

# techniques for *Golden Trout*

Story and Photos by Don Vachini

*Anglers pursuing these trout must not only be prepared to utilize special tactics but to meet them on their own terms.*

**M**esmerizing anglers with a startling array of vermillion, lemon yellow, and flaming orange markings, the coloration of the golden trout rank it as the crown jewel of the salmonid family.

Native to areas of harsh growing conditions, this product of what scientists refer to as variation by isolation, doesn't

girthy, 2- to 3-pound trout. Their crimson undersides were glowing like hot embers as they unsuspectingly cavorted in the narrow channel. With my heart pounding like a cannon, I tightened the grip on my fly rod!

I soon found myself flat on my back at the Royce #2 outlet with an uncomfortable rock for a headrest. Stripping fly

## HISTORY

Until discovered by white settlers in the mid 1860s, this kaleidoscopic trout maintained its genetic integrity for centuries in a pair of South Fork Kern River tributaries in the southern reaches of California's majestic Sierra Nevada.

Thanks to Department of Fish and Game (DFG), mule train plants commencing at the turn of the century expanded the range of the golden trout to a 100 mile swath along the southern Sierras by 1914. So successful were these stocking efforts that during the late 1920s, the DFG began shipping eggs by rail to a few other western states including Washington, Idaho, and Montana, and most notably, Wyoming's Wind River range has become an important golden mecca.

Before the California Legislature banned egg exportation in 1938,



*Above: The golden trout showcases a vivid array of colors.*

*Lower right: Often thought of as diminutive, the golden can reach respectable size.*

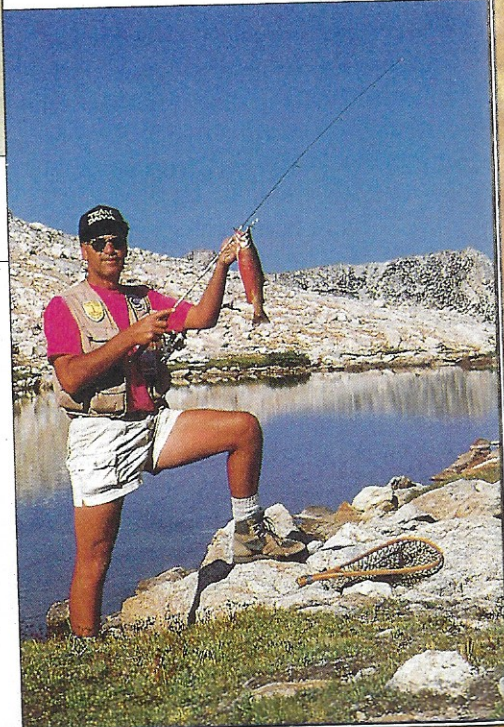
normally attain large size.

Indeed, most biologists suggest that any golden over 10 inches is a trophy. Specimens approaching a pound are considered to be real bragging material.

## WORLD RECORDS

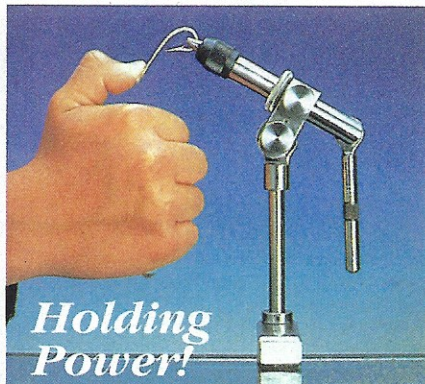
Imagine my surprise then, in June of 1987, as I glanced into the Royce Lake #2 outlet which sits well above the 11,000 foot elevation in California's French Canyon drainage. Not more than a dozen feet away were a quintet of

line onto my stomach and executing a short, well placed cast above the nearby trout, I watched one unceremoniously inhale the nymph. A second after setting the hook, the crystalline water was instantly set on fire as the 14-inch thrashed wildly, resembling a pulsating neon light. Within half an hour, the International Game Fish Association's (IGFA) 4- and 8-pound tippet class world records were netted before back spasms forced me to quit.



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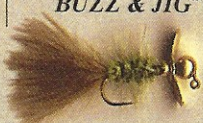
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## techniques for *Golden Trout*

Wyoming had developed one of the most successful hatchery programs for goldens anywhere.

Today, both the Sierra Nevada and Wind River mountains are home to either self-sustaining or hatchery-aided populations of goldens.

### CALIFORNIA STATUS

Currently, the *Oncorhynchus aqua-bonita* range in California encompasses about a 150 mile swath along the Sierra Nevada backbone, roughly between Mt. Whitney and Yosemite National Park.

A lofty trio of neighboring basins, just north of Kings Canyon National Park between Fresno and Bishop, make up the largest concentration of golden trout waters in the world. With more than 120 lakes, French Canyon, Humphrey's Basin, and the Bear Creek drainages serve as a good locale to get on intimate terms with the gaudy California state fish.

The vast majority of these lakes, which are dedicated to the perpetuation of this emblazoned trout, harbor abundant and willing numbers of 6- to 9-inch living shafts of light.

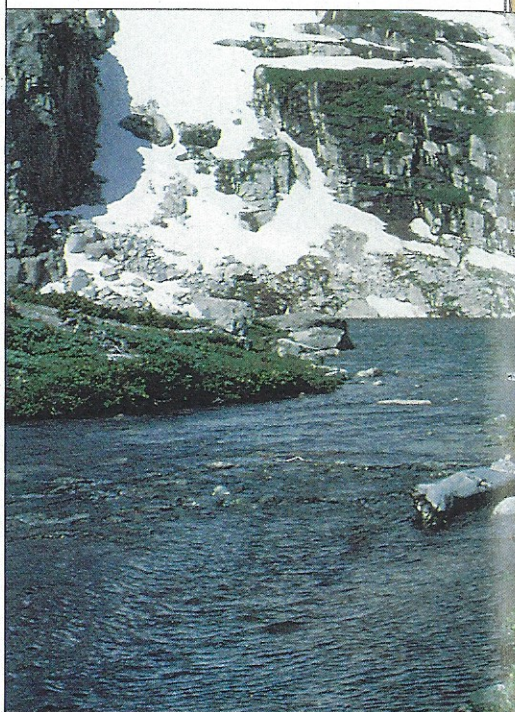
According to Mike Morgan, owner of the Bishop Pack Station in California, a few of these select lakes, carved out by glaciers and sparkling like emeralds

Royce 2, 3, 4, and 5, Brown Bear, and Three-Island lakes, among others, possess conditions feasible to growing better than average specimens.

These lakes are not only difficult to reach, they are deep and fertile and lack suitable spawning habitat. Residents commonly average 13 to 16 inches and approach 2 to 3 pounds at best. "However, a few individuals will possibly push 5 pounds or more in some of the really isolated waters," he happily informs.

### WYOMING STATUS

Initial stocking efforts in Wyoming were

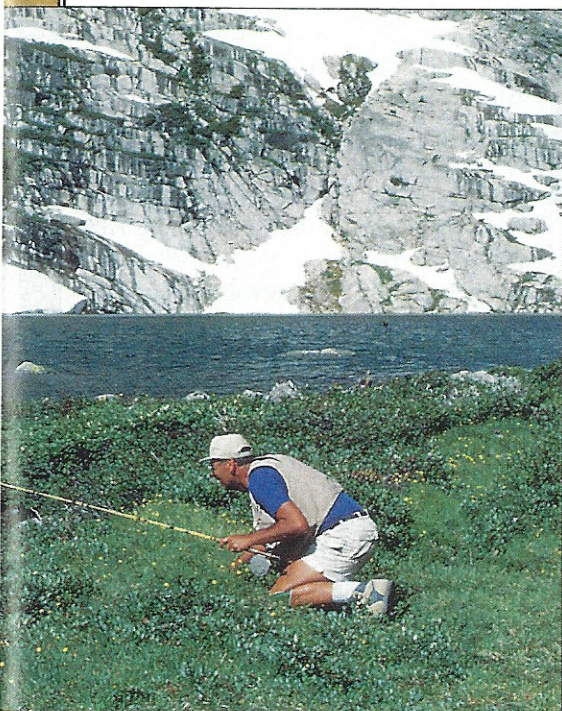


among settings of white polished granite, represent a unique niche for the golden—somewhat dispelling the fallacy that lakes above timberline can't produce big fish. He feels Puppet, Desolation, Goethe,

also carried out by mule train beginning in 1936. Principal beneficiaries were a handful of formerly barren alpine lakes scattered along the crestline of the rugged Wind River mountains, sitting in the

southwestern corner of the state. According to Jim Allen, of Allen's Diamond Four Pack Station in Wyoming, the golden flourished here virtually unnoticed for decades, attaining unheard of proportions. Not only have these mountains produced the All-Tackle world record 11-pound, 4-ouncer which has stood since 1948, but routinely yield specimens in the 2- to 5-pound range." During the past 5 seasons alone, various line- and tippet-class world records have been broken and re-broken over 20 times," he informs.

"This," he continues, "is a pretty impressive statistic!" Currently more than 100



*Goldens spook easily in the clear mountain lakes which makes a stealthy approach mandatory.*

Cowboy State lakes are managed for goldens. While small populations exist in the Absaroka, Bighorn and Snowy mountains, the vast majority are found in the alpine sections of the Wind River Range. Here, golden waters are scattered over 120 miles of mountainous terrain, much of which has remained the same as when Jim Bridger and Chief Washakie roamed them. Many of the lakes are located against headwall glaciers at the headwaters of drainages, usually between 10,000 to 12,000 feet of elevation.

With somewhat more terrestrial insect activity than their Sierra counterparts, Allen hints that Titcomb, Wall, Valentine, Golden,

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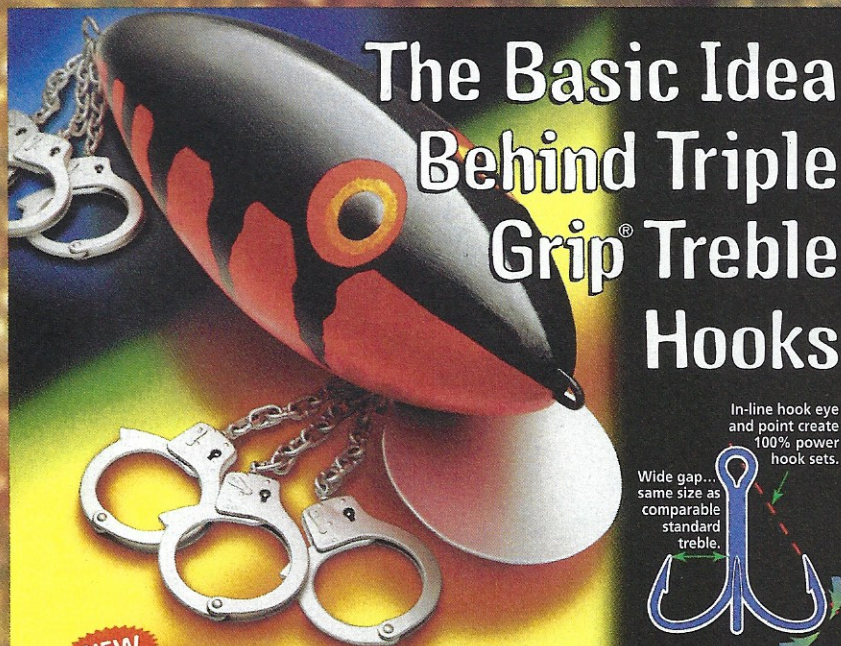
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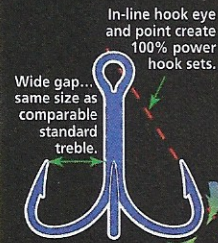
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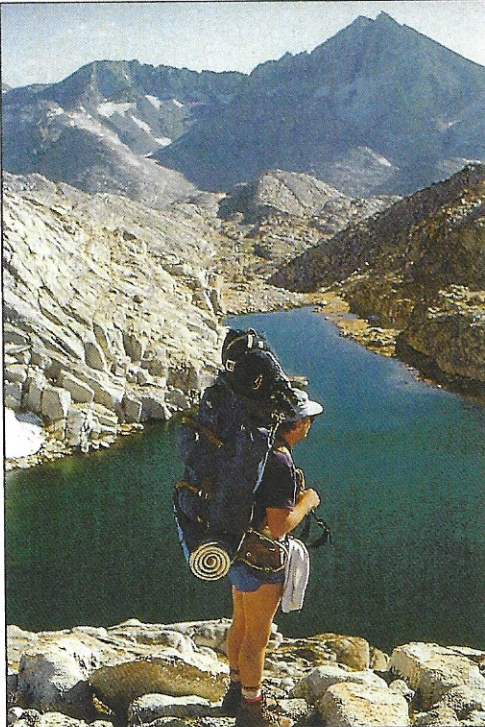
Thumb, Deep Creek, and Washakie lakes are a few which offer stable environments for growing bruiser goldens. "Windy, Glacier and Coon lakes also bear watching," he adds.

### GOLDEN HABITAT

No matter where they reside, goldens are strictly a high altitude trout, thriving in waters nestled near the clouds where glaciation, erosion, and faulting have carved a harsh landscape for them. Food forms are notably small and growing seasons drastically short. While several factors conspire to keep goldens smallish, there are a few elite waters in both states where this gaudily-attired trout probably reaches its pinnacle as a game fish. While both guides concur that abundant food forms, limited spawning to prevent stunting, ideal water temperatures, and extremely light angler pressure are necessary ingredients, Allen feels that yet another crucial factor enters into the formula for producing big fish. "In lakes with lower densities, there is less competition for the available food," he ascertains. "Goldens in a healthy balance with their food supply commonly grow to impressive sizes."

To effectively tangle with these special world-class fish, anglers must be prepared to meet them on battlefields nearly 2 miles high which is not always a simple task.

The alpine lakes of both regions share



*A high advantage point helps you locate the best structure on the lake. Then plan your attack.*

a common geology regardless of size. As glaciers moved down slope, they gouged out soil and rock, 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. The shallow, flat area where water escapes is called the moraine.

In this granitic landscape, winter releases its grip slowly and is quick to reclaim it again. According to Morgan, goldens are somewhat vulnerable during both extremes of the season when they tend to feed voraciously. "The period just after ice-out, which usually occurs during early July and then late September through October are great times. However," he quickly points out, "these are also times when back-country weather can be most unpredictable."

Morgan, who visits the back-country regularly, confides that goldens' inherent caution is sometimes slightly relaxed during early and late day shadows or cloudy periods preceding thunderstorms.

### GOLDEN HABITS

Understanding this species' high altitude food chain and eating habits goes a long

way toward duping these wary, often highly selective feeders. Even though they are covered with ice for close to 7 months, these sky-high lakes are very fertile, supporting zooplankton in addition to caddis hatches and a highly prolific gammarus food base.

While mosquitos, mayflies, damselflies, and midges are present, caddis flies and fresh water shrimp seem to make up a good portion of goldens' menu.

Success in these lakes is not only predicated upon a knowledge of trout habitat and habits, but by adapting and implementing special fishing tactics.

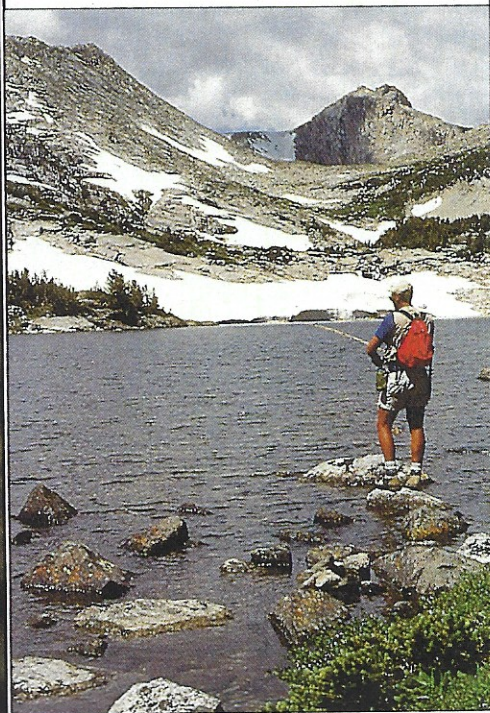
### FLY FISHING

While I have identified brown, green and olive shades of caddis in each mountain range, tan is my personal favorite. Both larval and adult stages of this prolific insect are highly relished by the big lake residents.

Although pan-sizers will hit dry presentations fairly consistently, the vast majority of our weighty goldens have shown a penchant for subsurface duplications of size 10 to 14 Caddis Pupa, Hare's Ear, Bead Head, Pheasant Tail, Bird's Nest, and Bucktail patterns.

In some of these high elevation waters, goldens subsist almost entirely on scuds. Noted for their high caloric value, these minute fresh water crustaceans are understandably a favorite of the broad-chested fish and account for a significant portion of their diet. Scuds typically measure between 1/4 to 1/2 inch, are translucent, and range in color 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 shrimp swim on their backs, imitations tied to float upside down are almost too good to resist. Since the hook rides with the point upward, it not only bumps bottom with less chance of snagging but sets firmly in the trout's snout.

Presenting imitations of these tiny photophobic life forms 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 either be manifested as a dull tug or slashing jolt, anglers should set the hook at any type of line hesitation. The rod tip should also be pointed toward the fly, just in or right at water level, to aid in a more efficient hook set.

While there is often plenty of room for back casts, Allen suggests anglers not attempt lengthy casts, instead opting for the more attainable littoral zone with well-placed presentations. A 7 1/2-foot, 4-weight outfit with matching floating line and a 9-foot leader suits my situation perfectly (when in these mountains, I always carry selections of both floating and sinking lines). Rather than simply blind casting, I attempt to locate a cruiser, then flick my offering 6 to 8 feet ahead of the leader-shy leviathan. Since the bottoms of these glacial lakes are often paved with sharp, jagged rocks and abrasive boulders, Allen feels it is wise to check leaders for nicks or abrasions after a dozen or so casts.

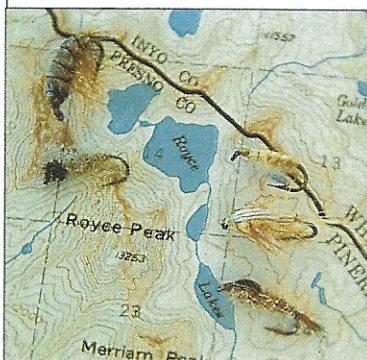
#### HARDWARE

After fish vacate the shallows, which usually occurs during the intense heat of mid day, is 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. A 5 1/2- to 6-foot ultralight rod and reel loaded with 4- to 6-pound line has proven to be a very sporting choice.

While seeming to prefer an insect diet, they will succumb to hardware if it is properly presented. Casting lengthy distances, I attempt to keep my offering deep while trying to cover as much territory as possible. Since goldens demonstrate a tendency to

ambush their prey, herky-jerky retrieves between and around submerged boulders often lead to jarring strikes as it appears the "bait" is about to escape. While old standbys such as yellow Rooster Tails (*Yakima*); yellow and orange Panther Martins (*Harrison-Hoge*); brass Mepps (*Sheldon's*) and Super Vibrax (*Blue Fox*) spinners; gold hued Wob-L-Rite, Kastmaster and Phoebe (all *Acme Tackle*); Needlefish (*Luhr-Jensen*), spoons, and Rapalas (*Normark*) have all treated me well over the years, modern technology continues to gain impetus. The new line of Bingo Bugs, Crippures, and Hum Dingers (all *Shasta Tackle Co.*) and Pro Secrets (*Sep's*) lures not only resemble bite-sized goldens due to their coloration, but their action is scientifically designed to trigger aggression, especially in the bigger fish.

Once when working



*#10 to 14 caddis and scud patterns are the right-sized morsels to tempt goldens*

Middle Deep Creek Lake in Wyoming, a small concentration of trout ignored my offerings for over an hour. Tying on a tiny, yellow Bingo Bug, I flicked it into deeper water and commenced an unusually rapid retrieve back toward the school holding near the outlet moraine. I gazed in amazement as a trio broke from the

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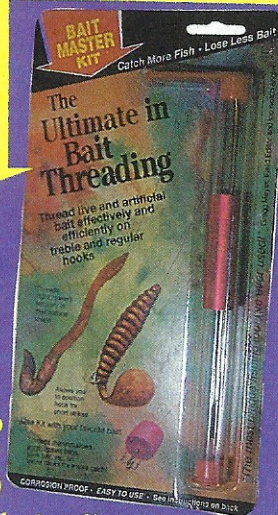
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pod and bore full speed toward the lure, which was wobbling from side to side in a unique, tantalizing manner.

Probably striking more out of territorial irritation than hunger, the quickest of the three vanquished it head-on then scurried for a pair of submerged boulders. With rod buggy whipping violently, I

ing girthy fish over the obstacle of large, shoreline boulders.

### LOCATION STRATEGY

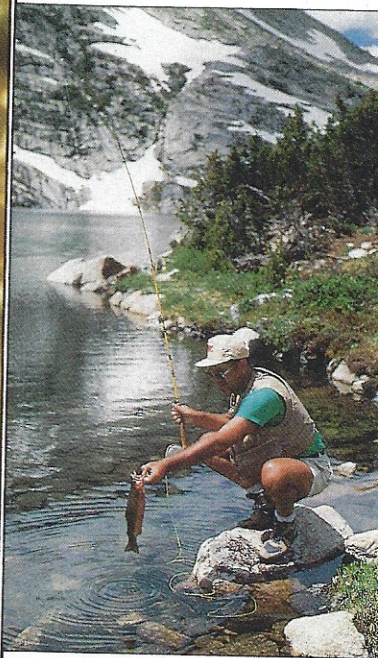
Once a body of water is selected, a careful plan of attack should be implemented for it is not easy to dupe these leviathans no matter what season. It is Allen's observation that goldens in these lakes garner the bulk of their food in shallow water. "The edge of the moraine is often the most fertile ground for insect life and subsequently attracts the greater number of fish."

Broad-chested goldens looking for a meal regularly cruise the outside edges of drop-offs since they offer both food and quick access to the sanctuary of deeper water. If possible, I always try to scout the lake from a higher vantage point and make both written and mental notes as to the water's layout for both present and future reference. Since granddaddy goldens often 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 or schools of fish can be pinpointed from above, leading to a direct stalking approach. Polaroid glasses aid greatly in this visual endeavor.

Prime locales I invariably check out on these forlorn lakes are goldens' inlets and outlets. Massive fish consistently hang out here as moving water not only supplies them oxygen, but food as well. Exposed dorsal fins as they forage or frolic in the shallows are common giveaways to their presence.

However, once these lunkers are located, there is no guarantee of success. Rambo-like skills must come into play to avoid detection. A common mistake novice anglers make is



parried several runs. Each burst and subsequent turn lit up the ebony depths like a lightning bolt, while my reel chimed in a soothing accompanying staccato. Testing both tackle and nerves, I finally managed to tail the chunky 19 1/2 incher in the shallows.

Not only did the 2-pound, 2-ounce prize re-write the new HOF Unlimited line class standard, but its vivid coloration served as a fitting reminder of its Latin name, which translates to "pretty in the water!"

Working flies or lures parallel to deep shelves along shorelines or trailing a fly 3 to 4 feet behind a spinner will sometimes capture the attention of wary denizens. A long-handled net proves very handy in land-



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walking upright and projecting their shadow on the water thus triggering an inherent panic mode among the fish. Instead, crawling on hands and knees, using shoreline rocks as cover, and making demanding casts from sitting, kneeling or prone positions help prevent spooking the biggies. To stay out of their line of vision, I generally attempt to remain under a 10 degree angle.

### SPOTTER FISHING

Team fishing, whereby one angler spots and directs casts for another, sometimes provides an invaluable edge on these crag-framed waters. Concealed behind a small outcropping which overlooks the Three-Island Lake outlet, my sons Matt and Jason, and I, worked this technique to perfection during a July '93 trip. From this lookout, each of us took turns pinpointing and guiding casts to a number of sizeable fish nonchalantly cruising back and forth along the undercut shoreline, a mere 4 to 5 feet from the prostrate angler trying for them!

On this particular day, our 2-hour cooperative session netted five outsized bonita over 2 pounds. While a pair of Jason's plus one each for Matt and I set tippet-class marks with the National Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame (HOF), the well-coordinated teamwork also provided an aesthetically rewarding father/son moment!

Of our combined 28 family world records for this species achieved over a 9 season span, 24 have been the direct result of arduous crawls and awkward casts performed from several contorted posi-

tions. Since so much time is spent kneeling or crawling, knee pads prove to be a great respite from the harsh granite.

Adventuresome anglers intent on matching wits with this exotic species must not only endure the rigorous physical challenges posed by jumbled talus, inhospitable ridges, and icy snowfields, but should be armed with a tactical arsenal as well. Visitors to these quintessential trophy lakes tucked near the clouds may find trophy goldens to be uniquely challenging.

*For more information:*

California back-country outfitters: Eastern High Sierra Packers Association (619)873-8405. Fish and Game biologists Darrell Wong (619)872-1171, Dale Mitchell (209)222-3761

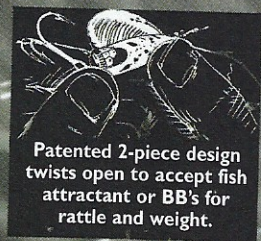
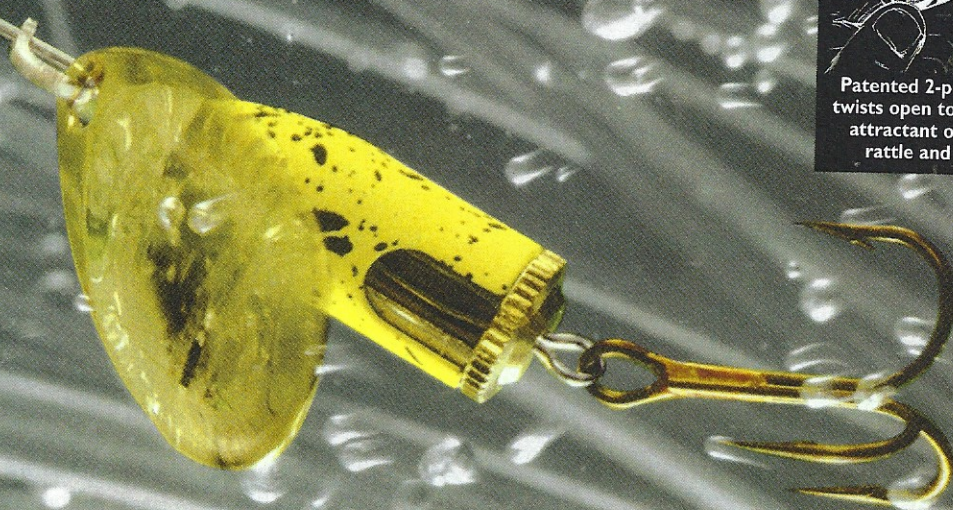
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