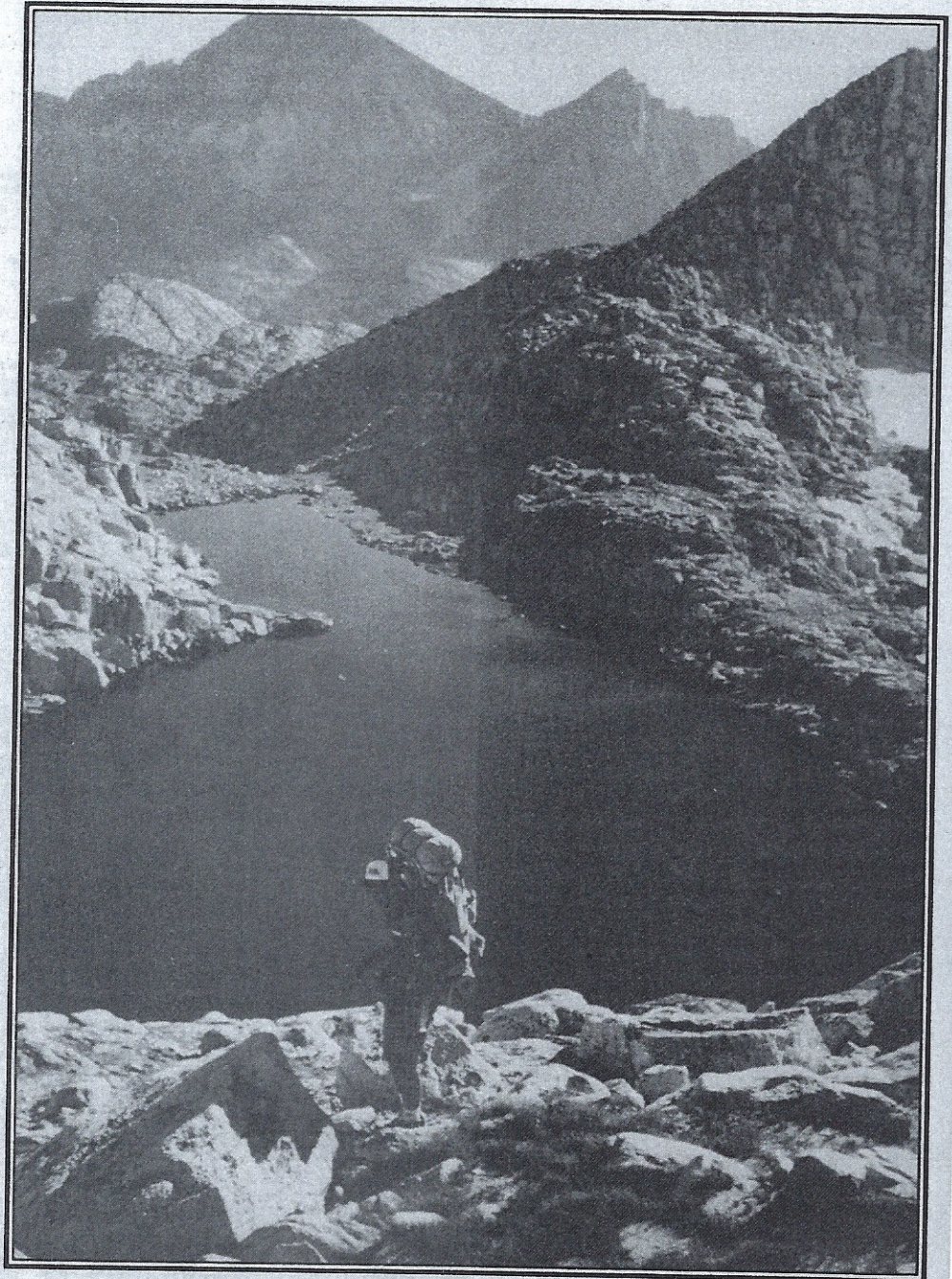


Sierra's Guarded Gold



After gaining about a mile in elevation, we overlook White Bear Lake.

Don Vachini

Crossing a desolate wind-swept opening between two snowcapped peaks, my partner and I glimpsed a pair of sapphire bodies of water sitting in tandem. Nestled in cup-like cirques, they were framed by jagged Royce Peak to the east. From our 12,000 foot perch near the clouds, we could envision hefty trout finning in their icy depths and our hearts raced with anticipation.

My partner, George DiRuscio, and I were

nearing the end of our second day of a planned 7-day, 53-mile angling/backpack trip designed to take us through prime golden trout terrain. Having spent virtually all our time just reaching these waters, we were justifiably fatigued. In the fading light we sought out a suitable site to pitch our tent as a good night's rest was in order.

We were in California's rugged and majestic High Sierra momentarily overlooking Black and White Bear lakes, two of the

most remote waters in the Bear Creek drainage. Our plans called for a loop through not only this, but neighboring French Canyon and Humphreys Basin drainages in our quest to prospect as much of the "gold country" as possible over a week's time.

The area is located just north of the Kings Canyon National Park boundary and lies entirely within the 500,000 acre John Muir Wilderness. With well over 120 lakes

ranging in size from one-half to 125 acres, the three backcountry basins originate as perpetual snow and ice melt from ice-carved granitic cirques and weathered peaks of the Sierra Nevada Crest.

Collecting this seepage, Bear Creek, Piute Creek and tributary French Creek all flow into the South Fork of the San Joaquin River.

The story of the golden trout is unique. This fish mysteriously evolved in no other water than the streams of California's upper Kern River Plateau. Most common theory is that this species evolved from native trout trapped in the upper Kern during the last ice age. They remained here until prospecting pioneers introduced them into nearby waters in 1876. Coffeepot transplants were made in Cottonwood Creek and became established there. In 1891 about 100 goldens were transported upstream to Cottonwood Lakes where they flourished.

Originally barren, most of the lakes in the three basins we were visiting were stocked by Department of Fish and Game (DFG) wardens during the early 1900s with pure strain stocks from the Cottonwood Lakes. This feat was accomplished via muletrain. By 1915, most of these waters contained robust, self-sustaining populations.

Though this species is scattered over a 100 mile swath of the High Sierra, these three high elevation basins, all of which are dedicated to the perpetuation of the golden, currently make up the largest concentration of golden trout waters in the world.

A true trout, the golden is closely related to the rainbow from which it descended and closely resembles in habits and actions. As the state fish, it flourishes between elevations of 8,500 to 12,000 feet. At these elevations, food forms are small and growing seasons short so specimens rarely reach

range in a few of the more secluded waters. "Goldens this size will certainly challenge the state record (9 lbs. 14 oz.) and possibly even the existing world record (11 lbs.)," added Mitchell.

Obviously we planned our route to include a selection of these waters.

Our first day was spent ascending the steep and arduous maintained trail from the Pine Creek Pack and Saddle Train, past the Pine Lakes to the meadow above Honeymoon Lake—a distance of five miles. This pretty forest-ringed lake provides a good jumping off point for Italy Pass. Beyond here the trail is poor and pack stock is not permitted.

Near the end of our second day we had left timberline far behind, crossed inhospitable Granite Park, struggled up a desolate, duck-marked switchback and crested 12,700 Italy Pass—a gain of roughly 5,000 feet over 9 miles! Of the three lofty passes we were to cross on this journey, this was by far the most taxing, not only in terms of incline but of locating its whereabouts as well.

Our chests heaved and our lungs seared as we admired the panoramic view of stark granite spires surrounding us. Resting in the prominence of Mts. Hilgard, Julius Caesar and the Bear Creek Spire I recalled a few years previous to when my sons and I were exploring the lakes a few miles below this pass. After being shut-out at expansive 125-acre Lake Italy, we climbed up the outlet of Teddy Bear Lake. Peering carefully over a protected ledge we could hardly believe our eyes as three behemoths were languishing in the riffles just below the mouth. While the largest had to push six pounds the other two weren't too far behind!

We agonized helplessly as they moved to inspect, and subsequently ignore, the

more isolated lakes in the Bear Creek system. Black, White, Big and Little Bear lakes all sit well above 11,000 feet, have no trail systems and are lightly fished. Our backcountry fishing gear consisted simply of four-piece, light action spin and fly rods, reels loaded with either 2-4 lb. monofilament or floating fly line and a small selection of lures and tiny dark-bodied flies. We also carried small, clear plastic bubbles, giving us several angling options.

Despite stiff, aching muscles, I crawled out of the tent around 6:30 a.m. to a clear blue sky. Though the sun was touching most of the surrounding peaks, the early morning chill was still very evident. Spinning rod in hand, I ambled toward the small, turfy meadowed inlet of 11 acre Big Bear Lake (11,450 ft. elev.) Almost completely rockbound, its surrounding white granite fields were dotted with tiny patches of sparse bunchgrass and colorful wildflowers. The inlet creek cascades over a small cliff, forming a 10 foot wide pool next to a rocky saddle. This area was still enclaved in shadow and I noticed a few dimpling rises.

Crawling on hands and knees to avoid detection, I began casting over the rings. My tiny spinner stopped suddenly and I set the hook expecting a nimble six incher. Instead my rod arced under a heavy weight. A large dorsal fin broke the surface and the pool now seemed much too confining and shallow for what was performing frantic figure eights. The bruiser twice took 2 lb. line against the drag as it burst for the main lake—a shaft of carmine each time it caught the sun's rays.

Slowly worked into the shallows, it repeatedly exhibited a full spectrum of cadmium hues while thrashing and darting in the crystalline water. Reverently cradling it in both hands, my heart continued to

A trek through the largest concentration of golden trout waters in the world nearly leads to an IGFA record!

large size. Stream residents average between 6 to 9 inches with lake counterparts a tad larger as a rule. "Any golden over 12 inches is considered a real trophy," said Dale Mitchell, a fisheries biologist with the DFG of office in Fresno.

To me, however, their gaudy coloration coupled with limited range and accessibility make them a prized catch no matter what size.

Talking to Mitchell during our pre-trip planning, we discovered that a few lakes in each of the three drainages house fish up to 18-20 inches or more. Adding incentive was the report that a fisheries biologist recently observed fish appearing to be in the 8-10 lb.

assortment of metals and feathers we carefully presented to them. Fully realizing that goldens this size are very rare, we dejectedly watched three fish of a lifetime nonchalantly disappear into the depths.

We could have followed the Lake Italy trail three miles down to these lonely lakes but instead opted to explore the bleak waters over the eastern ridge. Selecting a high route, we scrambled over the most God-forsaken array of talus, large boulders and snow fields (unofficially known as Black Bear Trail) to arrive at our destination just before dark.

We planned to start our angling expedition the following morning on some of the

pound. Stretching 14½ in. from hooked jaw to spotted tail, it weighed in at 2 lbs., one oz. on my pocket De-Liar—a personal best!

For the next day and a half we played catch and release with goldens to nine inches as we fished our way down the Bear Creek canyons. The outstanding network of stream-connected lakes such as Bear Paw, Little Bear, Seven Gables, Lou Beverly and Sandpiper lakes were characterized by good spawning and fertility, consequently providing good sport.

True to reports, we observed large goldens in Vee and Three Island lakes but couldn't interest them. Vee sits in the

shadow of Seven Gables Peak, a horizon-dominating edifice made even more stately as it catches the last blush of the evening sun.

It was with high spirits that we joined the 200 mile long John Muir Trail at the confluence of the three Bear Creek forks. This trail is one of the more developed sections of the Pacific Crest Trail which runs from Mexico to Canada. We spent a full day following it 14 miles over 10,875 foot Selden Pass, past Heart and Sally Keyes lakes and up the heavily forested San Joaquin canyon to our campsite at the mouth of Piute Creek. The path forks here with the Muir Trail taking travelers into Kings Canyon National Park while the Piute Trail ultimately leads over Pine Creek Pass.

The deep, azure pools above our campsite not only soothed our tired, burning feet but temporarily whet our angling appetites with four nice rainbow/golden hybrids.

Next day we dragged our feet on the long, sweltering climb up Piute Canyon as the previous day's jaunt took its toll. Proceeding past Hutchinson Meadows, we took a fork in the trail that follows Piute Creek to Golden Trout Lake, which lies in the middle of open Humphreys Basin. At 10,775 ft. elev., rockbound Golden Trout Lake sits right at timberline and we chose an aesthetic wooded campsite next to its outlet, which flows over glacier-polished granite. This site also provides a good base camp from which to sample 30-plus other trout lakes in the area.

Rich in nutrients, the nearby lakes and streams support a healthy, self-sustaining population of pan-sizers. Nearby Packsaddle Lake also provided us a spectacular setting among the forbidding cliffs of Mt. Humphrey and the Glacier Divide. Two-hundred and twenty acre Big Desolation Lake (11,381 ft. elev.) is the most famous basin water, yielding occasional goldens to 20 in. However, it is one of those grim, forsaken places where one can fish for a week without so much as seeing a trout.

At 11,540 ft. elev., Goethe, which is over 100 feet deep, we located a school of seven trophies cruising along the rocky shoreline but they weren't buying what we were selling. Past frustrations like this have shown that trying to catch big goldens can be one of angling's greatest frustrations. It is not unusual to spot large fish finning slowly in the limpid depths of an alpine gem only to discover they are indifferent to everything tossed their way. According to Brian Berner, who operates the Pine Creek Pack and Saddle Train, this behavior may continue for hours or even days. "All of a sudden they'll come to life and start hitting everything," he said. "However," he cautioned, "this mood may only last a few minutes."

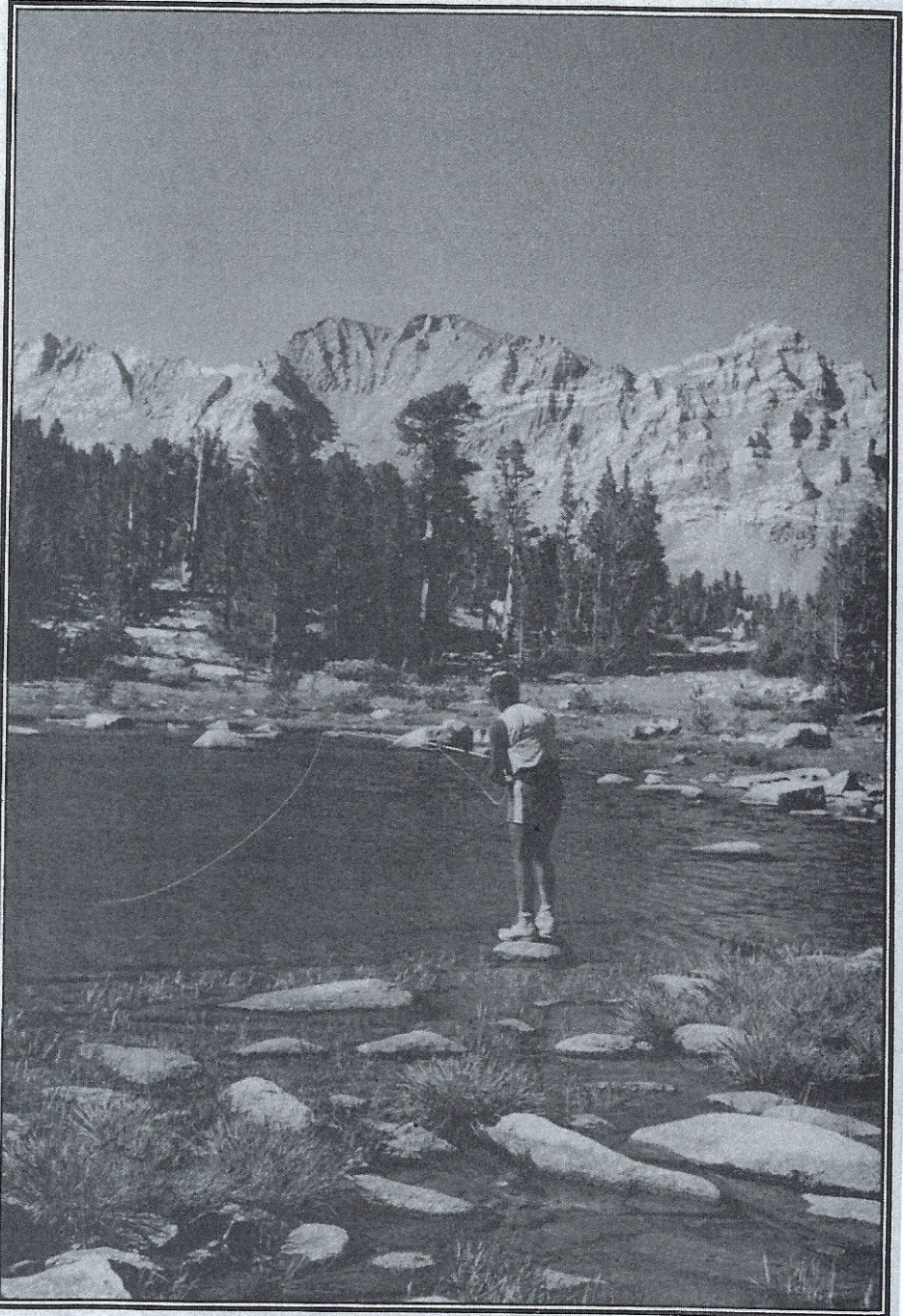
Berner suggests long casts as a possible solution, letting the fish follow an offering for a good distance. "Sometimes they'll hit

right near shore as it appears the 'bait' is getting away," he confided.

While fly/bubble setups achieve great distances, lures worked deep over ledges or shelves are more effective for this tactic.

Backtracking down Piute Canyon, we cut cross-country along a faint trail blazed centuries ago by Piute Indians to intercept tiny

A mini-falls gurgled into a small emerald pool which swirled in a circular direction. My size 14 Black Ant caught the drift perfectly and I twitched it gently on the sandy bottom. Moments after a dark shaft shot toward it, my rod bowed deceptively and a flashy *Salmo aquabonita* tore across the hole.



The inlets and outlets of high country lakes are good places to seek action.

French Creek. This six-mile long stream heads around 11,600 ft. elev. at the French Lakes and drains the entire French Canyon. A high montane, cascading brook, its open turf-lined banks course in and out of forest cover before meeting Piute Creek just above Hutchinson Meadows. We pitched our tent among a small stand of pines about two miles up the valley, and I headed creekward.

The battle didn't last long and I quickly derricked a wriggling eight incher onto the bank. Holding it in my hand to remove the barbless hook, its still wet sides glistened in the midafternoon sun, which accentuated the blending of flaming reds and orange. It was obvious to me why its Latin name accurately translates to "pretty in the water." Seven more similar residents were released before tending to camp chores.

Despite the slow fishing encountered in many of the lakes, we had an ace up our sleeves. The trails we had chosen followed over 45 miles of stream where iridescent goldens grow only to pan size but are much easier to catch than their lake cousins. The south and east forks of Bear Creek, Piute Creek which heads above 12,000 ft. elev., and French Creek are all splendid trout streams throughout their courses as they cascade clear and cold amid pine and quaking aspen forest cover.

As we hugged the campfire that evening, we planned our visit to Merriam Lake, an off trail water perched high above French Canyon. A tough climb up a sketchy trail made it plain why Merriam (10,950 ft. elev.) is so lightly fished. Overlooking the granite-framed lake from a ledge we observed goldens from fingerlings to over 15 inches. The smaller seven inchers occasionally hit our lures but the grand-daddys typically ignored everything. Much as we hoped to catch another golden of trophy size, we didn't plan to spend much time at one spot because our main objective was exploratory angling.

Rejoining French Canyon, we made use of our topo map as we cross-countried over a wooded ridge to save time. The French Canyon lakes lie almost entirely above timberline amid benches, ledges and glacial flats. Mainly rockbound with little basic fertility, these waters are characterized by dwarfed and scattered conifers, clumps of willows and tundra-like meadows.

We briefly tested Elba Lake (10,900 ft. elev.) where we released a handsome 10 incher, then trudged a short distance up to 51-acre Puppet Lake (11,200 ft. elev.) which, according to Berner, has put out a couple of five pounders the past two seasons. We spent the better part of the afternoon unsuccessfully trying to entice a duet of 17 inchers near the entrance to Paris Lake (11,120 ft. elev.) a short distance below Puppet.

I have found there is no best way to fish for these big goldens which are usually easily spotted. I initially head for the inlet or outlet areas which not only offer food but oxygen as well. Early or late in the day seems to be the best time to find them there. They also tend to lose some of their inherent caution in the shadows common to these periods.

A wide assortment of lures and flies is the best insurance against failure. Tiny gold-plated spoons like Super Dupers, Z Rays, and Kastmasters or Panther Martins, Rooster Tails and Mepps spinners in gold hues have been successful over the years while standby Woolly Worms, Royal Coachmen, Black Gnats, Black Ants, Mosquito nymphs and Grasshoppers in sizes 12-16 have proven their mettle for me.

According to Mitchell, freshwater shrimp, tiny swimming crustaceans which

are abundant in many of the lakes, are the golden's major food source. Tiny dark nymph patterns twitched near the surface do quite well, especially in the spring. I have found clear plastic bubbles a useful tool to cast these flies long distances and at the same time act as a strike indicator.

Changing offerings frequently, searching for the correct payoff combination, sometimes works. Due to remarkable water clarity on these lofty jewels, 2-4 lb. line is most feasible.

Many times persistence is the key to enticing the sulking giants—their moods sometimes lasting for days. However, time is something backcountry travelers usually don't have a lot of.

According to Berner, who services this backcountry, these heavyweights 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," he said. "However," he continued, "most of the high country is inaccessible due to snow at this time. Weather is very unpredictable during these early and late seasons."

We camped at Moon Lake (10,998 ft. elev.) where the surroundings were appropriately barren and dull. When staying at some of the more isolated lakes above timberline, a different form of camping is necessary. Here where nothing grows higher than bunchgrass, you cook one-pot meals on a mini-stove which burns liquid fuel and sleep in a cramped tent with an ensolite pad underneath you for insulation from the granite. Temperatures commonly range from 80 at noon to below freezing at night.

Our final session was to be at the Royce Lakes chain. Only sturdy climbers make it into these five isolated waters, which sit in a foreboding glacial scour near the Eastern Divide. While the lower two lakes are shallow and subject to winter kill, the upper three, all above 11,670 ft. elev., are very noteworthy.

According to Mitchell, these waters, which range in size from 10 to 73 acres, offer the best potential for big trophies with good populations averaging between 15-18 inches. "Goldens apparently grow to big size here because the lakes are big, spawning is poor and there isn't too much competition for the available food," he informed. "Angling pressure is also very light," he added.

Relishing the tranquility while standing in awe of the castle-like crags around me, I imparted action to my heavy gold spoon. After an abrupt, jolting stop, line began peeling from my reel and I knew I was onto something big. Relying on careful but

steady pressure, I twice worked it near the shore. From the rocks above Royce No. 4, George caught a glimpse of it. "A big one," he shouted. "Looks like at least a seven pounder!"

Almost on cue, however, the lunker tired of the game and bore unstopped toward the sharp rocks in the lake's depths. Even though my spirits and 4 lb. line simultaneously went limp, I had proof that these super-leviathans, in fact, do exist.

According to Mitchell, these lake specimens put on their bulk over a long period of time, with many probably eight to 10 years old. "Due to limited spawning, however, they are susceptible to over-harvesting," he cautioned.

Since they are too valuable a resource to simply destroy, most guides and pack station operators like Berner, strongly advocate catch and release among their clients to protect these somewhat fragile populations. "Most visitors are very understanding and cooperative on this matter," Berner happily adds.

Good topographic maps are a must, especially when traveling cross country. Fifteen minute quadrangles of the following are more than adequate: Mt. Tom, Mt. Abbot, Mt. Goddard and Blackcap Mt. All are available from the U.S. Geological Service. *Starr's Guide*, by Walter A. Starr, Jr., offers a written description of all the trail systems.

For more information on the areas, contact either:

Brian and Danica Berner
Pine Creek Pack and Saddle Train
Box 968

Bishop, California 93514
Phone: (619) 387-2797

or

Walt Schober
Schober's Pack Station
Bishop, California 93514

Pushing over 11,200 ft. elev. Pine Creek Pass and finishing the ensuing four hour descent to our car, we were emotionally as high as some of the taller peaks. During our week-long "golden loop" we experienced some stringent physical challenges, observed spectacular scenery, sampled a wide array of productive waters, narrowed down our list of trophy lakes and even managed to tangle with a few bruisers in their lofty wilderness domain. However, an additional honor arrived a few months later when I received notification that the two pound, one ounce golden currently holds down second place in the International Game Fish Association (IGFA) world record book under the two pound line classification!

Like a punch-drunk boxer who can't wait to get back into the ring, I am already planning a rematch with some heavyweight adversaries for early next summer. In particular, I have a score to settle with a certain seven pound backcountry challenger. □