, we enjoyed great sport catching and releasing the flashy resident fish of Moon, Puppet, Paris, Alsace, Star, Steelhead, Rust, and French lakes. Each lake is a reasonable climb from Elba, and by contouring cross country, we could easily visit all of them in a single day and still return in time for camp chores and the evening rise.

Huddling by a cozy campfire, I recalled a previous golden trout venture into the adjacent Humphrey's Basin. A gigantic punch-bowl of sorts, collecting seepage from all sides that feeds Paiute Creek, its white polished granite, jumbled talus slopes and boulder-strewn fields show harsh evidence of prior glacial action. We bivouacked at an aesthetic wooded campsite near productive Golden Trout Lake, from which we explored a variety of higher lakes over a five-day period. Topo maps and a compass allowed us to find our way over finger ridges and

*California's only native trout are the reward that encourage anglers to pack-in to the lakes and streams at or above timberline in the John Muir wilderness.*



*California's beautiful native golden trout (inset) are found only at elevations above 9,000 feet in the High Sierra, where anglers must pack-in to reach the lakes and streams. Picturesque is this unworldly country of granite and clear, deep blue waters (above), which varies only in the draws and canyons where stands of pines and meadow grasses border cold-water streams (below). The largest goldens, like this two-pounder at the left, are usually taken from the lakes.*





*Stream fishing can often be the most productive for golden trout. The fish are usually small, but they are much easier to catch than are the larger goldens in the clear-water lakes.*

granite fields to sample Upper Golden Trout, Packsaddle, Paine, Goethe, Lower Goethe, Muriel, Forsaken, Desolation, Lower Desolation and Lost lakes.

Like the French Canyon Lakes, just over the Glacier Divide to the north, the Humphrey's Basin waters are all above 11,000 feet, sit among cirques or benches, and are dwarfed by jagged, horizon-dominating edifices. Sparse clumps of willow and mountain heather are the only noticeable forms of vegetation found around the desolate and oftentimes rugged shorelines.

While many of the lakes abounded with nimble 6- to 8-inch golden trout, others drove us to wits end with much larger fish that we could see but which would repeatedly ignore everything we threw at them. According to Dale Mitchell, a fisheries biologist with the Fresno DFG office, the size of a lake and its richness in natural food and spawning habitat will, for the most part, indicate the type of fishery to be expected. Waters with large numbers of 6-inch fish possess good spawning streams and have fair nutrient content. Goldens at Alscace, Elba, "L," Star, Golden Trout, Upper Golden Trout, Paine, Packsaddle and Lower Honeymoon lakes are plentiful, but slightly stunted and subject to plenty of competition for food. Keeping a few of

these fish for the skillet only helps to improve the quality of the fishery.

Steelhead, Moon, French, Rust, Lower Desolation and Forsaken lakes are basically fertile, but they encourage little spawning. Fair numbers of goldens approaching 11 inches in size are present, though they are more wary and thereby harder to catch.

While many of the deep, rockbound lakes in the higher extremes discourage spawning altogether, they do have adequate food and will grow golden trout up to 24 inches. According to the DFG, two- to five-pounders are fairly common in these locations because there is less competition for the available food and the lakes are less heavily fished. There is evidence that some 8- to 10-pounders also exist in these remote waters: The all-tackle world record golden weighed 11 pounds, and the California state record fish was 9 pounds 14 ounces.

Royce Two, Three and Four, Paris, Puppet, Desolation, Goethe, Lower Goethe, and Lost Lakes One and Two are all grim, foreboding bodies of water guarded by precipitous cliffs with tough or limited access. I have scrambled over some of the most God-forsaken arrays of loose talus, icy snowfields and remote ridges to test these waters over the years. While I have caught a few trout over 2 pounds, lost one golden estimated at

6 pounds, and observed countless others in the 3- to 6-pound range, these leviathans prove just as difficult to tempt as they are to reach.

In these high-country extremes, food forms are small and growing seasons short, so most trout do not attain large size. Mitchell considers 10- to 11-inch fish to be trophy size; 12-inchers will approach a pound and are noteworthy prizes. Since these bigger trout put on heft slowly and are up in years, they are much too valuable a resource to destroy. Practicing catch-and-release on these broad-chested beauties is a sound conservation practice.

Understanding the golden's food sources and habitat will help solve the problem of catching them. Since caddisflies, mosquitos, midges and scuds comprise the main menu, small artificial flies resembling these naturals are usually quite effective. Faint, who experiments with various caddis imitations, has identified olive, green, brown and tan shades of this insect in the two drainages. He personally favors size 10 to 14 *Elk Hair Caddis*, *Caddis Pupa* and *Caddis Larva*. *Hare's Ear Nymph*, *Bucktail Coachman*, *Quill Gordon* and *Mosquito* are other productive patterns.

In some of the higher lakes, goldens subsist almost entirely on scuds (tiny freshwater shrimp). *Brown Leech*, *Scud* and nymph patterns fished deep and retrieved slowly are quite successful in these places.

Spin fishermen seem to score well at times with small spinners or spoons. Even though no baitfish are present in these high elevation waters, brown or yellow *Rooster Tails*, brass *Panther Martins*, or gold plated *Mepps*, *Kastmasters*, *Wob-L-Rites*, *Z-Rays*, and *Phoebes* probably resemble bite-sized goldens to the larger fish, which often smack the hardware with authority.

Though basically unsophisticated and particularly vulnerable when gorging voraciously right after ice-out and again before winter, golden trout usually head for deep water and inexplicably sulk for long periods from late July through September. However, by checking the lake's structure, you can increase your chances of finding fish. The moving water around the inlets and outlets is usually a good bet, while dropoffs (indicated by darker water) and the deep side of the lake can also be productive. Moving to a higher vantage point with polaroid glasses is another approach to identifying promising fishing spots.

Due to extreme water clarity, it is sometimes advisable to approach the water on your hands and knees, keeping a low profile,

and then making a careful presentation with light lines or tippets to avoid spooking the wary trout. Knee pads can protect you from the harsh granite. Morning and evening shadows can encourage the goldens to be less cautious.

Changing offerings frequently and lengthy casts retrieved deep with sporadic motion will sometimes entice the pouting trout to strike. Many times I have observed fish following the "bait" great distances from the limpid depths, and then hit right near shore.

While angling for golden trout in the lakes can sometimes prove frustrating, the numerous stream systems which feed and drain French Canyon and Humphrey's Basin lakes often provide more reliable action. Whether winding through an open meadow or tumbling over boulders, these interconnecting arterioles provide prime trout habitat. When in this country, we always plan our route along one or more of these creeks. This way, in case we get skunked at a lake, we can still catch fish.

Cascading brooks in their headwater regions, French and Paiute Creeks course in and out of forest cover as they gain size from tributary flows before meeting at Hutchinson Meadows. Three summers ago, I camped along heavily forested French Creek deep in the canyon. At one point while carefully peeking around a streamside aspen, I spied several dark forms holding over the light sandy bottom. Dabbing my *Black Ant* above them and letting it drift brought six streaks all making a beeline for the moving tidbit, with only the swiftest 9-incher intercepting it. Autumnal hues flashed as the golden darted frantically through the emerald pool, translating with accuracy its Latin name — "pretty in the water."

Generally more vividly adorned than their lake counterparts, the golden trout found in the pools, pockets and undercut banks of these tiny rivulets always seem hungry, so matching the hatch isn't crucial. They prefer small profiles (size 10 to 14) and dark patterns which are suggestive of the damselflies, caddisflies and carpenter ants that reside at streamside. *Wooly Worm*, *Black Gnat*, *Flying Ant*, *Royal Coachman*, *Zug Bug* and *Pheasant Tail* flies are good for starters.

Whether prospecting a lake two miles up or dredging a "nugget" out of an alpine stream, I will continue to tap the ice-carved escarpment of the High Sierra for its sparkling riches. Like the 49ers of yesteryear, I too have discovered that, "... there's gold in them thar hills!"

## Prospector's Prospectus

The gateway to the French Canyon/Humphrey's Basin backcountry is at Bishop. Reached from Reno to the north or Los Angeles to the south via Highway 395, the community offers numerous motel accommodations, as well as paved access to the main trailheads.

From Bishop, follow Hwy. 168 west for 18 miles to North Lake. From there, a steady full day's backpack takes you over Paiute Pass and into the heart of Humphrey's Basin.

Ten miles north of Bishop, turn off Hwy. 395 at Pine Creek Road (Rovana) and follow it 9 miles to the trailhead. A steep day-and-a-half ascent will lead you over Pine Creek Pass and into French Canyon.

Golden country is never easy to reach. Due to distances and high elevations, hikers should be in good shape. Proper fitting and well broken-in footwear is essential. For those not willing or able to enter the wilderness on foot, pack stations with sure-footed mountain horses and mules are located at each trailhead, catering to both first-time or seasoned riders. For more information on these, contact:

(Humphrey's Basin)  
Walt Schober

*Schober's Pack Station*  
Bishop, CA 93514

(French Canyon)

Brian Berner

*Pine Creek Pack & Saddle*

P.O. Box 968

Bishop, CA 93514

(619) 387-2797

While a (free) permit is required for wilderness travel, necessary gear should also include a lightweight tent with a rain fly, poncho, backpack stove with fuel, and a high quality sleeping bag. Sunscreen, chapstick and sunglasses are also advisable.

Topographical maps of the Mt. Tom and Mt. Abbott quadrangles help plan cross country routes. For maps, permits and trail information contact:

*White Mountain Ranger District*

798 North Main Street

Bishop, CA 93514

(619) 873-4207

For backcountry fishing information contact:

Joe Faint

*Western Waters Flyfishing*

Route 2, Box 155-D

Bishop, CA 93514

(619) 387-2277

