

New Golden Trout Records

Biologists say big fish of this rare species await this year's anglers in California's High Sierra.

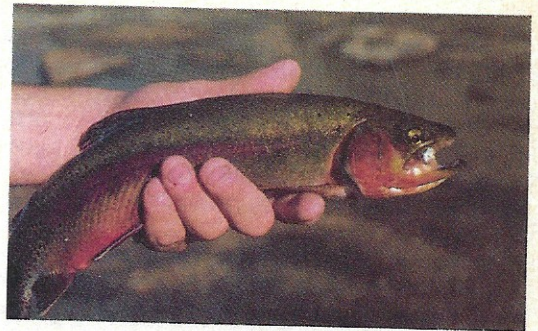
Swimming in a remote section of California's High Sierra are some outsized golden trout which state officials believe have the potential to establish a wealth of new line class, state and possibly even world standards. Resident of clear, sapphire bodies of water nestled in cup-like cirques and framed by jagged, horizon-dominating ridges, the golden is not only recognized as the state fish, but as a symbol of these lofty drainages.

Sources in the Department of Fish and Game hint that French Canyon, Humphrey's Basin and Bear Creek, a trio of backcountry basins, offer adventuresome anglers possibly the best chance at setting these new records. Totally committed to recreation, the area is located just north of Kings Canyon National Park boundary and lies entirely within the

500,000-acre John Muir Wilderness. The three locales, home to about 120 lakes ranging in size from a half-acre to 220 acres, undulate above and below timberline.

The waters originate as perpetual snow melt from ice carved cirques on weathered granitic peaks of the Sierra Nevada crest. A number of high altitude lakes collect this seepage and feed the upper arterioles of Bear, Paiute and French creeks. These streams eventually flow to the South Fork of the San Joaquin River.

Popular with hikers and backpackers, the magical appeal of this high country remains the golden trout. The golden's story is unique. This fish mysteriously evolved in no other water than the streams of California's upper Kern River Plateau.



According to Dale Mitchell, a fisheries biologist with the DFG, the most common theory is that this species evolved from native trout trapped in the upper Kern during the last ice age. They remained there until prospectors introduced them into nearby waters in 1876. "Coffee can transplants were made in Cottonwood Creek and goldens became established there. In 1891 about 100 goldens were transported upstream to Cottonwood Lakes, where they flourished," Mitchell says.

Originally barren, most of the lakes and streams of the French Canyon/Humphrey's Basin/Bear Creek drainages were planted by DFG wardens during the early 1900s with pure strain stocks from Cottonwood Lakes.

A true trout, the golden is closely related to the rainbow, from which it descended, and resembles that trout in habits and action. Bathed in iridescent arrays of crimson, yellow and flaming orange, the golden is accurately depicted by the translation of its scientific name, *Salmo aquabonito*, "pretty in the water."

Records show this kaleidoscopic trout exists only between 8500 and 12,000 feet altitude. At these altitudes food forms are small and growing seasons short, so specimens rarely attain large size. Colorful stream residents average between six and nine inches, with lake counterparts a tad larger as a rule. "Any golden approaching 11 or 12 inches is considered trophy size," Mitchell says.

Covering about a 60-mile swath, these headwater basins make up the largest concentration of golden trout waters in the world. A surprising number of these lakes along the serrated backbone of the Sierra crest hold trophy-size specimens. "A few hold goldens which could possibly rewrite various record books," Mitchell says.

Statistics show that a few waters in each drainage house fish between 15 and 22 inches. There have also been unverified reports of lunkers to eight to 10 pounds which continue to raise a few

Big Goldens Lurk in Isolated Waters

While pan-size goldens abound in many of the smaller lakes and stream systems of the drainages, the really big trophies are found only in the more isolated, harder to get to waters. Usually completely rockbound, these inhospitable lakes are sustained by air plants of fingerlings every one to three years, according to Bill Loudermilk, a state Department of Fish and Game fisheries biologist.

Loudermilk labeled the four separate forks that drain the vast Bear Creek backcountry as especially noteworthy for resident fish of up to 10 inches. Resting above these streams around the 11,000-foot mark, Rose and Teddy Bear lakes have goldens to 14 inches. Vee, Three-Island, Sandpiper and Italy lakes contain 17 to 20-inch lunkers.

Bisected by Paiute Creek, Humphrey's Basin is a broad, ice-carved bowl strewn with jumbled talus and boulders. Goethe and appropriately named Desolation Lake house good numbers of 17 to 22 inchers. "How-

ever, at 220 acres, Desolation is one lake where one can fish for days without ever seeing a fish," cautions Loudermilk.

No less than 10 French Canyon lakes have been tabbed most likely to produce the next state or all-tackle world record. All lie among rugged benches, glacial scours and precipitous cliffs with little or no vegetation. Elba, Moon and "L" lakes produce catches to 12 inches, while Merriam and French consistently put out 15 inchers. However, the list grows more impressive with both Paris and Puppet annually yielding a few fish between two and five pounds.

The Royce Lakes go one step further. Resting between 11,670 and 11,770 feet, Royce Lakes 3, 4 and 5 contain specimens to 24 inches. Loudermilk figures many in the six to seven-pound class exist there, with "... Royce 4 likely holding a few approaching 10 pounds."

He also says an unconfirmed eight pounder was reportedly caught.

Don Vachini

Predicted in '87

Story and photos by Don Vachini



High, isolated, glacier-scoured valleys (left) are homes for golden trout that swim in water as clear as air (below). Lakes high above timberline (bottom) must be reached by anglers after these rare fish.

eyebrows. "Goldens of this size will certainly challenge the state record (9 pounds, 14 ounces) and possibly even the existing world record (11 pounds)," adds Mitchell.

While goldens generally live in an environment which is less conducive to putting on heft, some lakes possess better conditions than others, according to Mitchell. "The ones with large specimens are usually big and deep, spawning is poor or non-existent, and there isn't much competition for the available food. Angling pressure is also very light," he says.

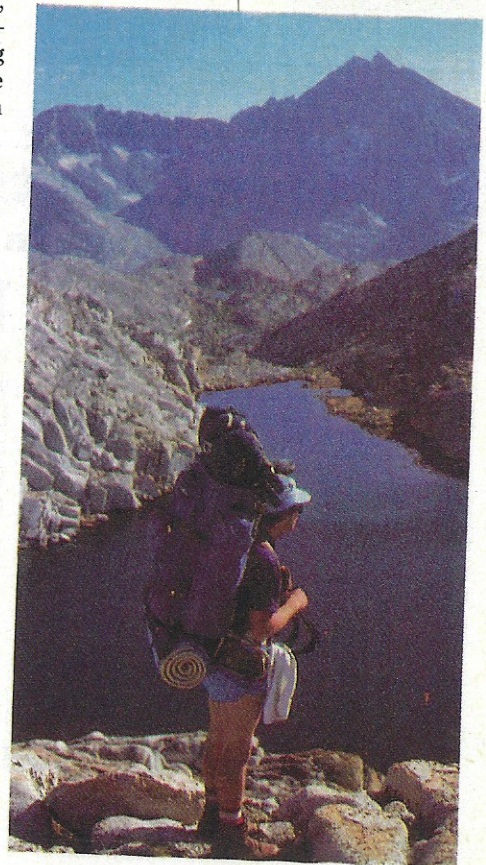
While the state and all-tackle world records have stood unchallenged for 3½ decades, a glimpse at the International Game Fish Association record book reveals that all its line class marks for goldens are surprisingly beatable. This organization, which maintains world records for freshwater and saltwater line classes plus fly fishing tippet classes, currently lists top weights for all golden trout classes between one and two pounds. The world record holder for two-pound line weighed 2 pounds, 2 ounces; the eight-pound line holder weighed one pound even, while the 12-pound class holder tipped the scales at 1 pound, 4 ounces. The four-pound line class, as well as all the fly rod classes, are currently open.

Several factors contribute to keep these records temporarily intact or

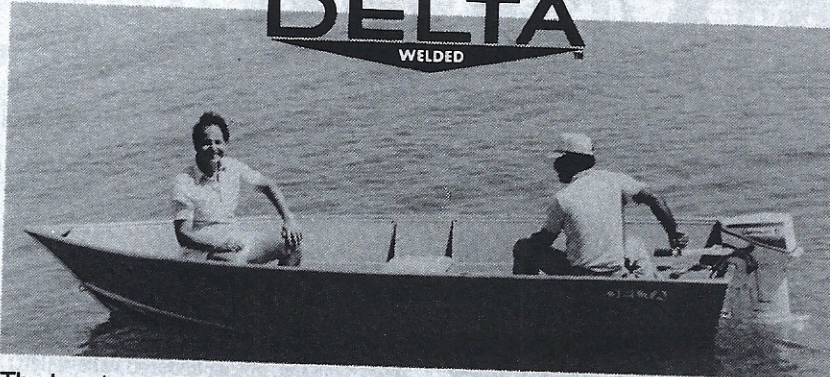
vacant, in the opinion of Joe Faint, a backcountry guide who operates where only sturdy hikers go. "Golden country is accessible only by foot or packhorse, with several side routes even inaccessible to stock," Faint says. "Depending on the previous winter's snowpack, the backcountry is usually only open from late June through September."

The IGFA requires all catches be witnessed, weighed on a certified scale, photographed and notorized. While certified scales in these remote areas are rare, IGFA officials recommend taking a variety of photos illustrating exact measurements (length and girth), close-ups for identification, as well as shots including anglers, fish and tackle. Photos of a small weighing scale, the entire fish and its weight showing, help to verify the catch. To qualify for IGFA records fish must weigh a minimum of one pound.

The clear streams and rivulets above and below many of the lakes provide excellent sport. An abundance of feisty six to nine inchers exist in the turquoise pools and riffles which occur between bedrock slicks or chutes. Because the high country trout found in these cascading waters always seem hungry, matching the hatch isn't really essential, according to Faint. Carpenter ants, flying ants, mosquitos and damselflies are staples of the stream goldens' diet. So Faint suggests Royal Coachman, Woolly



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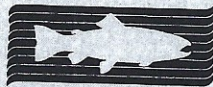
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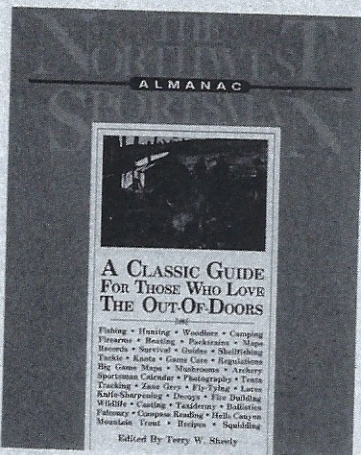
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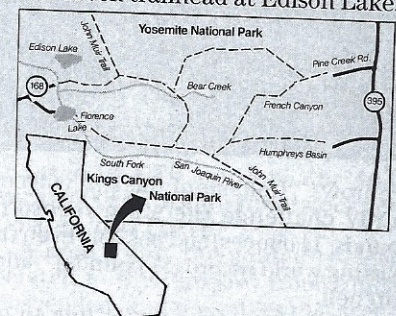
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Trout in lakes feed heavily on scuds, shrimp, leeches and small midges. In addition to the wet patterns, dry standbys such as Adams, Humpy, Ginger Quill and Renegade are effective. "The smaller trout basically prefer tiny, dark, wet patterns, with black the most popular," says Faint.

While the gaudy pan-sizers are cooperative, Faint concedes that trying for

Golden Trout Trip Facts

HOW TO GET THERE: From Los Angeles to the south or Reno to the north, Highway 395 services Bishop, where roads lead to the Muir wilderness' eastern gateway. Turn off 395 at Pine Creek Road (Rovana) and follow it nine miles to the Pine Creek trailhead; or follow Highway 168 out of Bishop 15 miles to the Paiute Pass trailhead. For a west side entrance, follow 168 from Fresno 93 miles to the Bear Creek trailhead at Edison Lake.



WHERE TO STAY: Numerous motels are available in Bishop and nearby Mammoth, while on the west slope limited lodging is available at Huntington Lake and Mono Hot Springs. Abundant forest service campgrounds are located near both east and west trailheads.

BEST SEASON: The John Muir backcountry is usually accessible only from June through September. Weather permitting, early summer and late fall are prime times.

APPROXIMATE COST: A resident fishing license costs \$18.50, while non-residents may opt for either an annual (\$45) or special 10-day (\$19.50) license.

WHO TO CONTACT: For current trail information, contact the Pine Creek Pack and Saddle Trains; Box 968; Bishop, CA 93514. For maps and wilderness permits, notify the White Mountain Ranger District; 798 North Main Street; Bishop, CA 93514. For pertinent angling updates, contact Joe Faint; Western Waters Flyfishing; Route 2, Box 155-D; Bishop, CA 93514.

granddaddy goldens can be one of angling's greatest frustrations. He mentions that it is not unusual to spot trophy fish finning in the limpid depths of an alpine gem, only to discover they are indifferent to everything thrown their way. While he admits there is no best way to fish for these large specimens, he does part with a few tips:

"The inlet and outlet areas are good choices, offering fish both food and oxygen. Early or late in the day seem to be the best times as they lose some of their caution in the shadows common to these periods. Also, thunderstorms or overcast skies will sometimes spur them to action."

Besides keeping a low profile, Faint recommends lengthy casts as another possible solution, letting the fish follow for long distances. "Sometimes they'll hit right near shore as it appears the 'bait' is getting away," he says.

While lures worked deep over ledges and shelves are more effective for this tactic, he advises that a fly/bubble set up can also achieve good distances. Whether flies or lures are used, Faint reveals that changing offerings frequently is a successful ploy to entice these sulking giants. He personally experiments with tiny, weighed nymphs in light shades in an attempt to match what the lunkers are currently feeding on, with caddis imitations his favorite.

Tiny gold-colored spoons or spinners worked deep have produced well for Faint's clients. Mepp's, Rooster Tail, Panther Martins and Needlefish draw special praise from him.

While a light action spinning rod and reel filled with four or six-pound line are more than sporting for hardware tossers, Faint suggests fly anglers use a floating fly line with a sink tip to get their offerings deep. A strike indicator is sometimes a helpful visual aid.

According to Faint, these heavy-weights are vulnerable twice a year, when they go on feeding frenzies in early spring and again in late fall.

"Right after ice-out is best. However, most of the high country is inaccessible at these times due to snow, and the weather is very unpredictable," he cautions. "Late September is an ideal time when they gorge prior to winter."

Faint is convinced that it is just a matter of time before one or more of these backcountry jewels produces a world record of some sort. Whether one wants to keep a few for the pan, release the catch or try for a global standard, there is no doubt that this myriad of High Sierra waters tucked near the clouds offers some of the finest angling for one of the most beautiful trout species in the world.

Author Don Vachini writes fishing articles from his home at Petaluma, California.

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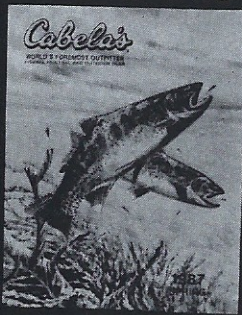
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