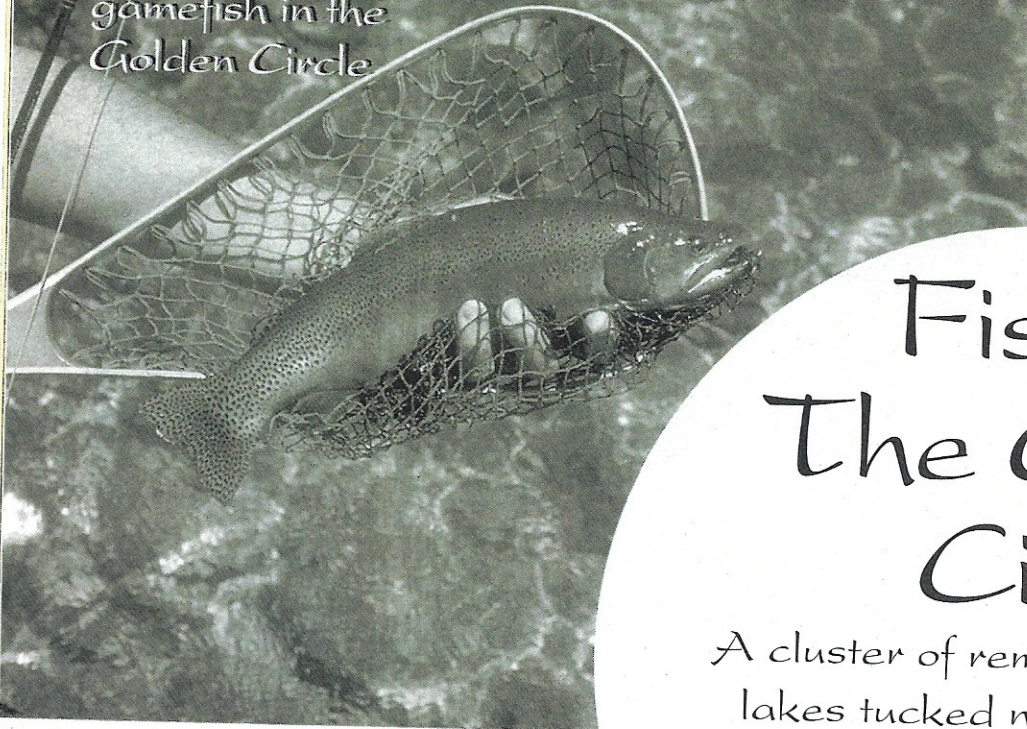


This kaleidoscopic trout probably reaches its pinnacle as a gamefish in the Golden Circle



Fishing The Golden Circle

A cluster of remote Sierra Nevada lakes tucked near the clouds are guarded by limited access and treacherous angling conditions.

They are also home to some world-class golden trout

Don Vachini

languidly two body lengths away. The rock-dodging episode merely served to remind me that there are certain caveats common to these lakes which are a consequence of their remoteness.

Bear Creek, along with Humphrey's Basin and French Canyon, a trio of neighboring drainages, cover about a 60 mile swath just north of King's Canyon National Park. Here, over 125 lakes, dedicated to the perpetuation of California's official state fish, collect ice and snow melt from among these three backcountry extremes, their overflow

eventually ending up in the South

Fork of the
S a n

Joaquin
River.

Clack!! The hairs on my neck stood at attention and my ears strained to identify the sound. Click, clack, clump!! The disturbance originated less than a hundred yards above me where a pair of boulders became dislodged from their precarious perch and began an impetus-gathering, gravitationally-induced descent directly at me. In the not-so-enviable position of witnessing a small avalanche from downslope, I hastily peered about, focusing on a tilted slab of granite protruding maybe eight feet in the air. Thanks to a major adrenaline surge, I was able to uproot my planted feet and flatten myself up against it seconds before assorted fragments rumbled past me, vehemently kerplunking into the lake!

Eventually ridding myself of the shakes, I somewhat undauntedly proceeded toward my destination halfway around the lake, now cautiously eyeballing rock formations about every dozen steps. Then, while glancing into the limpid depths, my heart suddenly resumed pounding like a cannon, although this time for a different reason. Cruising not more than 10 feet from shore were a quintet of girthy, two- to three-pound golden trout, their crimson undersides setting the dawn on fire as they unsuspectingly cavorted back and forth in the narrow inlet—exactly the situation I

had been seeking before the cavalcade of boulders had so rudely interrupted me!

This particular day in early July of 1994 found friend Terry Donahoe, sons Jason and Matt plus myself high in California's majestic Sierra Nevada Mountains, spread out along the talused shoreline of a sapphire body of water nestled just below 12,700 foot Italy Pass. It had taken us nearly two days and a gain of close to a mile in elevation to reach this secluded basin enclosed within the boundaries of the half-million acre John Muir Wilderness between Fresno and Bishop. Veering off the heavily traveled Muir Trail, we trudged five miles up Hilgard Canyon, carefully maneuvered through the "eye of the needle," left timber far behind and finally dragged our feet over a scree-laden moonscape to arrive at our windblown base camp along the outlet of Teddy Bear Lake. While here, we planned to explore five clustered Bear Creek lakes, a trio of which were reputed to house some extremely large specimens of this gaudily-embazoned trout. Certainly, you can imagine my anticipation as I prepared to cast to the conclave of gargantuans finning

However, sitting atop this myriad of interconnecting watersheds are possibly two dozen or so elite

waters, often referred to as the Golden Circle lakes, where, according to Dale Mitchell, a fisheries biologist with the California Department of Fish and Game, *Oncorhynchus aqua-bonita* probably reaches its pinnacle as a game fish. "Two to five pounders are fairly common in these isolated waters," he maintains. "Puppett, Steelhead, Desolation, Goethe, Three-Island, Vee and the Royce Lakes, plus a few other unmentionables, contain some extremely noteworthy specimens."

Carved out by glaciers and sparkling like emeralds among settings of white polished granite, these select lakes undoubtedly represent a unique niche for the golden. Enduring short growing seasons and small food forms, this fish normally does not attain large proportions. Most anglers consider 11 inchers to be trophy size and anything approaching a pound, real bragging fodder. Mitchell, however, feels these Circle lakes consistently provide notable exceptions. "Several house rather concentrated densities of fish in the 12 to

15 inch range, others consistently average in the 15 to 18 inch category while less than half support low numbers of significantly larger 17- to 24-inch specimens!"

Descending from this lofty Bear Creek drainage, our party was emotionally as high as some of the peaks surrounding Italy Pass as we recalled our five day accomplishments. Not only did we expand on our trophy-waters list, release over 40 trout and work over numerous fish up to four pounds but managed to add four more line or tippet world records to our growing family list. Small wonder that before we reached the trailhead, plans were already in the offing for a return visit to explore more of the circle lakes.

While peaks that stroke the sky provide us with some fascinating vistas, it is the euphoria of pursuing and catching granddaddy goldens in improbable lakes found nearly two miles up that lures us back so religiously. Since 1985, my sons Chris, Matt, Jason and I have zeroed in on several of these hard to reach waters, armed with a wide assortment of lures, flies, tippets and monofilament lines. To date, we have struck it rich on seven of these crag-framed gems which have not only provided us with some of our biggest angling thrills but rewarded us with a remarkable 28 line or tippet class standards with either the International Game Fish Association (IGFA) or the National Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame (HOF).

Somewhat dispelling an existing fallacy about lakes above timberline not producing big fish, Mitchell confides that these special lakes tucked among forsaken headwater cirques and benches possess the necessary ingredients conducive to producing outsized specimens. In addition to limited spawning habitat, all contain adequate food and ample cold water temperatures. In fact, Mitchell firmly believes that spawning streams are quite often the downfall of many a promising high elevation lake. "In some of the lower lakes with abundant spawning capabilities, fish reproduce so successfully that they deplete their food supply and stunt," he maintains.

Although Mitchell ascertains that many trout lakes in the Sierra have a fish surplus—not a food shortage—he is convinced that golden populations are in a healthy balance with the food supply at most Circle lakes. "Since many of these waters support low densities, there is less competition for the available food and individual fish can attain phenomenal growth rates," he happily states.

Extremely light angler pressure is yet another instrumental factor entering into the big fish producing formula. Most of these lakes are lightly fished and unless hammered by consumptive anglers, can indefinitely maintain status quo. Besides being deep and vast, most of these waters contain areas which can-

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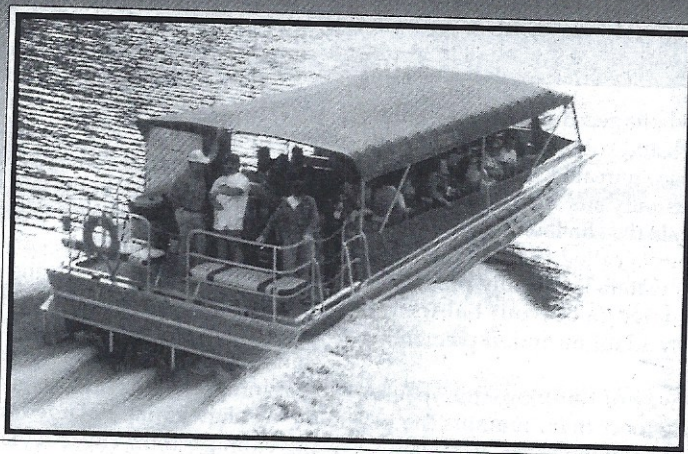
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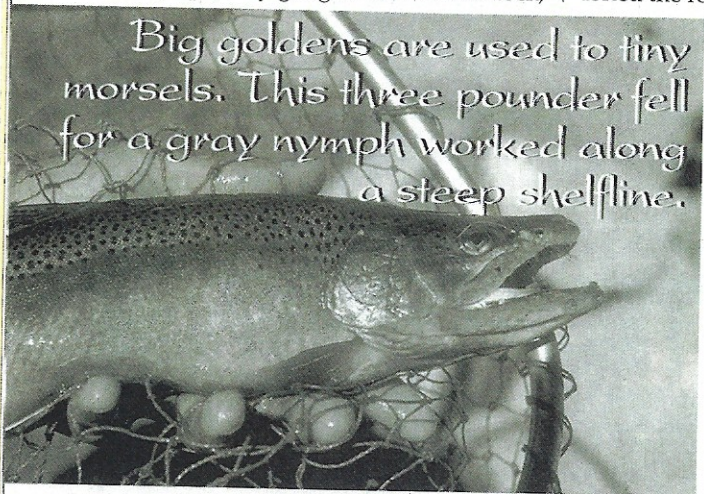
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not be effectively worked by shore anglers. "Additionally, a few see less than 20 rods per year," he informs.

To effectively tangle with these bruisers, however, anglers must be prepared to meet them on their own battlefields which is not always a simple task. The alpine lakes of this region share a common geology regardless of size. As glaciers moved downslope, they gouged out soil and rock,



Big goldens are used to tiny morsels. This three pounder fell for a gray nymph worked along a steep shelfline.

leaving bowl-shaped depressions behind berms of rock and rubble which filled with water as the ice retreated. The deepest part of the lake usually sits against a headwall or cirque while the shallow flat area where water escapes is called the moraine. Success in these waters is not only predicated upon a knowledge of trout habits and habitat but by adapting and implementing special tactics.

By my way of thinking, this species' high altitude food chain remains the key ingredient in catching them. Personally, I have noticed that goldens in these lakes garner the bulk of their food in shallow water. Most notably, the edge of the moraine is often the most fertile grounds for insect life and subsequently attracts the greater number of fish. Broad-chested goldens looking for a meal regularly cruise the outside edges of these dropoffs since they offer both food and quick access to the sanctuary of deep water. For this reason, I visually inspect most of the shoreline using polaroid glasses. Whenever possible, I make an attempt to observe the water from a higher vantage point, and in doing so can get a pretty good feel for its more productive locales, occasionally pinpointing the quarry as well.

While many of the higher rockbound lakes don't have true shallows, they do possess shelves extending 10 to 20 yards from shore, in some cases dropping rather abruptly into deeper water. Just this past summer I was prospecting the shoreline of a Hilgard Creek feeder for productive structure. A large swath of dark, aquamarine water temptingly indicated a steep shelfline maybe 30 yards offshore and, unable to resist, I instinctively whipped

out a green and yellow Bingo Bug 3 1/2 feet ahead of a sliding sinker. Counting to 15, I let it settle and began an erratic, speed-varying retrieve. As the lure approached the lip of the dropoff, a submerged force vanquished it from underneath, pleasantly doubling my ultra-light spinning rod. Though I feared the knife-edged granite would sever my line, I lofted the rod high over my head and with

both arms extended, not only maintained steady pressure but parried each run with movements not unlike a dueling foil. As each burst and subsequent turn lit up the ebony depths like lightning bolts, my reel chimed in a soothing, accompanying staccato. Patience and luck presided and I was soon tailing a rotund, 19-inch prize. While the 2 pound, 2 ounce re-wrote the new HOF Unlimited line class standard, its vivid coloration, which fanned the kaleido-

scopic spectrum from vermilion to flaming orange, served as a fitting reminder of its Latin binomial nomenclature which translates to "pretty in the water!"

Other prime locales worth checking out on these forlorn lakes are their inlets and outlets, especially during early morning shadows or as soon as the sun dips behind the peaks. Since moving water is a source of both food and oxygen, feeding or spawning goldens tend to gravitate here, often congregating in large numbers. During calm periods, these leviathans often expose their dorsals on the mirror surface as they forage, thus tipping off their presence from a distance.

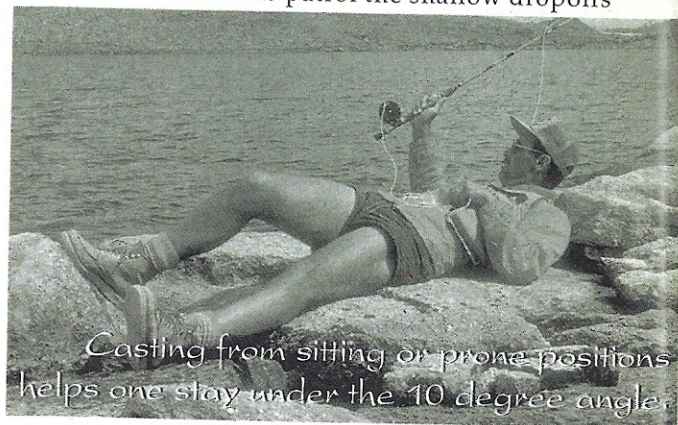
Whether plying an inlet, outlet or shoreline structure, the biggest mistake often made by neophyte anglers is walking upright and projecting their shadow on the water thus triggering an inherent panic mode. Instead, keep a low profile, crouch behind rocks or obstructions and cast parallel to the right or left shoreline before attempting perpendicular presentations. Crawling stalks on hands and knees and demanding casts from sifting, kneeling or prone positions makes it possible to avoid spooking these biggies, especially when no shoreline cover is available. In an effort to stay out of their line of vision, I generally try to remain under the 10 degree angle.

The buddy system, whereby a spotter observes fish from a higher vantage point and verbally directs their partner's casts, is

often a deadly ploy. Most recently, this tactic worked to perfection at the funnelled outlet of Three-Island Lake where I proudly watched Jason meticulously crawl to within five feet of several out-sized bonita stacked up against the undercut bank and lay prostrate on his back to stay out of their window. Calling out instructions while concealed behind a small outcropping, I observed him shortline a Hare's Ear nymph into the slow-moving current. As a fish darted to intercept it, I shouted "pull" and he blindly set the hook. Remaining low, he not only managed to deftly subdue but stealthily net the thrashing battler without spooking the remaining fish. Then, it was my turn... Our reciprocal actions, which took just under 40 minutes to accomplish, accounted for a duet of HOF tippet records!

Understanding their eating habits goes a long way toward duping these wary, often highly selective feeders. Even though covered with ice for eight months, these sky-high lakes are very fertile according to Mitchell. "In addition to an abundance of zooplankton, most support caddis hatches in good numbers while all contain seemingly-prolific numbers of gammarus."

Since the weighty residents prefer to dine subsurface and are used to tiny morsels, size 12 to 16 Hare's Ear, Bead Heads, Caddis pupa and Caddis nymph patterns in tan, brown green and olive shades are most suitable. However, Mitchell feels that it is most likely the scud, present in amazing abundance, which accounts for a significant portion of their diet. "Not only are they an important source of caloric intake, but they are responsible for amazing growth patterns among these beautiful trout," he informs. "Goldens patrol the shallow dropoffs



Casting from sitting or prone positions helps one stay under the 10 degree angle.

relentlessly in pursuit of this highly relished, bottom-dwelling crustacean."

Scuds here typically measure from 1/4 to 1/2 inch, are transparent and range from tan to olive with pink or amber highlights. Size 12 to 18 Scud patterns with olive-gray, pink and orange bodies and tied with a weighted underbody seem to pique the interest of these massive citizens. Because these freshwater shrimp swim on

their backs, imitations tied to float upside down are almost too good to resist. Since the hook rides with its point upward, it not only bumps bottom with less chance of snagging but sets firmly in the trout's snout. For best results, fish the fast-sinking Scud with a floating line and 12-foot leader with a 4X tippet. The fly can be easily cast yet sinks like a rock, just the ticket for twitching it along the sandy bottom.

Either retrieving with a sink and draw technique over deep water or darting the fly off a sandy bottom and letting it settle before resuming the retrieve is a highly effective procedure. Since the take can be manifested as either a dull tug or slashing jolt, anglers should set the hook at any line movement. The rod tip should be pointed toward the fly and just about at water level to aid in a more efficient hook set.

While big goldens will readily pursue the scud as it is stripped, they will sometimes inhale it as it drops toward the bottom. On our recent mid-July trip, my morning's first cast was parallel to a steep dropoff. Before the orange Scud had barely settled into the water, a V-wake materialized toward it. Pulse rate rising, my line hesitated slightly then became a tensile guitar strand as I gently lifted the tip. Probably hooking itself, the thick two pounder not only helped awaken me with several dramatic aerial displays and autumnally-hued splashes, but established a new six-pound tippet mark with the IGFA.

I usually don't attempt lengthy casts in these open lakes, instead opting for the more attainable shallow zone and well-placed presentations. Rather than simply blind casting, I commonly attempt to locate a cruiser, then flick my offering six to eight feet ahead of the leader-shy leviathan. While there is often plenty of room for backcasts, jagged slabs or rocky outcroppings often take the place of trees and brush as obstacles. A 7 1/2 foot, 4 weight outfit with matching floating line and a nine-foot leader suits my situation perfectly. After a half dozen or so casts, I methodically run my fingers along tippets or leaders to check for nicks or abrasions since the bottoms of these glacial lakes are often paved with sharp, jagged rocks and abrasive boulders.

As a general rule, when fish vacate the shallows, which usually occurs during the intense sunlight of midday, I find it a good time to change tactics and ply the deepest part of the lake. In an attempt to coax resting fish, I opt for spinning gear. Although these trophy goldens seem to prefer an insect diet, they will succumb to hardware if it is presented properly. Casting lengthy deep while trying to cover as much territory as possible. Since they demonstrate a tendency to ambush their prey, herky-jerky retrieves between and around submerged boulders often leads to jarring strikes as it



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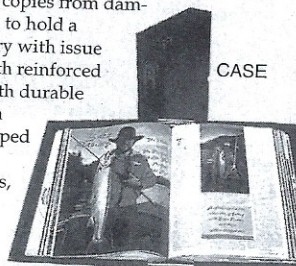
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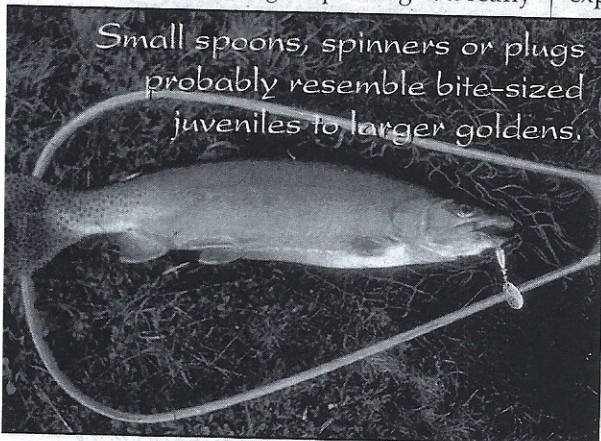
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appears the bait is about to escape. I have also made it a policy not to give up on retrieves too soon as wary denizens sometimes make exasperatingly lengthy pursuits before deciding to either attack or swim away right along the bank.

While old standbys such as yellow Rooster Tail, yellow and orange Panther Martin and bronze-plated Mepps and Vibrax spinners, gold-hued Kastmaster, Wob-L-Rite, Phoebe and Needlefish spoons plus brown and yellow Rapalas have treated me well over the years, modern technology continues to gain impetus. The new line of Bingo Bugs, Pro Secrets, Cripple and Hum Dinger lures not only resemble bite-sized goldens via their coloration but their action is scientifically designed to incite aggression, especially in the bigger fish. Size 0-2 artificials with weights under 1/8 ounce seem to be their preferred targets.

Perfect for presenting dainty offerings, an ultra-light spinning rod really



Small spoons, spinners or plugs probably resemble bite-sized juveniles to larger goldens.

enhances the fighting qualities attributed to these 24-carat steelhead. While most fast action rods will suffice, my favorite backcountry weapon is a 5 1/2 foot Daiwa Eliminator.

Once feeling the sting of steel, these gladiators can really turn on the muscle, making powerful, surging runs toward sharp rocks or deeper water. Lighten the drag and let them run but hold the rod as high as possible to maintain a mechanical advantage and keep them near the surface. In these lakes, a net is virtually a must not only to land the quarry over harsh granite and cumbersome boulders but to ensure a safer, more gentle release.

Entry into these upper-echelon, headwater lakes is strictly via bipedal locomotion with off-trail movement pretty much an absolute requirement. However, one must pay special attention to details when traipsing cross-country, for this high country ecosystem can be very unforgiving. Hikers commonly battle fatigue as they near the end of arduous ascents in the presence of rarefied air which sometimes tends to cloud their caution. I vividly remember 16 year-old Jason stepping into a chest-deep crevasse as he uncharacteristi-

cally attempted to rush negotiations with a snowfield on a mid-June 1988 venture into the Royce Lakes chain. Rapid gains in elevation can also bring about dizziness, headache and nausea, a phenomenon commonly identified as altitude sickness.

Though many of our backcountry ventures have not been without incident, on a few occasions they actually became life threatening! While my most recent brush with backcountry adversity occurred when I found myself barely averting the path of a mini avalanche, other heart-stopping moments have included dangerous scrambles across jumbled granite or icy snowfields, treacherous high stream crossings, a pair of battles with some particularly nasty inclement weather and a near-bout with hypothermia. My absolute scariest situation, however, involved extreme negligence on my part.

Nine years ago while travelling alone, I was plying a small tarn nestled along an exposed ridgeline. Although a storm was

brewing, the suddenly-torrid fishing kept me from departing long enough to flirt with disaster. Releasing my seventh trout in as many casts, I suddenly felt the hair on my neck tingle as nostrils detected the strange aroma of ozone. A black nimbus cloud had approached so close it was practically touching my fly rod. Not only was I the highest spot but I was brandishing a graphite lightning rod as well! A blinding flash occurring simultaneously with a sizzling clamor resembling a thousand watermelons splitting on cement assisted my hasty, downhill retreat. From safely below, I watched several other well-lit strikes along the very area I'd just vacated. One in particular, had been too close for comfort!

Framed by horizon-dominating edifices, serrated sentinels and ethereal air, the golden's presence pervades the Golden Circle. Whether journeying to these lakes near the clouds to admire the iridescent coloration of the crown jewel of the trout family or to match wits with bulky, world class specimens, adventuresome anglers must not only be prepared to endure rigorous physical and mental challenges but should be armed with a tactical arsenal as well. Indeed, visitors to these lakes will usually find these sizeable specimens to be just as difficult to catch as they are to reach!

Reaching the Golden Circle Lakes

Remote lakes take time and effort to reach. While you need not be a world class athlete, it is a mistake to underestimate the effort to heft a full pack over rugged country at high altitude. Don't wander into the high country unless you are both mentally and physically prepared, and by all means, don't go alone. If, after research, you deem

a water beyond comfortable hiking range, have a horsepacker drop you and your gear close to the water. By setting up a base camp nearby, you will reach the lake much more refreshed and with plenty of energy to fish.

Four reputable packers service the trio of High Sierra drainages. For those seeking a west slope entrance, High Sierra Pack Station; P.O. Box 11 66; Clovis, CA 93613; (209) 299-8297 and D & F Pack Station; P.O. Box 156; Lakeshore, CA 93634; (209) 893-3220 or (510) 946-1475 are best suited. Pine Crook Pack Trains; P.O. Box 968; Bishop, CA 93514; (619) 387-2747 and Bishop Pscck Outfitters; 247 Cataract; Bishop, CA 93514; (619) 873-4785, are excellent eastern Sierra backcountry vendors.

Besides well broken in footwear, necessary gear should include a backpackers tent and a rainfly suitable for windy conditions, a sleeping bag capable of handling freezing temperatures, a backpackers stove with fuel, and lightweight but durable rain gear. A hat, sunglasses, Chapstick and sunscreen are also necessary commodities.

Even though major passes Pine Creek, Selden, Italy and Piaute are linked by maintained trails, scanning topo maps, studying declinations and cross-country travel along sketchy, ducked ways are often necessary procedures for reaching Circle lakes. Although not always identified on maps, Alpine col, Steelhead, Puppet, Feather, Brown Bear and Granite passes offer demanding yet feasible short cut routes between adjoining drainage waters.

Topographical maps of the Sierra Nevada Range are available from the U.S. Geological Survey Map Sales, P.O. Box 25286, Denver, CO, 80225; (303) 236-7477. The Mt. Tom and Mt. Abbott quadrangles will help plan cross-country routes. Forest Service maps of the John Muir Wilderness, which contains the largest concentration of golden trout waters in the world, can be obtained from the White Mountain Ranger District; 798 North Main St.; Bishop, CA 93514; (619) 873-4207.

Fish and Game biologists Dale Mitchell, Fresno (209) 222-3761 and Darrell Wong, Bishop offices (619) 872-1171 are reliable sources of information regarding John Muir Wilderness trophy lakes.

Some Exceptional Golden Circle Lakes

Sources in the DFG hint that nearly two dozen or so Humphrey's Basin, French Canyon and Bear Creek drainage waters offer adventuresome anglers possibly the best chances at tangling with world class specimens. While pan-size goldens abound in many of the smaller lakes and stream systems of these drainages, the really big trophies are only found in the more isolated, inhospitable lakes approaching 11,000 and 12,000 feet.

Bisected by Paiute Creek, Humphrey's Basin is a broad, ice-carved bowl strewn with jumbled talus and boulder fields. Forsaken, Goethe, Lower Goethe and appropriately-named, 220 acre Desolation Lake house fair numbers of fish up to 17 inches.

The four separate forks that drain the vast Bear Creek backcountry are especially noteworthy for resident fish up to 10 inches. Resting above these streams around the 11,000 foot mark, White Bear, Teddy Bear, Big Bear and Merle have goldens up to 16 inches. Three-island, Brown Bear, Vee and Italy lakes contain 17 to 24 inch lunkers, albeit in small numbers.

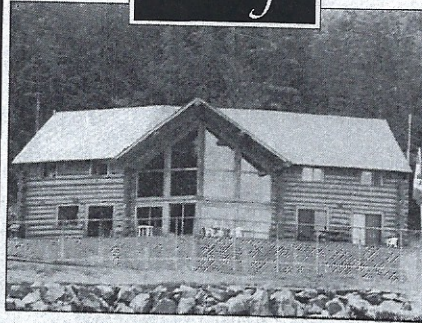
Tabbed most likely to produce hefty bruisers in the two to four pound class are no less than eight French Canyon waters. All lie among rugged benches, glacial scours and precipitous cliffs with little or no vegetation. While Merriam and French consistently put out catches to 15 inches, the list grows more impressive with Steelhead, Star, Paris and Puppert annually yielding a few fish between two and three pounds.

The Royce Lakes 2, 3, 4 and 5, resting between 11,670 and 11,770 feet, contain specimens up to 24 inches with a few possibly estimated near four pounds. There were several unconfirmed reports of an eight pounder taken from Royce 4 a few years back.

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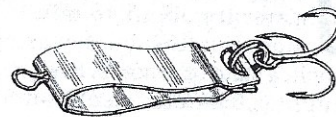
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Right now, every squawfish you catch, 11 inches or longer, is good for cash. And from June 17 to 25, each registration station will award the catcher of the longest fish a \$500 G.I. Joe's gift certificate. Plus tagged fish can net you anywhere from \$50 to \$250. Grab a starter kit at G.I. Joe's or call 1-800-622-4520.



GET UP TO \$5 FOR EVERY SQUAWFISH AND A CHANCE TO WIN G.I. JOE'S GIFT CERTIFICATES.

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