

John Muir's Happy (Fishing) Trail

Resembling a thin emerald ribbon, the cascading creek babbled a pleasant sonata as it tumbled through lodgepole pine, quaking aspen and white polished granite while coursing a lengthy valley. Resting momentarily on a streamside rock, I proudly watched my 11-year-old son work a section of pocket water with his spinning outfit. Within moments a brilliant swirl flashed through the crystalline water as the diminutive trout danced vigorously but in vain against 2-pound line.

Hastily derricking it out of the water, the lad turned to me to display a wriggling 7-inch shaft of light, adorned in vivid arrays of vermilion and lemon yellow gleaming in the early morning sun. While it was one fish of a hundred or so released on this trip, it remains special in my memory because of the toothy, wide-faced grin that escaped from my son's freckled face.

On this particular outing more than 15 years ago, sons Chris and Matt learned the cagey ways of golden trout for the first time. We had reached our productive Bear Creek destination, which is situated deep in the rugged and majestic High Sierra backcountry between Fresno and Bishop, via the popular John Muir Trail.

As the major bipedal route between Mt. Whitney and Yosemite National Park, this backcountry byway follows the serrated backbone of the Sierra Nevada while coursing a good portion of Kings Canyon National Park plus its namesake wilderness. Over its 120-mile length, the trail undulates through mixed conifers, glacier-polished granite fields and across bouncy creeks while cutting a swath through headwater basins between 9,000 and 12,000 feet, many of which are dedicated to the perpetuation of *Oncorhynchus aqua-bonito*.

Lying just north of the Kings Canyon National Park boundary are

*From the shadows of
Mt. Whitney on
through to Yosemite
National Park, the
well-traveled John
Muir Trail takes
backcountry
followers on a
magical adventure
through golden
trout country.*

by Don Vachini

a trio of inter-connecting drainages, collecting seepage and melt from ice-carved cirques and spires of the Sierra Nevada Crest and ultimately feeding excess flow into the South Fork of the San Joaquin River. With more than 125 lakes between them, the uppermost reaches of French Canyon, Humphrey's Basin and Bear Creek make up the largest concentration of golden trout waters in the world and are good places to get on intimate terms with this gaudily attired species.

Actually, quite a number of interconnecting passageways are available from the Muir Trail. I have found the best way to prospect the numerous upper drainage waters tucked near the clouds is via base camps. By establishing a set campsite, anglers can day hike to nearby waters without heavy backpacks and easily return in time for camp chores and the evening rise.

Best Bear Creek base camps are available at Lou Beverly Lake on the South Fork and along the upper East Fork. French Canyon and

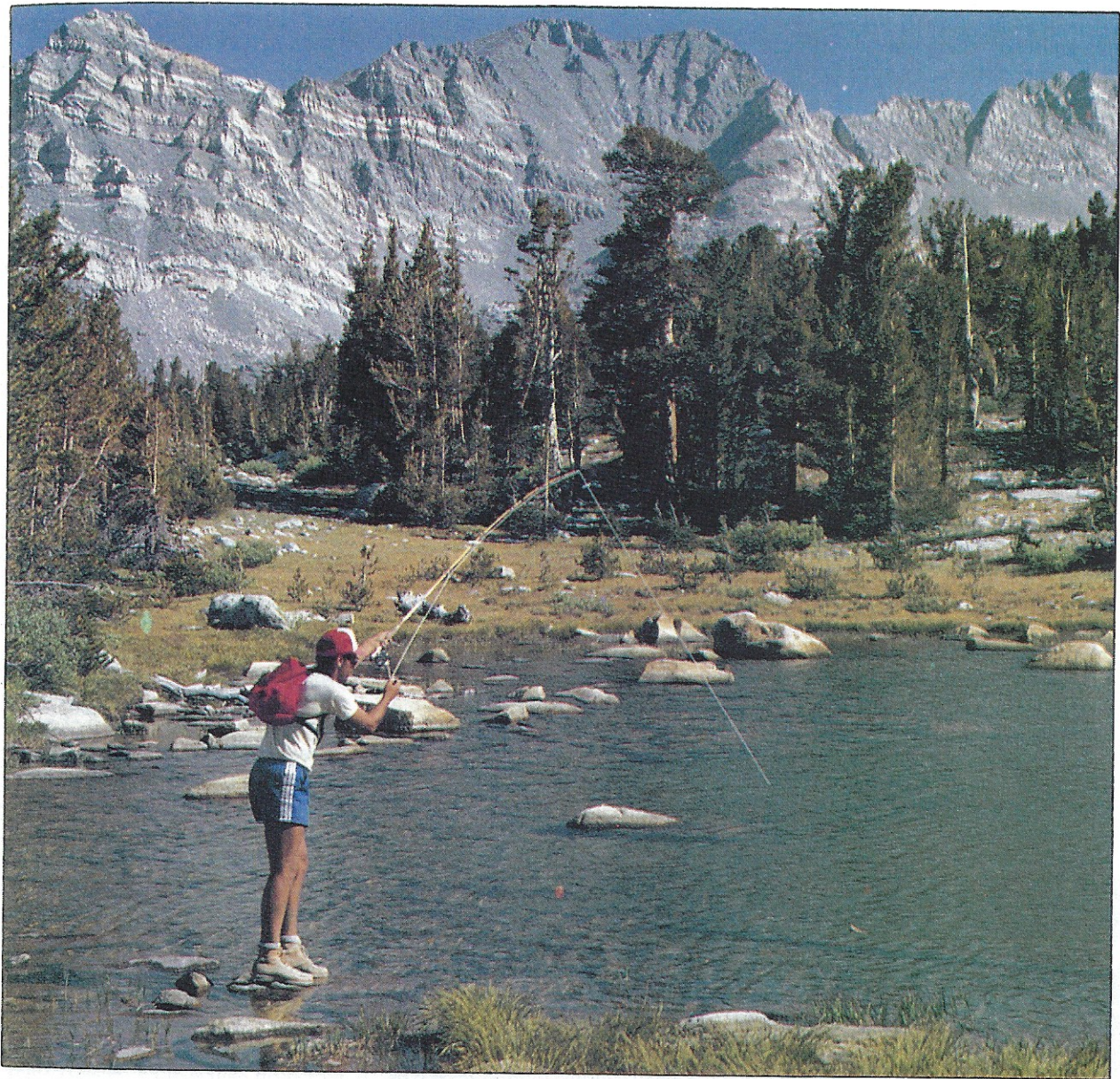
Humphrey's Basin, both gigantic punch bowls of sorts, are reached by a moderate detour off the Muir Trail via Piute Canyon and offer wooded base camps at Alsace, Elba, L, French, Lower Desolation, Golden Trout, Muriel and Packsaddle lakes. Bivouacking from here, Sandpiper, Medley, Three Island, Rose, Vee, White Bear, Black Bear, Ursa, Big and Little Bear Puppett, Paris, Royce, Steelhead, Star, Rust, Desolation, Forsaken and Goethe lakes can easily be sampled. Most of these waters abound with nimble 6- to 8-inch pan-sizers, although a few contain significantly larger members.

In these high-country extremes, food forms are small and growing seasons short, so most residents do not attain large size. In fact, Darrell Wong, a fisheries biologist with the DFG's Bishop office, considers 10- to 11-inch goldens to be trophy size with anything over 12 inches a noteworthy prize. He firmly believes the size of a lake, its richness in natural food and spawning habitat often determines the type of fishery to be expected.

"Waters with excellent spawning habitat and abundant food forms usually possess large numbers of 5- to 7-inch fish, which are subject to plenty of competition for meals," he said. "Keeping a few for the skillet at lakes such as Orchid, Apollo, Flatnote, Seven Gables and Lou Beverly will only help to improve the quality of their fisheries."

Although basically fertile, Tulley, Virginia, Glassy, Hoof, Ursa, Star, Lower Desolation, Black Bear, Teddy Bear, Pioneer and Silver Pass lakes encourage very little spawning. Fair numbers of fish approaching 11 inches in size are present, though they are considerably more wary and somewhat difficult to dupe.

While many of the deep, rock-bound lakes of the higher extremes discourage spawning altogether, they do possess adequate food and will



grow goldens up to 24 inches in some instances. Wong hints that 1- to 3-pounders are fairly common in these isolated locations because there is less competition for the available food and the lakes are lightly pressured. "Puppet, Goethe, Vee, Italy, Steelhead, Royce, Three-Island and Desolation bear special considerations," Wong offered.

Among a dozen or so drainages are possibly 18 to 20 grim and foreboding bodies of water guarded by precipitous cliffs with limited access where this kaleidoscopic trout reaches its pinnacle as a game fish. Over the past eight years, two of my sons and I have scrambled over some of the most God-forsaken arrays of loose talus, icy snowfields and remote ridges to test several of these forlorn waters.

On some occasions, we've had remarkable results. While we have consistently worked over goldens in the 2- to 5-pound category — lost one guess-timated at 6 pounds and released many fish of a pound — a quintet of these lakes has produced a combined 23 line- or tippet-class world records with the National Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame for the three of us — including four on one dream trip!

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

A trio of drainage headwaters, with 125 lakes between them, begin flowing from the ice-carved reaches of the Sierra Nevada Crest. It's here that most of the world's golden trout can be found. Photo by Don Vachini.

typical year) and again in late fall, when they feed voraciously, occasionally with reckless abandon. Early and late day shadows and the cloudy periods preceding 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

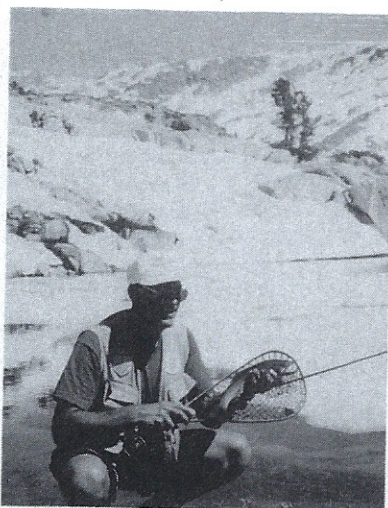
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point. Since granddaddy goldens like to ambush their prey along underwater shelves, I search for the telltale light-to-dark color line indicating this type of structure. On some occasions, individual fish can be pinpointed from above, leading to a direct striking approach. Polarized 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.

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 also be taken to keep silhouettes out of their window of vision while performing demanding casts.

Such was the case during a June 1987 venture to the French Canyon's Royce Lake chain. With the sun barely illuminating the snow-laden



Despite the snow still remaining from winter, author Don Vachini opts for short pants in June. Photo courtesy of Don Vachini.

prominence of 13,077-foot Meriam Peak towering above me, I meticulously crawled over 40 feet of rough granite slabs to the outlet of Royce 2. Stretched out behind a shoreline boulder, I carefully peered into the channel. My heart raced and the grip on my fly rod tightened as seven husky bonita in the 1- to 3-pound range glowed like hot embers

as they languidly finned in the current a mere dozen feet away!

Flat on my back with an uncomfortable rock for a headrest, I stripped fly line onto my stomach and executed a short, well-placed cast above the trout in the narrow vestibule. Seconds after watching a fish unceremoniously inhale the nymph, the crystalline water was set on fire with autumnal hues of cadmium, saffron and flaming orange as the thrashing 14-inch resembler pulsed like a neon lighter. Within a half-hour, two tippet-class world records were netted before intolerable back spasms coerced me to quit.

Team fishing, where one angler spots and directs casts for another, sometimes provides an invaluable edge on these crag-framed waters. Concealed behind a small outcropping that overlooks the Steelhead Lake outlet, sons Jason and Matt and I worked this to perfection during a July 1991 trip. From a lookout, each of us took turns in pointing and guiding each other's casts to several sizeable fish unsuspectingly cruising back and forth along the undercut shoreline, a mere half-dozen feet from the prostrate angler trying for them.

Huddled around a campfire, enjoying the evening's glow and soothing tired, muscles incurred from the demanding climbs and prone stalks, we reflected on the day's cooperative effort that had produced two tippet-class world marks for Jason and one apiece for Matt and me. Amid the laughter, handshakes, backslaps and hot cranberry tea toasts, our pleasing and rewarding angling trifecta took second fiddle. Although the freckles had disappeared, the same broad smiles were present on the now young men — an especially emotional moment for a still-proud father!

One of the main keys to catching these bulky trout is understanding their food forms. While mosquitos, mayflies, damselflies and midges are present, caddisflies and freshwater shrimp seem to make up a good portion of their menu.

Though tan is my favorite, I have also identified brown, green and olive shades of caddis in these lofty drainages. Both larval and adult stages of this prolific insect are

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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 to 14 caddis pupa, Hare's Ear Nymph and Bucktail Coachman patterns have all proved 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 these broad-chested fish. Weighted orange, green and 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 best twitched upward ever so slowly using a sink-and-draw technique. Since the strike can be manifested either 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 hookset.

Spin fishermen using small spoons, spinners or plugs seem to enjoy much success at certain times. Although no baitfish inhabit these lofty waters, gold-plated Wob-L-Rite, Kastmasters, yellow/orange Panther Martin's, yellow RoosterTails, brassy Vibrax and small gold/brown Rapalas probably resemble bite-sized juveniles to the larger goldens.

While patience and 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 three to four feet behind a spinner will often pique the interest of wary denizens.

While angling for big goldens in the more expansive lakes can often prove frustrating, the numerous stream systems which feed and drain many of these provide reliable action. Whether tumbling over boulders of winding through an open meadow, these interconnecting arterioles provide prime trout habitat. Cascading brooks in their headwater

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JOHN MUIR . . . Continued

regions, Bear, Hilgard, Tyndall, Evolution, French, Piaute, Purple, Fish, Senger, North Fork Mono and Darwin creeks often course in and out of forest cover as they gain size from other tributaries.

Generally more vividly adorned than their lake counterparts, the goldens found in the pools, pockets and undercut banks of these tiny rivulets always seem hungry, so matching the hatch isn't crucial. They prefer small profiles and dark patterns which are suggestive of the damselflies, carpenter ants and caddisflies that reside streamside. Woolly Worm, Black Gnat, Flying Ant, Royal Coachman and Pheasant Tail in sizes 12 to 16 are good for starters.

Ultralight spinning outfits loaded with 2- to 4-pound line and 5- to 6-weight fly rods with matching fly lines are more than adequate for presenting the above offerings. We usually carry both floating and sink tip fly lines.

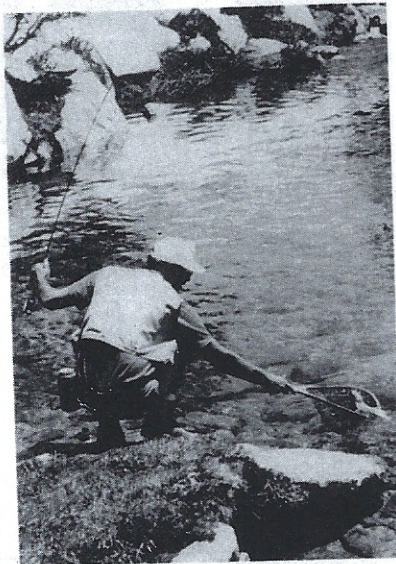
While goldens are the main prize among such productive, beaten-path waters as Wanda, Marie, South America, Rae, Marjorie, Palisades, Evolution, Virginia, Garnet and Thousand Island lakes, brook trout quite often augment these high-elevation fisheries. While hikers who stay solely on the main byway commonly run into waters exhibiting signs of heavy pressure, especially late in the season, those traveling the land as Muir once did — not restricted to any one path — are often piscatorially rewarded for their cross-country treks.

Several loop options are available off the Muir Trail, using either lightly maintained side trails or "ducked" ways. Of the many circuits available, I have particularly enjoyed the Evolution Valley — Humphrey's Basin loop via Piaute Pass — which traverses one of the prettiest meadow/woodlands in the entire Sierra. While attempting to expand our golden horizons last summer, Matt, Jason and I scrambled over a steep, windswept ridgeline to sample a little-known, 24-acre lake nestled deep in Humphrey's Basin.

Overcoming a drenching thunderstorm and a triple-hookup which briefly turned the simultaneous occurrence into a comically

orchestrated rendition of an Italian backcountry fire-drill, we each landed a brookie approaching 1 1/2 pounds! In a complete but welcome surprise, the weighty square-tails established additional tippet marks for each of us — albeit on a different species than we had originally intended.

A pair of the Darwin Lakes trio found in the uppermost reaches of Evolution Canyon offer a rugged side trip for some exceptional rainbows in the 16- to 18-inch range.



Small aquatic insects and a short growing season allow "trophy" goldens to attain lengths of 10 to 11 inches. Photo by Don Vachini.

Accessible from South Lake via Bishop Pass, the Dusy Basin offers a pristine area with good campsites, a splendid view and excellent fishing. While the Dusy and Rainbow lakes plus Dusy Creek are notable hotspots, this trailway leads over Muir Pass and to Wanda Lake.

The Bubbs Creek trail into the Sixty Lakes Basin offers numerous brook and golden trout options and allows for a return to Cedar Grove via Woods Creek.

My favorite circuit, nicknamed the Golden Circle, follows French Creek Canyon over Pine Creek Pass then loops over Italy Pass and finally descends either Hilgard Canyon or the East Fork Bear Creek Canyon back to the Muir Trail.

The gateway to John Muir trailheads on the Eastern Sierra is Highway 395. Several popular trailheads are available via paved side roads from the lengthy concourse. Whitney Portal, Onion

Valley, North and South Lake out of Bishop, and Mammoth and Duck Passes out of Mammoth Lakes offer the most feasible linkups to the Muir Trail.

Popular West Slope trailheads include those from Highway 168 at both Florence and Edison lakes, and from Highway 180 at Cedar Grove in Kings Canyon.

Due to distances and the rarefied air of high elevations, fishermen entering the backcountry should be in good shape, especially when venturing off the main trail. Proper fitting footwear is essential.

While a free wilderness permit is required for wilderness travel, necessary gear should also include a lightweight tent with a rain fly, poncho, backpack stove with fuel and high-quality sleeping bag. Chapstick, sunscreen and sunglasses are also advisable. Since backcountry weather in the high country is always unpredictable, travelers should always be geared for inclement weather.

Besides pinpointing accessible routes to secluded water, topographical maps also reveal unnamed shortcuts between drainage divides which can save time and many miles of travel. For specific quadrangle maps, permits and trail information, contact the White Mountain Ranger District, 798 North Main Street, Bishop CA 93514, or call (619) 873-4207.

For those not willing or able to enter the wilderness on foot, pack stations with sure-footed mountain horses and mules are located at most trailheads, catering to both first-time or seasoned riders. For information on individual packers contact: West Slope High Sierra Packers Association, P.O. Box 1362, Clovis, CA 93613, or for the Eastern Slope, Eastern High Sierra Packers Association, 690 N. Main Street, Bishop, CA 93514, or call (619) 873-8405.

Whether dredging a tiny "nugget" from a gurgling stream, probing a lightly fished tarn or prospecting a granitic punch bowl two miles up for a line- or tippet-class world record, the John Muir Trail is there to direct adventuresome anglers on a magical tour of this majestic, ice-carved escarpment — otherwise known as golden trout country! □