

4-Wheelers For Gold

A few waters housing the kaleidoscopic golden trout can be reached — or nearly so — by vehicle. Here's a rundown of those places.

By Don Vachini

CALIFORNIA'S gaudily attired golden is strictly a high altitude trout, its presence pervading headwater streams or lakes tucked along ridgelines of the Sierra Nevada Crest at elevations between 8,500-12,000 feet. Guarded by precipitous cliffs, jumbled talus and icy snowfields, and often alienated by wilderness boundaries, this kaleidoscopic fish is usually only accessible by means as old as man himself, namely foot or horseback.

Although motorized travel is disallowed within designated primitive areas, an ever-increasing network of backcountry roads plus modern manufacturing technology have collaborated to deliver anglers right to the doorstep of their pristine wilderness homes. While the golden trout remains hard to reach in most cases, a few waters are surprisingly attainable by vehicle.

Probably the largest concentration of drive-to waters is situated in the southern Sierra on a geologic wonder known as the Kern Plateau, the ancestral home of this rare species. The two Kern River forks meander through broad meadows and gently sloping hills of the Sequoia National Forest before each enters a steep, glacier-torn canyon on the way to forming Lake Isabella 30 miles to the south.

While the headwaters of the main Kern River, Little Kern River, and the South Fork of the Kern Rivers are nestled deep within the Golden Trout Wilderness, nearly a dozen tiny tributaries containing pure-strain goldens are among the most accessible in the Sierra. Centralized in the Bald Mountain region, South Fork feeders Trout, Little Trout,

Machine, Fish, Jackass and Soda creeks, plus the main Kern suppliers of Beach and Bonita creeks are all reached from a myriad of interconnecting backcountry roads emanating from near the Black Rock Ranger Station. This maze of roads is reached from the east via Kennedy Meadows or Johnsondale out of the west. Approached from the west by a four-wheel drive road out of Camp Nelson, Clicks Creek flows into the Little Kern.

Heavily dependent on snowmelt, all of these are best worked early in the season normally from late June or as soon as the upper routes become open to travel. Later in the season, especially during drought periods, portions become marginal, occasionally having little or no surface water in places.

From the Black Rock Ranger Station, primitive passageways of varying degrees of difficulty and distances will either lead right to some of these waters, or nearly so. Besides offering a connecting thoroughfare from Kennedy Meadows to Johnsondale, Forest Service Road 22S05 reaches or comes close to Trout, Little Trout, and Machine creeks while Soda, Fish, Jackass, Beach, and Bonita creeks are all reached by spurs off this windy, ridgetop conduit. In addition, several side road beds also provide good jumping off points to penetrate the three nearby wildernesses, Monache and Boone Meadows plus Blackrock Mountain, Clicks Creek and Forks of the Kern trailheads being the most notable.

It should be noted that some of these deep-rutted or recently-blazed byways are definitely not suitable for passenger car use. To obtain up to the minute road conditions and directions, contact the Kernville Ranger Station at (619) 376-3781.

Though diminutive, stream goldens are the most vivid of the salmonids, exhibiting brilliant hues of vermillion, lemon yellow and flaming orange. While finning in the crystalline waters of their creek environment, the crown jewel of the trout family ably lives up to its Latin name *agua bonita*, which means "pretty [in the] water".

Though an eight incher is considered a real prize, anything approaching 10 inches on these rivulets is noteworthy campfire-bragging fodder.

For the true "creek freak," Brian Botham of the Southcoast Chapter of Trout Unlimited,

suggests a ½- to one-hour trek up or downstream to reach the less-sophisticated residents. He feels these lightly-pressured sections are also ideal to introduce the young person to fly fishing.

"Trout are usually quite eager and receptive here," he said.

Located 24 miles from Lone Pine, Cottonwood Creek is another easily-reached water housing good numbers of flashy six to seven inchers. From Highway 395, turn west onto Whitney Portal Road for 3.5 miles, bearing south on Horseshoe Meadows Road another 20 miles to the parking area. A short half hour walk along the moderately ascending trail leads to the creek which successfully bore the initial mid-1860 transplants from Mulkey Creek, located just over the pass in the South Fork Kern drainage. Although the brush and tree-lined banks of this narrow and shallow creek create a mild presentation obstacle, anglers can often catch goldens here.

Trout here, as they are in the Cottonwood Lakes above, are protected by special regulations which include artificial lures or flies with single, barbless hooks. The stream is open from July 1 - October 31 with a five trout limit.

As a general rule, goldens dwelling in lakes usually attain greater size than their stream counterparts, primarily because living conditions are slightly more conducive to growth. One such body of water is Koenig Lake which sits along the Sierra crestline near Sonora Pass in Toiyabe National Forest. Reached by driving the Leavitt Meadows Road off Hwy. 108, coursing three miles of rough, unimproved road plus a 30 to 40 minute ascent along a well-marked trail, this rocky, bowl-shaped water rests above 10,000 feet. Guarded by sentinel-like Leavitt Peak (11,570 feet), the 20- to 35-foot deep lake is surrounded by an open, evergreen forest blanket, and thus possesses a fairly rich food chain.

Rick Rockel, of Ken's Alpine Sporting Goods in Bridgeport said that Koenig goldens grow to 13 inches fairly consistently on a diet of midges, mayflies and the ever-present cad-dis.

"Goldens here will range from eight to 13 inches, although a few up to 14 or 16 inches and over a pound are taken each year," said Rockel.

A lengthy, submerged ridge protrudes up from the lake bottom, nearly bisecting the lake in half. If using a float tube, these mid-lake dropoffs are good places to patrol.

Located a short distance above Koenig is Latropie, a four-acre tarn housing goldens in the seven- to nine-inch range. Since it is above timberline, rockbound and windblown, food forms are much scarcer than below. Most likely because it is reached via unmarked trail and offers a stiff physical challenge to reach, it is under very little pressure.

For those drivers seeking outsized goldens,

there aren't too many selections matching the qualifications possessed by the Laurel Lakes located just south of Mammoth Lakes.

To reach Laurel, follow Mammoth Creek out of town to the south via good dirt road to Sherwin Creek Campground. Proceed two miles past the campground and turn right onto the four-wheel drive road which winds steeply up Laurel Canyon. The last mile of road can be rugged and some anglers park in the broad meadow below the lakes and follow the stream up the steep hillside to the lake.

Sitting amid talus slopes and scattered conifers, the two small lakes collect ice and snow melt from surrounding Laurel Mountain (11,812 feet) and Bloody Mountain (at 12,544 feet). Lower Laurel is three acres and sits right at 10,000 feet while Upper Laurel covers eight acres and is located a few feet above. Both lakes are approximately 30-40 feet deep.

According to Darrell Wong, a fisheries biologist with the Department of Fish and Game in Bishop, historical plans once had Laurel pegged as golden trout brood stock lake where eggs could be collected annually.

But with natural spawning areas very limited, it would have been difficult to collect eggs. So the Cottonwood lakes became (and remain) the primary source of the state's golden trout eggs.

While goldens in Laurel had all but been

fished out because of no restrictive regulations, new regulations for 1992 require that anglers use barbless hooks and artificial lures and they can keep no fish under 14 inches. Planted last year for the first time in several seasons, it is expected the goldens here will be in the 12-inch range by the end of this year and perhaps even larger.

Why? This lake is noted for producing goldens in excess of four pounds, and 14 to 18-inch fish have been common in the past because of a rich scud, a freshwater shrimp-like animal, population in both lakes.

"No doubt this tiny crustacean alone accounts for rapid growth," said Wong.

These Laurel trout have the reputation for being rather wary and hard to come by because they tend to dine in the sanctuary of deeper water where tiny, dark-bodied nymphs twitched parallel to or across steep ledges seem to be their preference. A high density line not only propels the offering a greater distance but allows it to sink fast.

Top places to fish include the moving water of inlets and outlets, and the shelflines you can scout from above with polaroid glasses to see cruising trout. Canoes or float tubes are ideal here.

A pleasant bonus exists below the rim in cascading Laurel Creek, where a population



This 4-wheel vehicle carries anglers up to the Sierra's goldens.

of self-sustaining pan-sizers exist. They are often much easier to catch than their lake cousins and offer good fishing even when the lake is seemingly impossible.

One should not lose sight of the fact that wherever goldens can be approached by vehicle, be it a babbling rill on the Kern Plateau or an ice-carved punchbowl along the backbone of the Sierra, they are a fragile commodity. Visitors can either practice voluntary catch and release or simply limit the number of fish kept to help preserve the resource.

Protected by sheer landscape alone, most golden waters in California remain secluded, but there are a handful of places where you can drive high into California's mountains and find "gold" at the road's end.



BEYOND THE ROAD'S END

For the more challenge-oriented 4-wheelers who don't mind varying amounts hiking tacked on to the drive, the following waters are all between two and six miles from trailheads with the potential for a one day, in-and-out fishing venture. All can be reached within two to four hours hiking time with moderate to difficult access. If desired, overnight stays are certainly feasible at all of the following sites:

- **Round Top Lake (Alpine County):** Take Highway 88 to the Carson Pass turnout. From the parking lot, two-plus miles of relatively easy hiking along the well-maintained trail leads past Winnemucca Lake and to the small lake tucked along the ridgeline of Round Top Peak. Easy to reach, this Mokelumne Wilderness water is under fairly heavy pressure for fish up to nine inches.
- **Cathedral Lake (El Dorado County):** From Highway 89 near South Lake Tahoe, take the paved Fallen Leaf Lake Road to its end. From here, a steep, brisk two-hour climb leads into the Desolation Wilderness and rocky Cathedral Lake, where colorful pan-sizers are the target.
- **Bear Creek (Fresno County):** From Fresno, take Highway 168 to Kaiser Pass Road, branching left toward Edison Lake. A short distance from the lake, follow the Bear Diversion Road three miles to the tiny dam. Ascending the moderate trail, which closely follows the cascading creek, about five miles will produce a mixed bag of rainbows, browns, brookies in addition to goldens, which wash over the impassible falls above Cirque Creek.
- **Hooper Lakes (Fresno County):** From Fresno, follow Highway 168, Kaiser Pass Road and proceed to Florence Lake. Follow the dirt road below the dam across the South Fork San Joaquin River and park at the Hooper Diversion Dam. Climb directly to the base of the Infant Buttes and contour across the drainage to Gordon, Harvey, Hooper and Chamberlain Lakes plus the interconnecting Hooper Creek. Since not a lot of people visit these lakes, which sit in a deep bowl at the 10,600 foot elevation, the fishery can be a sleeper, housing anywhere from stunted midgets to trophy class specimens.
- **Cottonwood Lakes (Inyo County):** From the Horseshoe Meadows trailhead, a three to four hour hike along a moderately ascending and demanding trail leads to lakes 5 and 6. While Cottonwood Lakes 1 to 4 are closed to angling, the upper two, plus all other basin waters, are governed by the same special restrictions as on the creek.
- **Raymond Lake (Alpine County):** From Highway 88 in Hope Valley, follow the Blue Lakes Road approximately 10 miles and proceed past Tamarack Lake (Goldens are present in Tamarack and Hell Hole Lake, located a short hike below). Continue via four-wheel drive road to the Summit Lake trailhead. Hike past Wet Meadows and turn right onto the Pacific Crest Trail, ascending toward Raymond Peak. The lake remains invisible from the trail and care must be taken just to locate it.
- **Treasure Lakes 1-7 (Inyo County):** Take Highway 395 to Bishop. Follow Highway 168 west out of town for 18 miles before turning left at the South Lake Road. From the end of this paved road, a three to four hour, demanding climb along the trail will lead to this chain of stepladder lakes, all sitting between 10,646 and 11,170 feet. While the lower two lakes are more pressured, the upper, harder to reach lakes contain some specimens to 14 inches as well as some spectacular scenery.

The DFG Region 4 office in Fresno is a good source for West Slope information at (209) 222-3761, while fisheries biologist Russ Wickwire at (916) 583-6824 is a good source for the South Tahoe region. On the East Side, contact the DFG office in Bishop, (619) 872-1171.