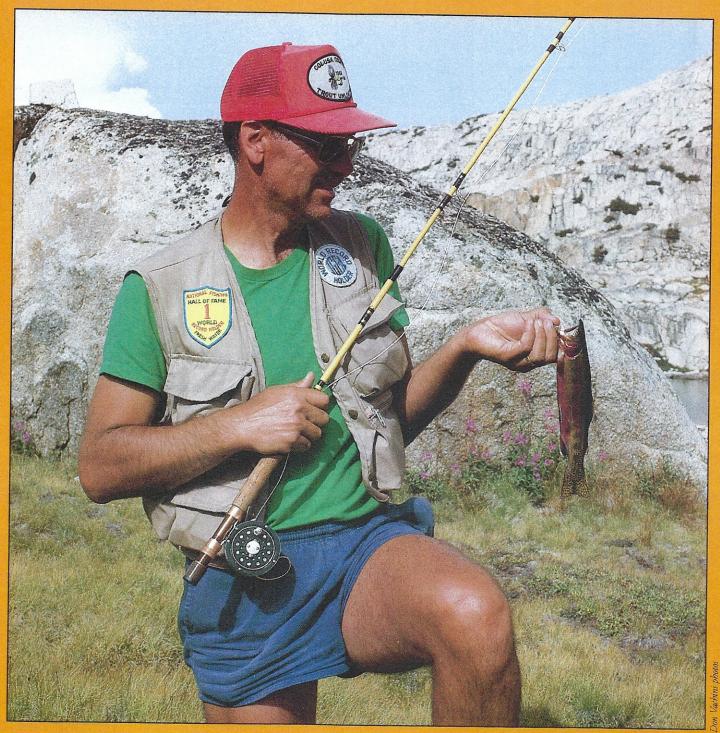
Eastern Sierra Special



Golden Trout Tactics



Golden trout, California's state fish, can be found in Kings Canyon National Park, between Fresno and Bishop. Author has numerous specie records.

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Anglers pursuing these outsized specimens must be prepared to utilize special techniques.

By Don Vachini

hough barely a glow on the eastern escarpment, the sun illuminated the snow-laden prominence of 13,077-foot Merriam Peak jaggedly towering above me. While scattered boulders on fields of polished granite gave clear evidence of prior glacial action, concentric rings consistently appearing on the lake's outlet told of trout so I focused my attention on them. Crawling meticulously over 40 feet of rough granite slabs, I stretched out behind a shoreline boulder. My heart raced and the grip on my flyrod tightened as I carefully peered into the channel.

Seven trout, all betwen 1-3 pounds, were holding a mere dozen feet away. They glowed like hot embers as they languidly finned in the slow-moving current!

A product of what scientists refer to as variation by isolation, the crown jewel of the salmonids — the gaudy golden trout — generally does not grow to large proportions. Knowledgeable anglers consider anything over 11 inches trophy size while specimens approaching a pound are real bragging material.

Imagine my surprise then, as I faced this scenario five summers ago in French Canyon's remote Royce Lakes chain.

French Canyon, along with Humphrey's Basin and Bear Creek, a trio of neighboring drainages dedicated to the perpetuation of California's official state fish, sits just north of Kings Canyon National Park between Fresno and Bishop. Among the more than 120 lakes which make up the largest concentration of golden trout waters in the world, are a dozen or so waters nestled near the clouds where this kaleidoscopic trout probably reaches its pinnacle as a game fish.

Over the past six seasons, my sons, Matt, Jason and I have zeroed in on these forlorn waters with some remarkable results. While we have consistently worked over goldens in the 2- to 5-pound category, lost one estimated at 6 pounds and released numerous fish around a pound — a quartet of these lakes have produced a combined dozen line or tippet class world records for Jason and myself — including four on one dream trip.

To do battle with these bruisers, anglers must be prepared to meet them on their own terms, which is not always easy. Certainly, the



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more sizeable specimens as exasperatingly wary and selective, especially during mid- to late summer. However, they are somewhat vulnerable at both extremes of the season, namely ice out (late June through early July in a typical year) and again in late fall, during which times they feed voraciously, occasionally with reckless abandon. Early and late day shadows and the cloudy periods preceeding thunderstorms are also prime times when inherent caution is sometimes slightly relaxed.

Once a body of water is selected, a careful plan of attack should be implemented for it is not easy to dupe these leviathans no matter what season. If possible, I always try to scout the lake from a higher vantage point and make both written and mental notes as to the water's layout for future references. Since grand-daddy goldens like to ambush their prey along underwater shelves, I search for the telltale light-to-dark color line indicating this type of structure. On some occasions, individual or schools of cruising fish can be pinpointed from above, leading to a direct stalking approach. Polaroid glasses greatly aid this visual endeavor.

Prime locales I invariably check out are the inlets and outlets. Massive fish consistently hang out here as the moving water not only supplies them food but oxygen as well. Dorsal fins, exposed as they forage in the shallows are common giveaways as to their presence.

However, once these lunkers are located, there is no guarantee of success as Rambo-like skills must come into play to avoid detection. Crawling stalks, using shoreline rocks as cover and careful presentations with long leaders, are all necessary in most cases. Care must be taken to keep silhouettes out of their window of vision while performing demanding casts.

In June of 1987, I found myself flat on my back at the Royce 2 outlet with an uncomfortable rock for a headrest. Stripping flyline onto my stomach and executing a short, well placed cast above the trout stacked in the narrow channel, I watched one unceremoniously inhale the nymph. The crystaline water was instantly set on fire with autumnal hues of crimson, flaming orange and lemon yellow as the thrashing 14-incher resembled a pulsating neon light. Within a half hour, two tippet class world records were netted before back spasms forced me to quit.

Team fishing, whereby one angler spots and directs casts for another, sometimes provides an invaluable edge on these crag-framed waters. Concealed behind a small outcropping which overlooks the Steelhead Lake outlet, friend Terry Donahoe, my son, Jason, and I worked this technique to perfection during a July, 1989 trip. From this lookout, each of us took turns pinpointing and guiding his partners casts to a number of sizeable fish unsuspectedly cruising back and forth along the undercut shoreline, a mere five feet from the prostrate angler trying for them!

While two of Jason's outsized goldens, plus one of mine, set tippet class marks, the cooperative effort also was instrumental in Terry's lifetime best — a plump 13 incher.

Of our combined dozen world standards, 11 have been the direct result of arduous crawls and awkward casts performed from several contorted positions. Since so much time is spent kneeling or crawling, I have found knee pads to be a great deterrent to the harsh granite.

While the gin-clear waters of the main lakes theoretically call for 1- to 2-pound tippets or line, the knife-edged granite submerged in these deep waters become an ally to the trout and dictates a more durable leader size. Though this can make for discouraging results on these leader-shy citizens, the inlets and outlets again remain popular choices as their

moving water not only allows for heavier line but covers up sloppy casts as well.

This case was well illustrated on Big Bear Lake's inlet, which has produced three of my current world marks. The incoming waterfall has gouged out a four-foot deep pool which then proceeds about 25 feet through a rocky saddle before settling into the lake. The layout is ideal for fish as the sheer rock walls make it difficult to both approach and cast while the sanctuary of deeper water is just a fin-flip away.

Trying to punch too much power into my cast while in a sitting position, I bounced the tan caddis nymph off a boulder and fly line clumsily splashed like coiled hemp in the current. Frantically stripping line in an attempt to rectify the mistake, the strike took me by complete surprise. Despite both aberrant

strike can either be manifested as a dull tug or slashing jolt, anglers should set the hook at any type of line hesitation. The rod tip should be pointed toward the fly and just in or right at water level to aid in a more efficient hook set.

Spin fishermen using small spoons, spinners or plugs seem to enjoy much success at certain times. Even though no baitfish inhabit these lofty waters, gold-plated Mepps, Wob-L-Rite, Kastmaster, yellow/orange Panther Martins, yellow Rooster Tails and small gold/brown Rapalas probably resemble bite-sized juvenilles to the larger goldens.

It is not uncommon to work over concentrations of large fish and have them spurn all offerings time after time, then inexplicably go on brief frenzies, smashing imitations with authority. Letting the lure sink deep and retrieving in an erratic, herky-jerky motion often entices a smashing strike, probably more out of territorial irritation than hunger. While working the deep side of Royce 2 four years ago, I imparted an energetic zig-zag course to my spoon and watched a husky, near two pounder vigorously annihilate the lure which it had snubbed for well over ten minutes!

While patience coupled with perseverance can often produce a payoff combination, I have found that working flies or lures parallel to deep shelves or shorelines can provide a pleasant change of pace from regular perpendicular retrieves. Trailing a fly 3-4 feet behind a spinner will also pique the interest of wary denizens.

As much care must be taken in landing these big fish as in hooking them. A long handled net proves very handy in landing girthy fish over the obstacle of large shoreline boulders.

Adventuresome anglers intent on matching wits with this exotic species must not only endure the rigorous challenges posed by jumbled talus, inhospitable ridges and icy snowfields but should be armed with a tactical arsenal as well. Visitors to these quintessential trophy lakes over two miles high will find the goldens just as difficult to catch as they are to reach!

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presentation and improper retrieve, a 1 pound, 2 ounce bruiser ended up on my line. No doubt the swirling water served to hide my faux pas!

One of the main keys to catching these bulky trout is understanding their food forms. While mosquitos, mayflies, damselflies and midges are present, caddis flies and freshwater shrimp seem to make up a good portion of their menu. Though tan is my personal favorite, I have also identified brown, green and olive shades of caddis in these three drainages. Both larval and adult stages of this prolific insect are highly relished by the big lake residents. While pan-sizers will hit dry flies fairly consistently, the vast majority of our weighty goldens have been taken on subsurface imitations. Size 10-14 Caddis Pupa, Hare's Ear Nymph and Bucktail Coachman patterns have all proven their worth for us.

In some of these sky-high lakes, goldens subsist almost entirely on scuds. Noted for their high caloric value, these minute freshwater crustaceans are understandably a favorite of the broad-chested fish. Weighted brown Leech, Scud and various dark-bodied nymph patterns suffice.

Presenting imitations of these tiny shrimp is a tedious operation usually requiring a high density sinking line to quickly bring them down to depths of around 30 feet. From here they are besty twitched upward ever so slowly using a sink and draw technique. Since the

WORLD RECORD PROCEDURES FOR GOLDEN TROUT

To have a realistic chance of establishing a golden trout standard with either the International Game Fish Association (IGFA) or the National Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame (HOF), two non-profit organizations which sanction world angling records, one must use foresight and planning. The first step is obtaining and reviewing the rules and regulations for world record procedures before fishing (both have virtually the same guidelines).

While the All-Tackle world record golden has stood for over four decades, it is the line and tippet classes which probably offer the most realistic chance at record status. A brief glimpse at the golden trout section reveals most marks between 1-4 pounds.

Once a particular class has been targeted, anglers should carry a selection of lines or tippets corresponding to that category.

Aside from hooking and landing a qualifier, the biggest obstacle is getting the fish weighed on a certified scale. For backcountry anglers operating 1-2 days away from civilization, both organizations allow the use of a hand held spring scale provided it is certified for accuracy both before and after the trip (the local Department of Weights & Measures will perform this task).

Both organizations demand quality color photographs in a variety of poses. For identification, a closeup of the whole fish showing tips of fins and other notable features; another depicting the whole fish plus the scale with weight clearly showing; and finally a third showing angler, side view of the whole fish and the tackle used to subdue it.

The application itself must be filled out clearly with all signatures plus any additional notes to explain out of the ordinary situations (when backpacking, I always have to explain the use of my scale, show its certification papers and describe my specific location in the backcountry).

Required line samples must be included with the application and photos. The completed packet must be notarized and mailed within 60 days of the catch date (the HOF allows 90 days).

For more information contact either: IGFA, 3000 East Las Olas Blvd., Fort Lauderdale, FL 33316; or HOF, Box 33, Hall of Fame Drive, Hayward, WI 54843.