



The Deep Creek Lakes house some outstanding goldens that commonly range up to five pounds.

Deep Creek Goldens

A trio of high altitude waters tucked along the Continental Divide house some of the largest golden trout in the world!

Don Vachini

Following the rushing stream up a steep, snow-covered incline, its lake source became visible as we crested the glacier-scoured granitic bench. Discarding my daypack, I crawled up to the edge of the outlet and carefully squinted through my polaroid glasses. Adrenalin surged as at least a dozen thick trout in the one- to five-pound range

languidly finned like glowing embers in the slow moving current! The nearby trout were not just any species, however. They were the rare and mystical golden trout which only dwell in the most rugged and primitive environments, well away from civilized man.

Friend Terry Donahoe and I were high in Wyoming's Wind River mountains

northwest of Lander, exploring the Deep Creek Lakes, a trio of backcountry waters famous for their outsized *Salmo aquabonita*. Nestled well near 11,000 feet in the remote Popo Agie Wilderness, these alpine lakes collect snow and glacier melt originating high along the Continental Divide. This remote chain of headwater lakes create Deep Creek, an arteriole of

the Middle Fork Popo Agie River, itself one of three tributary branches forming the main Popo Agie.

Our trek into this country began on July 10, the day Wyoming celebrated its centennial. A dozen miles out of Lander, we turned off Highway 287, forked onto a dusty dirt road, skirted the Wind River Indian Reservation and endured 14 miles of switchbacks on a narrow, single lane road where we gained over 3,000 feet in elevation before arriving at the Allen's Diamond Four Pack Station.

After a restful night in one of their guest cabins, we spent the better part of a day in the saddle. Following the North Fork trail, we left Dickinson Park, crossed the wilderness boundary, traversed forested ridges and swampy mosquito-infested Sanford Park, forded and re-forded the briskly moving North Fork Popo Agie River several times before ascending to our base camp above Pinto Park. On a high, wooded notch bisecting Echo Lakes, we found a suitable spot for two tents and a cooking area. Besides plenty of firewood, the thick Douglas fir and spruce canopy offered protection from the high winds and late afternoon thunderstorms common to these mountains.

Though moose and elk tracks signified we had left civilization behind, discovering fresh bear prints a mere stone's throw from our tent site concerned us somewhat. The true wilderness mystique enveloped us as we meticulously hung our food high from a sturdy limb, hopefully to alleviate any bruin problems.

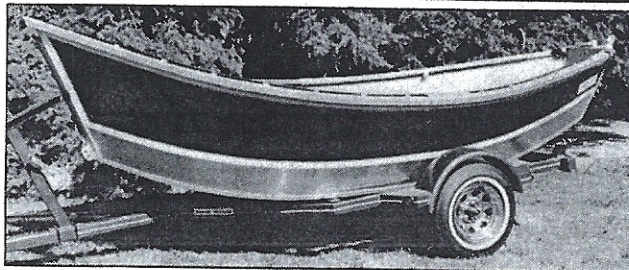
Day one in the backcountry dawned clear and chilly. Daypacks laden with fishing gear, food and camera equipment, we spent 45 minutes ascending the steep ridge before approaching the Deep Creek Lakes. Our three target waters, each stacked out of sight above the other in stepladder tandem, were partially rimmed by polished granite edifices, morainal debris and massive snowfields. All were guarded by sentinel-like Wind River Peak, at 13,140 feet one of the state's tallest points.

Shaking more out of anticipation than cold, we were about to find out firsthand if the Cowboy State's reputation for producing the largest golden trout in the world was well founded. According to Kerry Connell, a fisheries biologist with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, these waters were an outstanding choice. "Hard to reach and lightly fished, they contain some extraordinary specimens," he informed. "However," he cautioned, "they are not easy to catch."

While most of the 55-acre Lower Deep Creek Lake appeared shallow, we gravitated toward a deep, 200 yard-long shelf along the bottleneck shaped inlet

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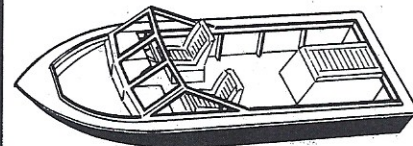
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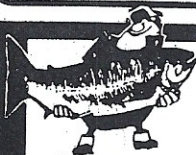
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which Connell suggested we try. Since I had pinpointed a pair of line class standards to shoot for, I rigged up my spin outfit. Utilizing lengthy casts over the dropoff, five to six seconds sink time and slow, bottom-hugging retrieves, my small spinner accounted for five goldens rang-

ing up to 11 inches over a two hour span. Most hits came as the lure approached the ledge-line in about 10 feet of water.

A stand of scrub willow and fir blocked entry to a likely looking stretch of shelfline. However, gaining a slight mechanical advantage by precariously

The Popo Agie Wilderness

Headwaters for numerous streams and rivers, the Popo Agie Wilderness is certainly appropriately named (among Native Americans, Popo Agie translates to "beginning waters"). Buffered by the Bridger Wilderness, Shoshone National Forest, the Wind River Indian Reservation and the Continental Divide, entry into this primitive area is by means as old as history itself—foot or horseback.

Though six trailheads are available near Lander, another eight to nineteen miles travel is still necessary from these takeoff points to golden trout waters. Since a plethora of peaks and valleys make distances deceiving and trails are faint and poorly marked in this primitive area, first time visitors should opt for horseback. Allen's Diamond Four Pack Station, a first rate outfit, services this wilderness. Con-

tact them at (307) 332-2995. A list of licensed packers is also available by calling (307) 777-5323.

Topo maps of the Dickinson Park and Sweetwater Gap quadrangles will aid in route planning.

Forming a lengthy barrier of high elevations, the Wind River Range receives the full brunt of the continental air currents and prevailing westerlies. These turbulent, capricious air currents subject these mountains to unexpected rain and dramatic lightning storms from June through September. Adequate rain gear should include a poncho and high mountain tent with a rain fly. Since summertime temperature will vary from 80 during midday to below freezing at night, appropriate clothing for both extremes is necessary.

Accommodations are available in Lander. Air service is to Riverton, just north of Lander.

Golden Trout

A product of what biologists refer to as variation by isolation, the golden trout evolved nowhere else on this planet but in California's South Fork Kern River tributaries sometime after the last ice age. However, by 1914, this kaleidoscopic trout had been transplanted along a 100 mile swath of the Sierra Nevada Crest and sometime during the '20s, several western states obtained surplus *Salmo aquabonita* eggs for backcountry use.

Even though the California legislature banned egg exports in 1938, a few of these states continue to maintain golden programs. While Idaho and Montana have limited programs today, Wyoming traditionally produces some of the largest specimens in the world. In fact, backcountry plants to Wind River waters have not be duplicated anywhere. While California goldens over 11 inches are considered real trophies, two- to five-pound fish are common in this southwestern mountain range. Not only was the All-Tackle World Record produced here but all current IGFA line and tippet records plus a good share of line and tippet marks in the National Freshwater Fishing Hall

of Fame also.

According to Kerry Connell, a Wyoming DGF fisheries biologist, populations are carefully managed to grow large specimens. Eggs are collected from broodstock fish and incubated in hatcheries. From here, fingerlings are helicopter planted in selected lakes over a four year span. "Lakes with no spawning habitat receive adequate plants to sustain the fishery, while others with degrees of spawning receive supplementary stocks. In all cases, numbers are proportionally monitored to prevent stunting," he informed.

Since most of these lakes are at or near timberline, more and larger food forms are present. Benefitting from what Connell calls "optimum forage opportunities," a dozen selected waters in the Popo Agie Wilderness contain specimens up to five pounds. Besides the Deep Creek Lakes, notable golden waters include Coon, Leg, Washakie, Little Washakie, Saddlebag, Tayo, Thumb, Valentine, Upper Valentine and Windy lakes.

For more information, contact either Connell or Dave Dufek (307) 332-2688.

balancing on a boulder, I whipped a probing cast parallel to the inaccessible shoreline. Ka-Wham! My rod was severely jolted by a hidden force that stubbornly moved away and stayed deep. Gingerly coaxed nearer, a gaudy carmine and flaming-orange shaft suddenly became visible, bolting from the azure darkness as if it were a brilliant charge of lightning spit from an ebony cloud. Its dazzling displays were simply mesmerizing as Terry netted the one pound, six ounce. My first real Wyoming trophy tied the existing 10-pound line class standard with the National Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame!

Day two we planned to explore the upper two lakes, which are all interconnected by Deep Creek. Hiking up the cascading feeder, I came upon the granddaddy goldens holding in the outlet. Since they nobly ignored all our offerings for over an hour, we proceeded to explore further. Past the emerald sheen of this expansive, 65-acre water jutted the serrated ridgeline of the Continental Divide, now slightly obscured by dark, swirling clouds.

However, the presence of such large trout soon drew us back to the outlet like a magnet, where we became so focused on fooling them that we disregarded the rapidly deteriorating weather. Paying for this oversight, we had to scramble under a gnarled stand of stunted spruce while sheets of rain, pea-sized hail and crackling lightning lambasted us for over half an hour. With the lake now whipped to a whitecap-froth, we headed for the comfort of our tents.

The next morning, under bluebird conditions, we again tried the middle lake outlet. The fish were still there and again we were stifled. Three solid hours

of casting, retrieving and changing patterns or lures accounted for little more than interested passes and breath-stopping follows. To ease the mounting frustration, we decided to knock off for a nutrition break.

While munching on some cashews, I impulsively arose, grabbed my spinning rod and headed toward the fish a few yards away, determined to try out a different tactic. Positioning myself well below the holding trout, I planned a downstream retrieve toward their noses. On my very first attempt, three bruisers darted upstream toward the fast-moving spinner, similar to how other offerings had been stalked and spurned at the last instant. This time, however, the quickest of the trio gained momentum, viciously intercepting it head-on, probably more out of territorial irritation than hunger. Heart pounding like a cannon, I endured a pair of aerial pirouettes and several sizzling slashes as the portly brawler painted an array of autumnal shades as it ran amok through the gin-clear outlet. Twice I had to pressure it away from jag-

ged rocks in the deepening channel. More tense moments ensued before the 16-inch, living shaft of light lay gasping in my net. Splashed in vivid blends of vermilion and saffron, the hook-jawed leviathan established the new HOF 12-pound line class mark at one pound, twelve ounces.

That evening, high spirits prevailed

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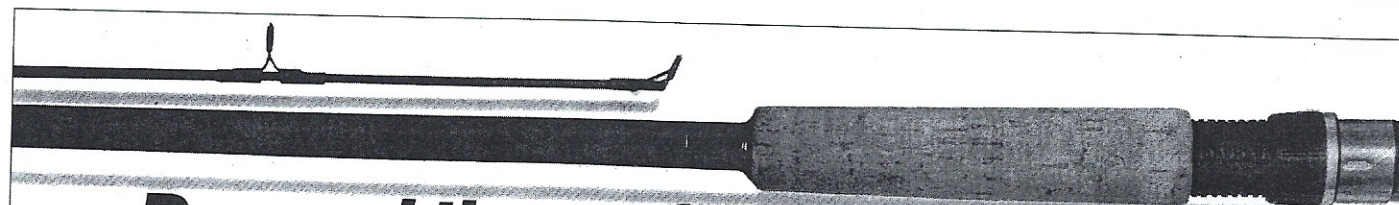
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around the campfire. While being serenaded by a Swainson's Thrush, we feasted on coal-broiled golden, served with Cous Cous and washed down with steaming cranberry tea. Bellies full, we drifted off to sleep marveling at how less-complicated life seems in the alpine-land.

My second trophy seemed to break the ice. Over the remaining three days we became more familiar with these picturesque lakes, even managing to solve a few of the angling mysteries surrounding their giant trout. While unsuccessfully working over the really huge three to five pounders, we did manage to tempt a few approaching two pounds, the majority of which were taken in or near outlets.

A week or two after ice out, the lethargic residents move directly into the shallows where the water warms first. Goldens become aggressive as water temperatures climb above 43 degrees. Since the outlet temperature averaged 46, we'd timed our presence about right.

Preliminary observations revealed healthy hatches of both tan and green caddisflies throughout this high altitude basin. Since this prolific insect is so prevalent, both larval and adult imitations are wise selections. Although the occasional large fish rose to our size 10 to 12 Elk Hair Caddis, Adams, Royal Coachman and Mosquito patterns, sub-surface imitations proved vastly superior, especially when worked deep

in the slow moving current. While Caddis Pupa, Hare's Ear, Bucktail Coachman plus green, tan and brown shaded nymphs drew plenty of strikes, we felt the flowing water helped mask many of our aberrant presentations.

Besides the sizable winged insects, Connell feels it is the presence of zooplankton and the highly caloric freshwater shrimp that accounts for their high proportions. "The bigger fish have a tendency to feed extensively on these highly relished crustaceans, often eschewing the larger groceries on the menu," he confided.

Though difficult to dupe during these periods, weighted green, pink and orange-tinted scud and leech patterns resemble lifelike replicas. Used with short leaders and a sinking line, these size 10 to 16 imitations are deadly when twitched slowly from deeper to shallower water with a sink and draw technique.

For the spinfisher, yellow/orange hued lures probably resemble bite-sized morsels to these lunkers indicating their cannibalistic tendencies toward smaller members. While best results were achieved with Panther Martin, Vibrax and Rooster Tail spinners in sizes zero to two, yellowish brown Rapala plugs worked deep and erratically around huge, sunken boulders also sequestered a few fish.

While the Deep Creek Lakes are managed solely for goldens, other species are available in neighboring waters. In addition to the Ice Lakes, situated two miles south, the tightly grouped quartet of Baer and Echo lakes surrounding our base camp were teeming with healthy and active brook trout up to 12 inches. We usually plied these "home" waters for an hour or so after a days hike and found their steady action like a tantalizing desert following a delicious home-cooked meal.

The willing chars hit just about any type of offering and we quickly lost count of numbers caught and released. Size 12 Adams and Coachman patterns were our initial choices and nothing seriously suggested we change.

Cutthroat were also present, Terry landed a plump 14 incher from an unnamed tarn.

Though the tonic effect of this wilderness, once frequented by Old West legends Chief Washakie and Jim Bridger, proved magical for both Terry and me, we also became believers in the notorious Wind River goldens. Here, in these pristine mountains, we not only experienced the demanding physical effort but the suspense-laden drama associated with pursuing these trophies, whose presence pervades these lakes tucked near the clouds!

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