

GOLD NEAR THE CLOUDS

Don Vachini

Though the sun had not yet crested the jagged escarpment to the east, it illuminated the snow-laden tip of 13,253-foot Royce Peak towering above me. As the morning chill caressed my face I could see my lure shimmering as it cut through the limpid depths of the lake, which was set like a blue jewel in a ring of white granite.

My heart raced as I glimpsed a stocky trout veer sharply from a school of a half-dozen and streak toward my Wob-L-Rite. Imparting a zig-zag motion to the spoon helped me realize a dream as the hefty 14-incher smashed it without hesitation. Carefully coaxed toward the net, the fish resembled a pulsating neon light, its violent, freedom-seeking thrashes setting the crystalline waters on fire with iridescent hues of crimson and saffron.

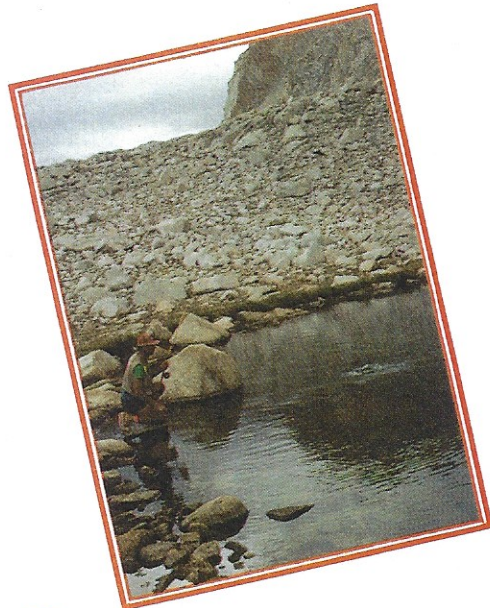
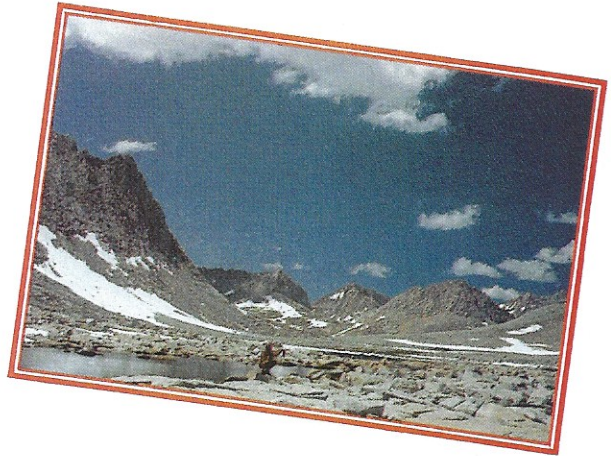
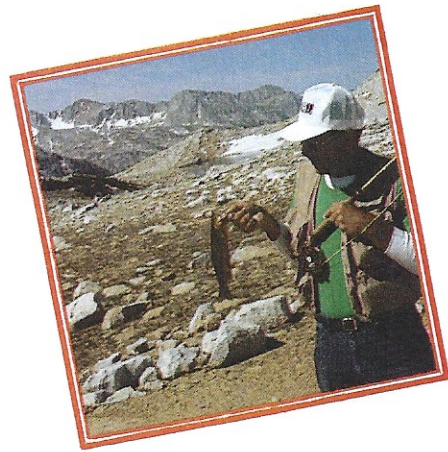
Accompanied by George DiRuscio, my son Jason and I were plying the expansive waters of Royce Lake number 2 on a crisp morning in late June 1987. We were halfway into an eight day backpack designed to take us to some remote Sierra Nevada lakes in pursuit of record-breaking golden trout. Our itinerary not only called for a visit to French Canyon's lofty Royce Lake chain but four isolated lakes in the neighboring Bear Creek drainage as well. Managed for the perpetuation of California's state fish, this duet of scenic headwater basins lies entirely within the vast John Muir Wilderness backcountry between Fresno and Bishop, eventually providing flow to the South Fork San Joaquin River via arteriole feeders Bear and French creeks.

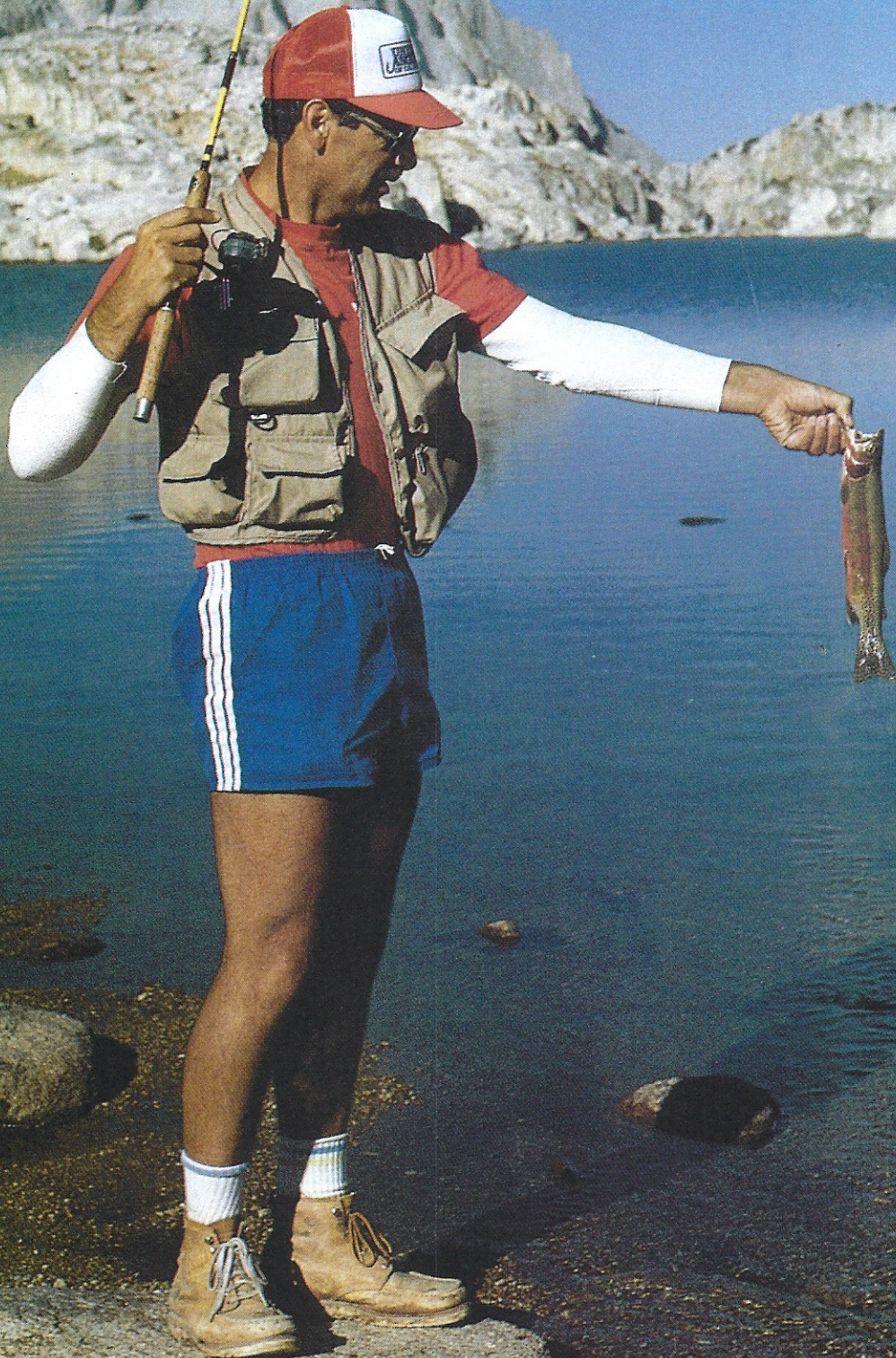
A product of what scientists refer to as variation by isolation, *Salmo aquabonita* is a direct descendant of the rainbow trout which it closely resembles in both habits and actions. Recognized as the most colorful member of the trout family, specimens usually do not grow to large proportions. Most anglers consider 11 to 12-inchers to be trophy size with fish approaching a pound real bragging material.

Over the past three seasons, I have researched golden trout records in both the International Game Fish Association (IGFA) and the National Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame (HOF), two non-profit organizations which not only sanction all-tackle, but line and tippet class world records as well. While the all-tackle standard for goldens has stood at a seemingly invincible 11 pounds for four decades, a close look at the other record listings revealed some surprisingly beatable categories. Top line class marks ranged between one to three pounds and all fly rod divisions were vacant as of early '87 (to fill a vacancy, a fish must weigh a minimum of one pound).

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Top to bottom: The author admires his IGFA, four-pound tippet class, world record golden; Royce 2, 4 and 5 house fair numbers of one- to three-pound goldens; goldens feed heavily during morning and evening shadows as well as the calm just before a storm; goldens usually don't grow large—11 to 12 inches are considered trophies. Opposite page: This Kaleidoscopic trout reaches its pinnacle as a game fish in these lakes nestled near the clouds.





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GOLD NEAR THE CLOUDS

(continued from page 7)

Bolstered by helpful Department of Fish & Game (DFG) information and benefitting from two previous exploratory trips, we planned a specific route to a small selection of pristine waters we knew held fish in the 13 to 22-inch range — granddaddy goldens which could re-write the record books. We would gain nearly a mile in elevation during a grueling two-day, ten-mile backpack from our point of departure at the Pine Creek trailhead.

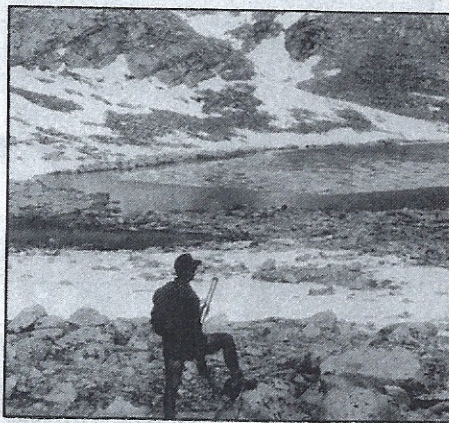
Armed with a wide arsenal of tippets and monofilament lines, we arrived at the Royce Lakes to find them in various stages of ice out. Ranging in size from eight to seventy-three acres, these five connected waters rest in a foreboding glacial scour,

after ice breakup. As the water warms and their metabolism increases, they will usually move into the shallow inlets and outlets which serve as prime sources of food and oxygen.



This hook-jawed 15 incher tipped the scales at 1 pound, 10 ounces to hold the new HOF 8-pound line class world record.

A small cluster of John Muir Wilderness lakes tucked along the Sierra Nevada Crest offer adventuresome anglers some outstanding trophy golden trout possibilities



We arrived at the Royce lakes in mid-June to find them in various stages of ice out. This outlet produced three world records!

devoid of vegetation at the highest extremes of French Canyon. According to Darrell Wong, a fisheries biologist with the DFG office in Bishop, Royce two, four, and five offer the best bet to get on intimate terms with some world-class goldens. Though unconfirmed reports of fish up to eight pounds add spice to the drama, these three lakes do house fair numbers of one to four-pounders. "Big, deep and hard to reach, these waters all benefit from a solid food base," he informed.

Despite the fact that early season weather in the high country can be unpredictable, we chose this time of year because the trophy goldens we sought are particularly vulnerable when they feed heavily right

Despite awaking with stiff, aching muscles incurred from the rigorous trek just reaching these lakes, I was anxious to begin the record quest. The narrow outlet channel at Royce 2 provided the best initial choice. From a safe distance I could observe several big fellows routinely exposing their dorsal fins as they cruised the shallows. Forty yards before the outlet went subterranean, the slow moving water had gouged out a hole possibly six feet deep. Since the shoreline was exposed and unprotected, I was afforded only one avenue of approach. Meticulously crawling over several rough granite slabs, I moved to within a few feet of the pool where a dozen fish glowed like hot embers as they peacefully maintained their feeding stations in the languid current.

A small notch between two boulders left me a perfect view of the fish without tipping off my advantage. Lying flat on my back, head propped on an uncomfortable granitic pillow, I stripped fly line onto my stomach. Casting above the hole, I twitched my caddis nymph, presented on three-pound tippet, ever so slowly along the sandy bottom. A moment after watching a torpedo-shaped bonita open its mouth and take the fly, I gently but firmly raised my rod tip.

Though the sting of steel prodded the gaudy male to dart crazily through the confined pool, the hook remained securely tucked in the corner of its mandible. Manuevered toward me with steady pressure, I

hastily netted it from my contorted position and somehow failed to spook the others. Shortly after changing to six-pound tippet, I was into another weighty specimen. This one waged an airborne battle, leaping several times before being nimbly subdued.

Besides a brace of girthy, near-identical 13-inchers, the half-hour session also yielded back spasms which finally required me to stand up. This action terminated the days angling at this outlet as frantic V-wakes led to deep water.

Amid congratulatory hand shakes and back slaps, the reality of the moment began to sink in. The first golden, weighing one pound, two ounces, filled the IGFA four-pound tippet vacancy while the other balanced my certified Chatillon scale at one pound even, barely fulfilling the IGFA eight-pound tippet requirement (On a recent June '88 venture, I witnessed 16-year-old Jason establish the HOF eight-pound-tippet class with a one-pound, two-ounce specimen, again taken from Royce 2's productive outlet).

The following morning while working the deep, rocky side of Royce 2 with a spinning rod, a thick 14-incher intercepted my Wob-L-Rite spoon. Weighing in at one pound, eight ounces, this golden set the previously open unlimited line class in the HOF record book.

Early the next day we hiked past still-frozen Royce 5, left the sketchy trail as we traversed several snow fields and cross-countryed over an inhospitable ridge, finally dragging our feet into the upper Bear Creek lakes. Our final destination was Black Bear, White Bear, Big Bear and V lakes. These waters all sit well above 11,000 feet among glacial cirques or benches, possess rugged shorelines and are dwarfed by horizon-dominating edifaces.

Not as famous as the Royce lakes to the east, the biggest fish of the trip nevertheless came from one of these lofty lakes. Following another hands and knees stalk, I cast a Mepps ultralight spinner into the shadowed inlet of Big Bear. Seconds following a jolting take, a carmine flash brought life to the pool, shooting back and forth like a gilded arrow. Splashed in brilliant vermilion and flaming orange as it rolled in the shallows prior to capture, the gorgeous, hook-jaws 15-incher weighed in at one pound, ten ounces, topping the previous HOF eight-pound-line class mark by five ounces! While on a return trip here in late August, I carefully drifted a caddis nymph through the same pool, this time besting a one-pound, two-ounce golden which filled the IGFA 12-pound-tippet class.

Without a doubt, Jason and I struck it rich on our last three trips into this bleak wonderland, far exceeding initial expectations. Besides consistently working over or near one to three-pound goldens and releasing several just under the one-pound qualifying minimum, our chests swelled with

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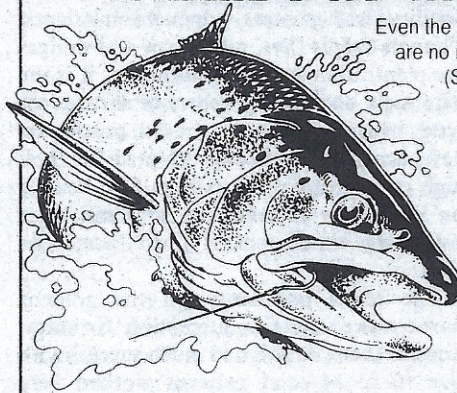
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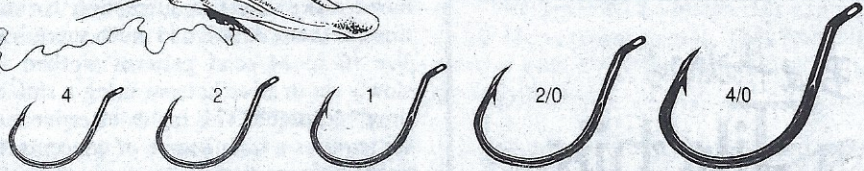
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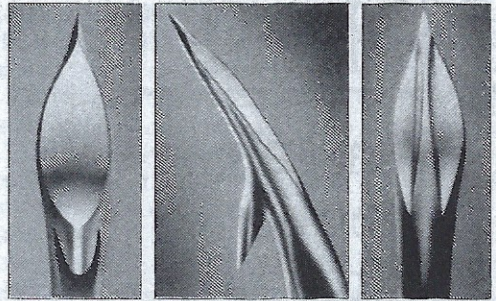


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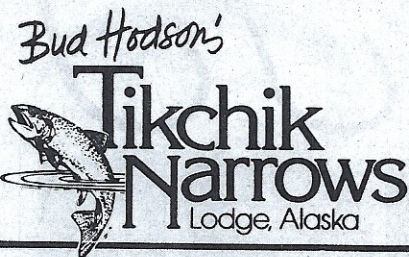


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pride as we managed to etch our names in the record books six times!

Pursuing California's colorful state fish for over 15 years has not only helped me learn more about my quarry but also to develop and refine some specific techniques to trick the bigger leviathans. While goldens found in the smaller lakes and headwater streams generally measure under nine inches and are fairly easy to dupe, fish over 10 inches are basically quite selective and extremely wary. One has to use stealth to avoid spooking them. 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 slightly toward the angler. Knee pads are a Godsend for protection against the harsh granite.

Understanding the big goldens food sources and habitat will help solve some of the problem of catching them. While food forms are small and growing seasons short, most of these high lakes have good basic fertility and possess adequate nutrients. Though caddis flies, mosquitos and midges are plentiful in these high altitudes, it is the extremely abundant freshwater shrimp, or scud, which is the key to the fish putting on heft, according to Wong. "Noted for their high caloric value, big goldens feed heavily on these tiny crustaceans, in some lakes subsisting almost entirely on them," he adds.

The scuds popularity on the goldens menu makes the fish susceptible to imitations of them. I have had much success with size 10 to 14 scud patterns worked very slowly on or near bottom using a sink and draw technique. This highly effective method requires a high degree of concentration as the pickup is usually transmitted as just a dull tug. Weighted brown leech and dark-bodied nymph patterns are also productive.

Since caddis flies are also prime ingredients in the goldens food chain, small artificials resembling these natural also work well. I have identified olive, green, brown and tan shades of this prolific insect in these high drainages. Size 10 to 16 Elk Hair Caddis, Caddis Pupa, Caddis Larva, Bucktail Coachman and Hare's Ear Nymph perform well for me (Three of mine plus my son's world record were all caught on tan caddis nymphs). A sink tip fly line is needed to get these offerings deep.

Quill Gordon, Mosquito and Adams, presented on floating fly line, are good dry choices, especially during mid-afternoon to early evening hatches.

Though no baitfish are present in these lofty waters, spin fishermen seem to score well with small spinners or spoons. Brown or yellow Rooster Tails, brass Panther Martins, gold-plated Mepps, Wob-L-Rite, Kastmasters, Z Rays and Phoebes probably resemble bite-sized goldens to the larger fish, which often smack the hardware with authority.

From mid-July through early September, the big goldens spend much of their time sulking in the sanctuary of deep water. However, by studying each lake's features anglers can increase the odds of finding fish. Scouting from a higher vantage point with polaroid glasses not only helps locate fish but "fishy" structure as well. Drop offs, revealed by darker water, and the steep, rocky side of a lake are promising spots to try. Lunker goldens like to ambush their prey from behind deep, submerged boulders or underwater shelves.

When using hardware, I have found that lengthy casts, allowed to sink deep and retrieved with an erratic, herky-jerky motion entices strikes. Working the offering parallel to deep banks also has proven effective. On many occasions I have witnessed fish follow for long distances and hit right near shore. A fly/bubble setup or shooting head fly line can also achieve the necessary distances for fly tossers.

Possibly striking out of territorial irritation as much as hunger, outsized goldens will inexplicably go on brief frenzies, smashing imitations with vigor after putting for long periods. However, the larger fish are more likely to lose some of their caution during morning and evening shadows or the calm, cloudy period prior to a storm. While persistence is important, frequently changing offerings quite often provides a payoff combination. A fly, tied onto and dragged three feet behind a lure provides a different wrinkle and will sometimes draw a strike, usually on the trailing imitation.

Since most of these lakes are rockbound, a long-handled net is helpful to land burly fish over the obstacle of shoreline boulders.

Backpackers should be in good shape and equipped with sturdy mountain tents and adequate survival gear. Surefooted mountain horses, available from the trailhead-centered Pine Creek Pack Station, will save a day's hiking time. Contact Brian and Dee Berner, Box 968, Bishop, CA 93514; (619) 387-2797.

No doubt this kaleidoscopic trout reaches its pinnacle as a gamefish in these ice-carved punchbowls two miles up. However, anglers intent on ascending the goldens domain, guarded by precipitous cliffs and limited access, must be prepared to meet these bruisers on their terms. Negotiating jumbled talus slopes and huge boulders, stealthy crawls to avoid shadows and delicate casts over gin-clear water are just a few of the challenges one will face when matching wits with this magnificent fish.

Speaking for myself, I am already poring over topo maps, planning my next golden excursion to these lakes nestled near the clouds. Neither pack-raiding marmots, howling winds nor freak, unseasonal snow storms will deter me from my appointment at these sapphire waters! □