

Golden trout in the clear, high-elevation lakes of the Wind River Range spook easily, and anglers often must literally crawl to within casting range to avoid being seen. (Don Vachini photo)

Breaking the GOLDEN RULE

Once found only in California's High Sierra, golden trout of five and six pounds are commonly caught in Wyoming's Wind River Range — home to the world's largest goldens

BY DON VACHINI

Mesmerizing anglers with its startling array of vermilion, lemon yellow and flaming orange markings, the royal colors of the golden trout rank it as the crown jewel of the trout family. While rarely exceeding 12 inches in its native range in California's Sierra Nevada Mountains, a lofty Wyoming mountain range has not only produced the 11-pound, 4-ounce all-tackle world record, but has yielded specimens which have shattered line and tippet class standards 20 times over the past five years. Let there be no doubt, Wyoming's Wind River Range is home to the largest golden trout in the world!

Evolving in a pair of South Fork Kern River tributaries in the southern reaches of the Sierra Nevada, the kaleidoscopic golden trout maintained its genetic heritage for centuries solely in these isolated headwaters. But, thanks to California Department of Fish and Game (DFG) mule train plants, their range was expanded along a 100-mile swath of the southern Sierra by 1914. So successful were these stocking efforts that during the late 1920s the DFG began shipping eggs by rail from Cottonwood Lakes broodstock to other Western states, most notably Idaho, Colorado, Montana and Wyoming.

Before the California Legislature banned egg exportations in 1938, Wyoming had developed one of the most successful hatchery programs for goldens anywhere. Initial stocking efforts by the Wyoming Department of Game and Fish, also carried out by mule, took place in 1936. Principal beneficiaries were a handful of formerly barren alpine lakes scattered along the crestline of the rugged Wind River Range. Here, the golden trout flourished virtually unnoticed, attaining unheard-of proportions. While the all-tackle world record has stood for over four decades, both line-class and fly-rod marks continue to fall routinely as growth rates soar.

This chain of mountains, located in west-central Wyoming, begins just south of Grand Teton National Park and terminates near Lander. The range's crest, which includes the state's tallest mountain (Gannett Peak, 13,804 feet), forms the Continental Divide. Seemingly still in the Ice Age, seven of the 10 largest glaciers remaining in the contiguous United States are found here, their melt ensuring late season flow even during drought years.

Glaciation, erosion and faulting have carved a harsh landscape, forming more than 1300 lakes nestled amid thick stands of fir, aspen and spruce. The area contains the Fitzpatrick, Bridger and Popo Agie

wilderness areas, plus sections of the Wind River Indian Reservation — all of which appear much the same as when Jim Bridger, Buffalo Bill and Chief Washakie roamed here. Together, this great wilderness blankets more than 1 million acres.

According to fisheries biologist Kerry Connell with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD), these mountains are, by their very nature, conducive to growing hefty goldens. "Goldens are strictly a high altitude trout, thriving in lakes devoid of pollution and competition from other species," he says. "Ideally, most Wind River golden waters are situated at the very head of the drainage, usually with natural barriers preventing upstream contamination by other species."

The normally dense snowpack provides year-round water as pure as the mountain air itself and, since these lakes contain fair amounts of nutrients and are rich in oxygen, the ample forest nearby translates to a plethora of insect life. Connell, however, insists these are not the only reasons for the golden's weighty stature. "Isolation is the key factor," he states. "While goldens do not grow especially fast here, they are seldom pressured."

Most of these backcountry basins sit 20 to 25 miles from trailheads, making for long, arduous journeys over rugged terrain.

Deep, breeze-ruffled lakes near timber in the Wind River Range (left) offer a rich diet of insects to speed the growth of golden trout.

(Don Vachini photos)



Wyoming's golden trout flash brilliant colors in the shallows (top photo). They can be taken on a scud pattern, as this fisherman happily discovered (above).

While horses offer a fine opportunity to penetrate most of this magnificent backcountry, anglers are often forced to scramble on foot. Connell confides that only a half dozen anglers per year visit some of these lakes — even fewer for the more demanding waters situated along glacier-scoured benches or ice-rimmed cirques guarded by serrated sentinels.

Reacting to minimal pressure, these goldens commonly attain Schwarzenegger-like proportions due to what Connell labels "optimum forage opportunities." A prolific and sizeable insect life abounds, due primarily to the near proximity of timber — and this represents perhaps the most significant difference from their Sierra Nevada cousins which endure well above timberline. In addition to a variety of stonefly, mayfly and midge species, the caddis fly, present in tan and green phases, is the dominant insect in these mountains. Zooplankton and freshwater shrimp, also found in healthy numbers in these lakes near the clouds, round out a high-calorie, girth-enhancing menu.

Because of the abundant food supply, the average size fish is a robust 14 inches. However, in a few particularly secluded waters, it is not uncommon to find golden trout in the five to six-pound category — truly world-class specimens! →

Current IGFA Golden Trout Records

LINE	WEIGHT	ANGLER	DATE	PLACE
All Tackle				
—	11-14	Charles Reed	8/5/48	Cooks Lake, WY
Line Class				
2 lb.	5-10	Bob Shettel	6/22/89	Golden Lake, WY
4 lb.	4-10	Bob Shettel	6/19/89	Golden Lake, WY
8 lb.	4-10	Chip Hane	6/20/89	Golden Lake, WY
12 lb.	4-6	Bob Shettel	6/20/89	Golden Lake, WY
Fly Rod				
2 lb.	5-0	Bob Shettel	6/22/89	Golden Lake, WY
4 lb.	4-9	Chip Hane	6/29/89	Golden Lake, WY
8 lb.	4-2	Chip Hane	6/28/89	Golden Lake, WY
12 lb.	4-2	Chip Hane	6/26/89	Golden Lake, WY
16 lb.	3-14	Chip Hane	6/26/89	Golden Lake, WY
20 lb.	1-0	Don Vachini	6/25/91	Steelhead Lk., CA

In fact, the International Game Fish Association (IGFA) World Record Book reveals a bevy of line and tippet-class records that have been established in the Wind River Range since the mid-'80s.

For instance, over a 10-day period in June of '89, Bob Shettel and Chip Hane realized an angling bonanza on a trek to formerly neglected Golden Lake. Here they landed nine oversized goldens — all but one of which was between four and five pounds.

Although these two anglers hold all but two of the 10 IGFA standards for golden trout, Connell expects this record-setting trend to continue, thanks to the inclusion of sterile trout among recent plants. This amounts to a test by the WGFDA to see if even larger fish can be grown. The theory being that sterile fish will use all of their energy for growth rather than producing

eggs. "Over time and under the correct conditions, we expect them to push eight to nine pounds," Connell states.

While smaller specimens are relatively easy to fool, the larger trout can be exasperatingly wary and selective. Connell hints the key to catching these backcountry behemoths is timing. After ice-out, which normally occurs in early July, goldens move into the shallows and feed voraciously for a few weeks before attempting to spawn.

Since they need moving water in which to spawn, various inlets and outlets of the lakes are prime places to locate goldens. "Even if no spawning habitat is present, the big fish instinctively stack up here, making them somewhat accessible," Connell says.

Staying out of the trout's window of vision by creeping to the shore on hands and knees, and keeping a low profile while

casting, are often the intangibles that will prevent spooking and lead to a hookup.

From late July through September the goldens scatter, seeking the sanctuary of deep water, where they become difficult to tempt. Probing small lures or plugs erratically along steep shelves or ledges often stirs their aggressive tendencies. Using a loose drag helps cushion the sudden, slashing strikes that frequently occur.

During late September/early October, goldens tend to gorge in anticipation of winter. Connell acknowledges they are extremely vulnerable during these late season binges.

Since these trout relish tan and green shades of caddis, replicas of these insects are good initial choices. Although goldens will rise to size 10 to 14 Elk Hair Caddis, Royal Coachman, Mosquito or Adams, the large fish often eschew surface groceries, preferring to dine subsurface. Size 12 to 16 Caddis Pupa, Hare's Ear, Bucktail Coachman plus green and tan-shaded nymphs bounced along the bottom of moving water often prove vastly superior to dry flies.

Tiny scud and leech patterns are great shrimp imitations. Orange, pink and green duplicates of these crustaceans, manipulated from deeper to shallow water with a sink-and-draw technique, often prove deadly. Since the strike is often manifested as a slight tug, attention should be riveted on the rod tip.

Often, fish that appear to be ignoring anglers' offerings are consuming the abundant but nearly microscopic zooplankton. Twitching size 14 to 18 nymphs a foot or so

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Big Goldens; Big Challenge

Currently more than 100 Cowboy State lakes are managed for golden trout. While small populations exist in the Absaroka, Bighorn and Snowy mountains, the vast majority are located in the alpine sections of the Wind River Range.

Anglers in search of goldens need to be aware their waters are scattered over 120 miles of mountainous terrain, and many lakes are tucked against headwall glaciers between 10,000 and 12,000-foot elevations.

The following east slope lakes offer stable environments for raising bruiser goldens:

Drainage

Jakey's Fork, Wind River
Dinwoody/Phillips Creek
Bull Lake Creek

Dry Creek
Little Wind River
Middle Popo Agie River

Little Popo Agie River

The following west slope waters, all of which flow into the Green River, are worth a visit:

Drainage

Pine Creek
Pole Creek
Upper Green River
Fremont Lake tributaries

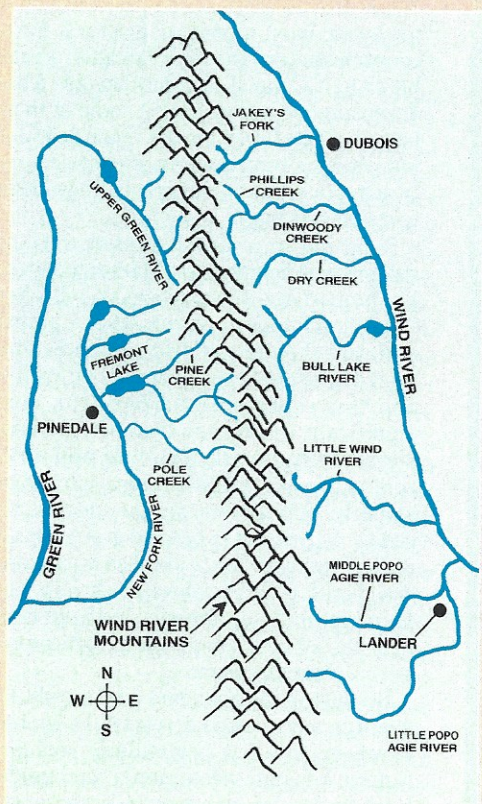
Lakes

Marion, Peat, Dyke
Golden
Sassafras, Golden, Upper Golden, Louise, Jean, Knifeblade, Half & Half, Shield, Dennis (aka Hay Pass), Alpine
Glacier, Golden
Lost, Valentine, Washakie
Gap, Taylo, Coon, Deep Creek, Mountain Sheep
Thumb, Windy, Saddlebag, Atlantic

Lakes

Elbow, Twin
Wall
Golden Lake, Stonehammer, Peak
Island, Upper Jean, Lower Jean, Titcomb

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GOLDEN RULE

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under the surface will occasionally elicit a response at these times.

For fly fishermen, a 5 or 6-weight outfit matched with either a floating line with a sink tip, or high density sinking line, fastened to a 10-foot leader will best present a selection of size 10 to 16 flies.

For the spin angler, a light to ultralight rod and reel loaded with two to four-pound line is an excellent choice. Size 0 to 2, yellow/orange-tinted Panther Martin, Rooster Tail and Vibrax spinners, 1/8 to 1/16-ounce bronze spoons, and two-inch-long yellow/brown Rapalas seem to work best, especially when plied in the proximity of submerged boulders.

Jerkily trailing a fly three feet behind a spinner will sometimes pique the interest of skeptical goldens. A long handled net is necessary to land brawny fish over shoreline obstructions.

Steeped in ruggedness and beauty, and containing potential record trout that have rarely, if ever, seen a lure or fly, Wyoming's Wind River Range provides the quintessential fishery for both angler and golden trout alike. And, if the sterile goldens grow as per biologists' expectations, anglers can

Stocking Golden Trout

While the Wyoming Game and Fish Department has no written management plan, goldens are judiciously managed as an exotic. Upwards of 70,000 eggs are collected annually from Surprise Lake broodstock, incubated and reared to fingerling size (three to five inches), then helicopter-planted in select lakes. Department biologists assess each lake based on a formula of angling pressure and spawning habitat. Lakes with self-sustaining populations are usually just monitored, while those with limited spawning are planted every two or four years. Lakes where no spawning takes place are normally stocked every other year. These latter waters commonly contain plenty of fish in the one to two-pound range along with good numbers of three to five-pounders.

Don Vachini

anticipate breaking the 11-4 world record. Who knows? You could be the one to nail the biggest golden trout ever seen. **WO**

Author Don Vachini of Petaluma, California, has held 11 golden trout IGFA line-class or tippet-class records, including two taken from the Wind River Range.

Wind River Goldens Trip Facts

HOW TO GET THERE: From Interstate 80 at Rock Springs, take Highway 191 north to Pinedale or Jackson. Or from Highway 191 at Farson, take Highway 28 east to Highway 287 through Lander and Dubois. Air service is available to Riverton and Jackson, where cars can be rented. Many paved and dirt roads offer access to trailheads along both slopes of the Wind River Range.

WHERE TO STAY: Numerous towns offer motels, but developed and primitive campsites abound.

BEST SEASON: Early to mid-July is prime time, although September can also be good.

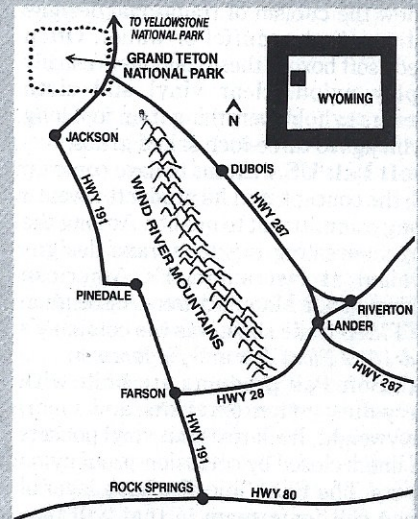
APPROXIMATE COST: A current '92 Wyoming resident fishing license costs \$9 while a non-resident license runs \$50. A special 10 day license is available for \$30. Packer fees range between \$70 and \$85 per day per horse.

WHO TO CONTACT: For a list of licensed guides or outfitters, call (307) 777-5323. Additional information is available from the Wyoming Outfitters' Association, (307) 527-7453.

Information on the following wilderness areas is available from:

Fitzpatrick Wilderness — Wind River Ranger District: Box 186, Dubois, WY 82513; (307) 455-2466.

Popo Agie Wilderness — Lander Ranger District: 600 N. Highway 287, Lander, WY 82520; (307) 332-5460.



Bridger Wilderness — Pinedale Ranger District: Box 220, Pinedale, WY 82941; (307) 367-4326.

Wind River Indian Reservation — Joint Council of the Shoshone and Arapahoe Tribes: Box 217, Ft. Washakie, WY 82514; (307) 332-7207.

For east slope angling information, contact WGFD Lander office (307) 332-2688; for west slope information, contact the Pinedale office (307) 367-4352.

For topographical maps contact the USGS, Box 25286, Federal Center, Bldg. 41, Denver, CO 80225, for a guide to locate specific quadrangles.