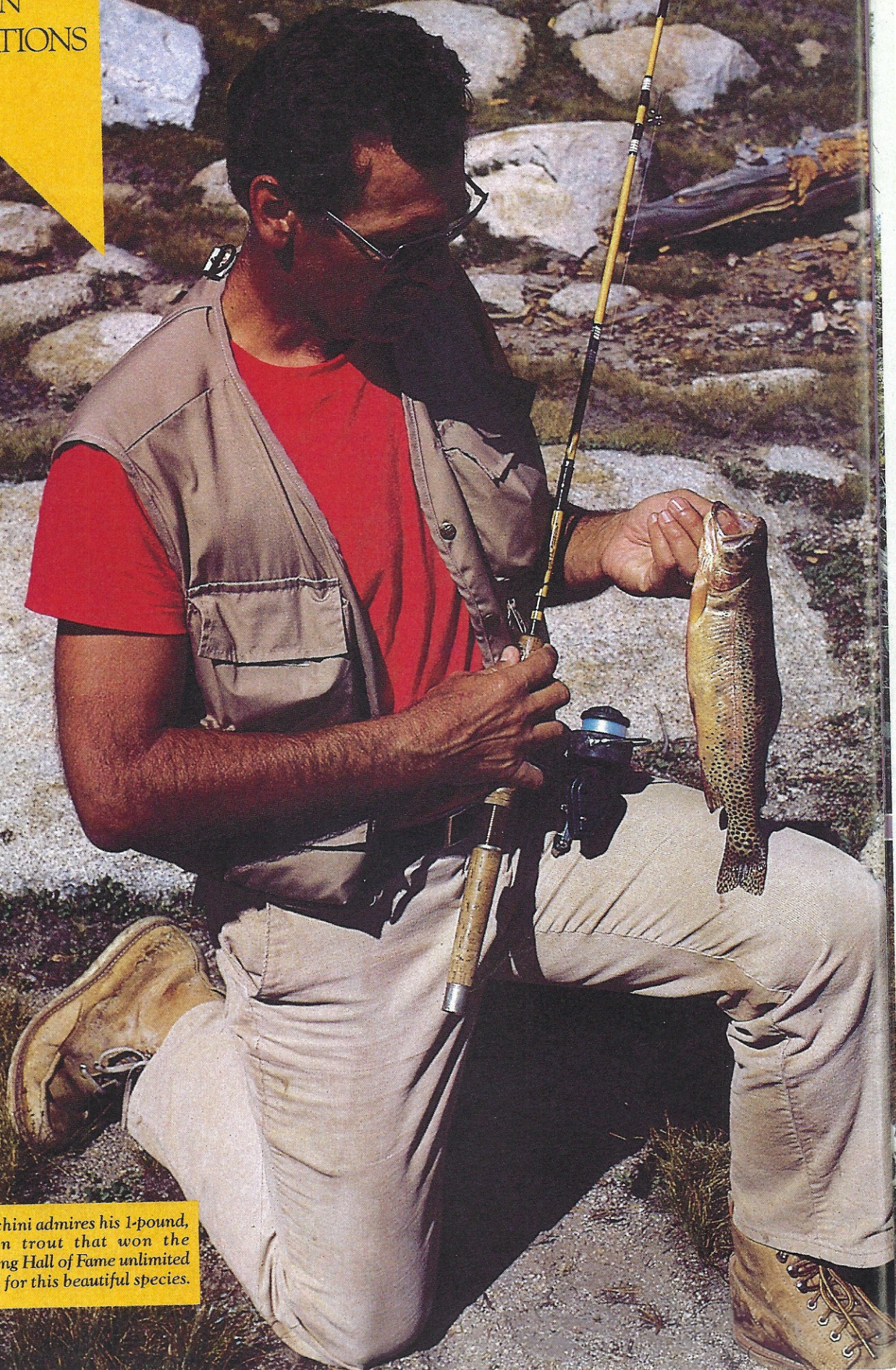


GREAT  
WESTERN  
VACATIONS



Author Don Vachini admires his 1-pound, 8-ounce golden trout that won the Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame unlimited line class record for this beautiful species.





Lakes holding record-size goldens lie far back in the Sierra wilds. Anglers can ride in by horseback (left) to enjoy the scenic backcountry. This 1-pound, 2-ounce golden (below) tipped the IGFA's 12-pound flyfishing tippet mark for a new record.



A product of what scientists call variation by isolation, the most colorful member of the trout family — the golden trout — generally does not grow to large proportions. Most anglers consider 12-inchers to be trophy size, and goldens over a pound are often real bragging materials.

Imagine my excitement, then, as I peered over a rocky ledge and into the clear outlet

# IN SEARCH OF RECORD GOLDENS

*Three high, glacier-scarred basins deep in California's Sierra Nevada yield record-breaking trout for anglers hardy enough to reach them.*

ARTICLE AND PHOTOS BY DON VACHINI

of Royce Lake No. 4, in California's eastern Sierra Nevada, and saw three golden trout estimated in the four- to five-pound class. These big goldens were finning languidly in the shallows, about 20 feet away.

To reach the Royce Lakes, George DiRuscio, son Jason and I had just completed a grueling, two-day backpack trip,  
*(Continued on page 69)*



# GOLDEN TROUT

(Continued from page 51)

culminated by an hour-long trek across the most God-forsaken array of talus jumbles, massive boulders and icy snowfields. Resting in a foreboding, wind-blown scour well above timberline, and ranging in size from eight to 73 acres, these five connected waters tucked in the upper extremes of California's 12,000 foot high French Canyon are home to world-class goldens.

French Canyon, Bear Creek and Humphrey's Basin, a trio of neighboring drainages dedicated to the perpetuation of California's official state trout, cover about a 60-mile swath north of Kings Canyon National Park. Home to more than 120 lakes, the backcountry basins lie entirely within the John Muir Wilderness Area, between Fresno and Bishop. According to Dale Mitchell, a fisheries biologist with the California Department of Fish and Game, the upper reaches of these lofty watersheds, recognized as the largest concentration of golden trout waters in the world, are good places to get on intimate terms with the larger specimens of this exotic species.

Big Bear, Black Bear, Paris, Puppet, French, Merriam and the Royce Lakes, though not good golden trout spawning sites, do have enough nutrients to grow and house exceptionally large goldens up to 24 inches.

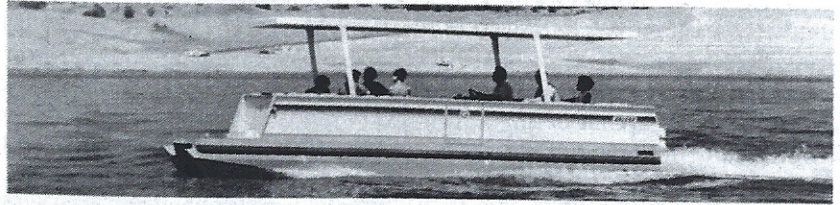
"Two- to five-pounders are common in these isolated waters because there's less competition for the available food and there's little or no angling pressure," says Mitchell. "The upper Royce Lakes reportedly have some really big specimens."

For several years I researched golden trout records in both the International Game Fish Association and the National Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame, two non-profit organizations which sanction all-tackle, line and tippet-class world records. A look at their record listings revealed top line class standards ranging between one and three pounds, with all fly rod categories vacant as of January 1987.

Enlisting the help of guide Joe Faint, Brian and Dee Berner of the Pine Creek Pack Station and Mitchell, we planned a specific, eight-day cross-country route through the forlorn upper ridgelines of both French Canyon and Bear Creek. Armed with a wide assortment of tippets and monofilament lines, we intended to sample several pristine waters supposedly holding granddaddy goldens capable of establishing new marks.

We arrived at the Royce Lakes in mid-June to find them in various stages of ice-

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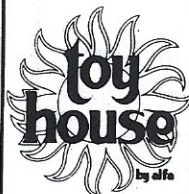
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# GOLDEN TROUT

out. The Royce No. 2 outlet provided the best initial choice as a dozen skittish 10- to 15-inchers finned in the narrow channel. However, its wide open, unprotected shoreline left but one avenue of approach.

With the early morning sun aglow on the eastern escarpment, I meticulously crawled over several large, sharp granite slabs to within 15 feet of the cruising fish. Lying flat on my back, I was able to execute casts and impart action to the nymph despite my contorted position.

A painful half-hour session produced back pains plus a brace of well earned 13-inchers. One, caught on a three-pound tippet, weighed 1 pound, 2 ounces and filled the IGFA four-pound tippet vacancy. The other, taken on six-pound leader, tip-

ped my certified Chatillon scale at one pound even!

The following morning, I explored with a spinning rod the deep, rocky side of Royce No. 2. Plying a dropoff near the outlet, I watched a thick 14-incher abruptly veer from a school of a half-dozen goldens, follow and then intercept my Wob-L-Rite spoon from behind a submerged shoreline boulder. The fish, weighed in at 1 pound, 8 ounces, set the previously vacant unlimited line class in the HOF record book. The afternoon was unsuccessfully spent trying to entice the super-big inhabitants of Royce No. 4.

The next day, we proceeded past frozen Royce No. 5, dragged our feet up the sketchy trail and over the inhospitable ridge into the Bear Creek lakes, finally reaching our destination at Black Bear,

White Bear, Big Bear and V lakes. All of these waters sit well above 11,000 feet among cirques or benches, possess rugged shorelines and are dwarfed by horizon-dominating edifices.

Big Bear is not especially noted for its huge goldens as are the Royce lakes, but my biggest fish of the trip nevertheless came from this lake. A small waterfall cascades into the 38-acre site, forming a deep and narrow inlet pool protected on three sides by sheer granite. Following a hands-and-knees stalk, I bounced an ultra-light Mepps spinner off a rock and retrieved it through the shadowed hole.

A jolting take was followed by frantic figure 8s as the pool seemed too small for what was thrashing about in it. Splashed in iridescent crimsons, yellows and flaming oranges, the gorgeous 15-inch, hook-jawed beauty weighed 1 pound, 10 ounces, topping the old HOF eight-pound line class record by five ounces! A size 12 caddis nymph carefully drifted in this same pool during another trip in late August netted a 1-pound, 2-ounce golden which filled the vacant IGFA 12-pound tippet class.

Though we had to be satisfied with just brief glimpses of a few monsters guesstimated between two and six pounds, and we released several just under the one-pound record minimum, the two trips did produce five world marks.

Having pursued California's colorful state fish for the past 15 seasons, I have found that goldens are vulnerable when feeding heavily right after ice-out and again in late fall, yet the big goldens are generally quite selective and extremely wary the rest of the year, spending much of the daylight hours sulking in the sanctuary of deep water.

However, by studying each lake's features, you can increase your odds of finding fish. Scouting from a higher vantage point and using polarized glasses not only help locate "fishy" structure, but the fish as well. Dropoffs, revealed by darker water, and the steep, rocky sides of a lake, are promising spots to try, since big goldens like to ambush their prey from behind deep, submerged boulders or underwater shelves.

The most productive areas for me are the inlets and outlets. Seeking prime sources of food and oxygen, goldens commonly hold or cruise these areas, often exposing their dorsal fins in the shallow, moving water. You have to use stealth to avoid spooking goldens. Keeping well back from the shoreline, using rocks as cover, crawling on hands and knees and careful presentations with long leaders all help shift the odds toward the angler. Knee

## GOLDEN TROUT TRIP FACTS

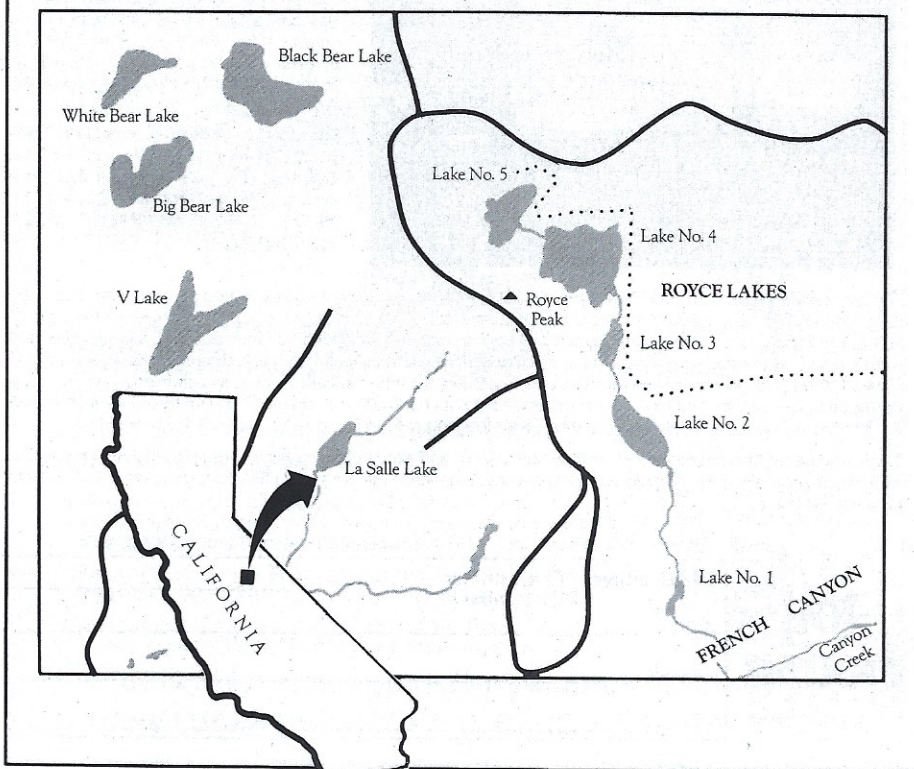
**HOW TO GET THERE:** The gateway to the French Canyon backcountry is at Bishop. Ten miles north of Bishop, turn off Highway 395 at Pine Creek Road (Rovana) and follow it nine miles to the trailhead.

**WHERE TO STAY:** Numerous motels are available in Bishop and nearby Mammoth. Forest Service campgrounds are plentiful in the area.

**BEST SEASON:** Depending on the previous winter's snowpack, the upper Royce and Bear lakes are usually accessible only from early July through September. Weather permitting, as near ice-out as possible is best.

**APPROXIMATE COST:** A resident fishing license costs \$19.00, while non-residents may opt for an annual (\$50.50) license.

**WHO TO CONTACT:** For maps and free wilderness permits, contact the White Mountain Ranger District; 798 N. Main St., Bishop, CA 93514; (619) 873-4207. For current trail information, contact Brian and Dee Berner, Pine Creek Pack Trains, P.O. Box 968, Bishop CA 93514; (619) 387-2797. For angling information on the Royce lakes, contact Joe Faint, Western Waters Flyfishing, Route 2, Box 155-D, Bishop, CA 93514; (619) 387-2277.





pads are helpful for protection against the harsh granite.

Since caddis flies, mosquitoes, midges and freshwater shrimp comprise the golden's main menu, small artificials resembling these naturals are usually effective. Green, olive, brown and tan shades of caddis are plentiful in these drainages, and imitations of these have worked extremely well for me. In fact, all three of my tippet-class world records were taken on small, tan caddis nymphs, twitched slowly near the bottom.

The weightier goldens tend to hit more readily on subsurface imitations. While

## ONLY DETERMINED ANGLERS NEED APPLY

From the Pine Creek trailhead, a steep two-day ascent will lead one over Pine Creek Pass and to the Royce lakes. Due to distances and high elevations, hikers should not only be in good shape but have proper fitting, well broken-in footwear.

For those unwilling or unable to enter the backcountry on foot, Brian and Dee Berner's pack station provides mountain horses and mules, catering to both first-time or seasoned riders. They offer a wide range of services including spot trips and backpacker expresses. However, the upper Bear lakes and Royce Lakes No. 2, 3, 4, and 5 are impassible to stock and must be reached on foot.

Necessary gear should include a lightweight tent with a rainfly capable of withstanding heavy winds common to the locale, a poncho, a high quality sleeping bag, and a backpack stove with fuel. Sunscreen, chapstick, cap and sunglasses are also advisable. At these elevations, temperatures will range from the 80s at midday to below freezing at night. Proper clothing for both extremes is necessary.

Backcountry trophy fishing gear should include a light-action spin or fly rod along with a wide assortment of tiny lures and flies. A combination four-piece spin/fly rod, plus small, clear plastic bubbles, allows for several angling options. A long-handled net is a necessity for landing big fish over the shoreline boulders. In addition to selected line or tippets, record seekers should carry a small certified scale to weigh the catch and a reliable camera to verify the weight on film.

Don Vachini



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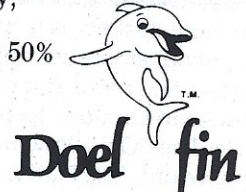
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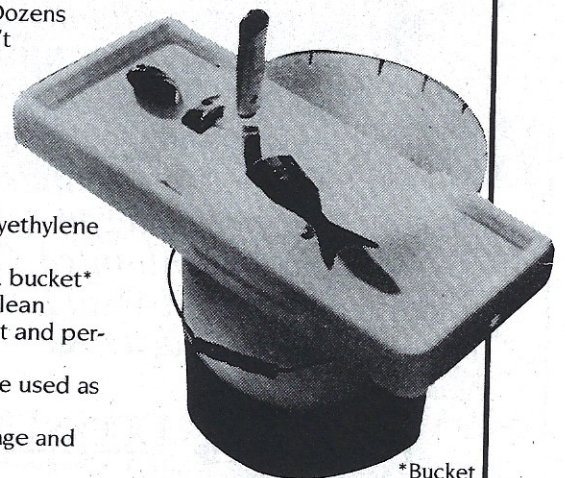


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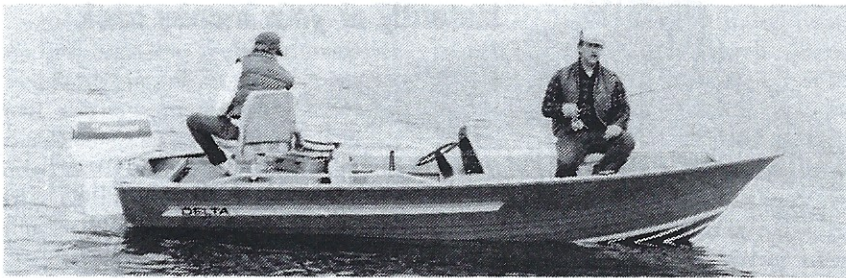
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## GOLDEN TROUT

sizes 10 to 14 Elk Hair Caddis, Caddis Pupa, Hares Ear Nymph, and Bucktail Coachman have all proven their worth, a floating fly line with a sinking tip is needed to get them deep.

In some of the higher lakes, goldens subsist almost entirely on tiny scuds. Noted for their high caloric value, these crustaceans are understandably a favorite of the broad-chested fish. Weighted Brown Leech, Scud and various dark-bodied nymph patterns worked ever so slowly with a sink-and-draw retrieve can be successful.

Spin fishermen using small spoons or spinners seem to find success at times. Even though no baitfish are present in these high elevation waters, gold plated Mepps, Kastmasters, Wob-L-Rites and Phobes, brass Panther Martin and brown and yellow Rooster Tails probably resemble bite-sized morsels to the larger fish.

When using hardware, I favor lengthy casts, letting the lure sink deep and then retrieving with an erratic, herky-jerky motion to entice strikes. Many times while using this technique I have witnessed fish following the lure for great distances and hitting near shore.

Possibly striking out of territorial irritation as much as hunger, oversized goldens will inexplicably go on brief frenzies, smashing imitations with authority after sulking for long periods. Frequently changing offerings and locations coupled with persistence often provides a payoff combination.

Unlike the smaller lakes and headwater streams where the quarry is measured in inches, the golden trout probably reaches its pinnacle as a game fish in these desolate, ice-carved punchbowls two miles up. Guarded by precipitous cliffs and limited access, these trout certainly have the potential to eclipse even more global standards in the near future. **WO**

Outdoor writer Don Vachini gets away from his base in suburban Petaluma, California, as often as possible to fish the high country.



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