

Fishing The Golden Triangle

Scattered and remote, these Sierra Nevada lakes — tucked near the clouds, guarded by limited access — provide the perfect conditions to grow world-record-sized golden trout.

by Don Vachini

I crouched low while stepping cautiously over shoreline rocks, my heart pounding as I gazed into the depths. Cruising not more than 10 feet from shore, a quintet of wide-girthed 2- to 3-pound golden trout, their crimson undersides setting the dawn on fire, cavorted back and forth in the narrow outlet — exactly the situation I had been seeking!

This particular July day found son Jason and me high in California's majestic Sierra Nevada Mountains along the talus shoreline of Brown Bear Lake, a sapphire-hued 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 in the John Muir Wilderness between Fresno and Bishop. We had set out to explore a trio of waters reputed to house some extremely large specimens of California's state fish.

While peaks that stroke the sky provide us with some fascinating vistas, it is the euphoria of pursuing granddaddy goldens in lakes found nearly two miles up that lures us back to this ice-carved escarpment. Since 1985, my sons, Chris, Matt and Jason and I, armed with a wide assortment of lures, flies, tippets and

monofilament lines, have zeroed in on several of these hard-to-reach waters. To date, we have struck it rich on nine of these crag-framed gems, which have not only provided us with some of our biggest angling thrills but rewarded us with a remarkable 38 line- or tippet-class standards with the International Game Fish Association or the National Fresh Water Fishing Hall of Fame.

Nestled within a 70-mile-long pie-shaped swath between Fresno, Bishop and Lone Pine are over 200 lakes that make up the largest concentration of golden trout waters in the world. Sitting atop this myriad of interconnecting watersheds, which encompasses sections of the John Muir Wilderness and King's Canyon/Sequoia National Park, are possibly three dozen or so elite waters that are often referred to as the Golden Triangle lakes. Here, according to Dale Mitchell, a fisheries biologist in the Department of Fish and Game's Fresno office, *Oncorhynchus aquabonita* reaches its pinnacle as a game fish.

Forming the northernmost base of the triangle, the Mono, Bear and Piute creek drainages house the greatest proportion of trophy waters.

"While Pioneer 5 and 6, Big Chief, Big Moccasin, Paine and Ramona lakes offer big-fish potential, Brown Bear, Vee, Three-Island, Puppett, Steelhead, Royce 2, 4 and 5, plus Upper and Lower Goethe lakes, contain some extremely noteworthy specimens," said Mitchell.

While mainly targeting Wanda, Evolution, Darwin No. 3, Martha and the Goethe Basin lakes from the South Fork San Joaquin River system, Mitchell thinks highly of the Mt. Whitney region, which forms the southern apex of the triangle. Although Cottonwood lakes 3, 4 and 5 (open only to catch-and-release angling) are noted for fish up to 17 inches, he feels that Wallace, Wales and Crabtree 2 and 4 also bear watching. "However," he says, "Amphitheater, from the Kings River drainage, along with Sky Blue and South America, which drain into the Kern River system, are reputedly home to goldens in the 4- to 5-pound class."

Author Don Vachini shows off the Brown Bear Lake golden trout that became the International Game Fish Association's 6-pound-tippet line-class world record. Photo courtesy of Don Vachini.

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 prey species, this fish normally does not attain large proportions. Most anglers consider 11 inches trophy-sized; anything approaching a pound is fodder for bragging. These Triangle lakes, however, consistently provide notable exceptions.

"Several house rather concentrated densities of fish in the 12- to 15-inch range," Mitchell said. "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!"

WHY SO BIG?

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 for producing outsized fish. In addition to limited spawning habitat, all contain adequate food and cold water. In fact, Mitchell believes, 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 the food supply." The result is stunted fish.

Mitchell feels sure that many trout lakes in the Sierra have not a food shortage but a fish surplus and is convinced that golden populations are in a healthy balance with the

food supply at most Triangle lakes. "Since many of these waters support low densities (in fish populations), there is less competition for the available food, and individual fish can attain phenomenal growth," he says.

Extremely light angler pressure is yet another factor entering into the big-fish formula. Most of these lakes are lightly fished and, unless hammered by consumptive anglers, can indefinitely maintain trophy status. Besides being deep and vast, most of these waters contain areas that cannot be effectively worked from shore. Additionally, a few of these lakes see fewer than 20 rods per year.

TACTICS

Anglers seeking to tangle effectively with these bruisers must be



prepared to meet them on the goldens' own alpine battlefields — not always a simple task. Success in these waters is not only predicated upon a knowledge of trout habits but also on adapting and implementing special tactics.

To my way of thinking, this species' high-altitude food chain remains the key to catching them. In places around most of these high-elevation lakes are collections of boulders, rocks and other debris pushed by glacial activity referred to as moraine. Points of contact between moraine edges and water are often the most fertile ground for the insect life that 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 deeper water. For this reason, I visually inspect most of the shoreline using polarized glasses. Whenever possible, I scout the water from a higher vantage point, getting in doing so a pretty good feel for its most 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. Prospecting such structure at Brown Bear Lake once, I whipped out a yellow Bingo Bug on a sliding sinker, let it

settle for 15 seconds and then began an erratic, speed-varying retrieve. As the lure approached the lip of the dropoff, a golden pounded it from below, doubling my ultralight spinning rod over pleasingly. As each burst and subsequent turn lit up the ebony depths like lightning bolts, my reel chimed in staccato accompaniment. The rotund 19-inch 2-pound, 2-ounce prize rewrote the NFWFHF unlimited line-class standard. And what a beautiful fish! It fanned from flaming orange to vermilion, which served as a reminder of the second half of its binomial nomenclature's meaning — "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 food and oxygen, feeding or spawning goldens tend to gravitate to it, often congregating in large numbers and exposing their dorsals on the mirror surface during calm periods.

Keeping a low profile by crouching behind boulders or other shoreline obstructions prevents the spooking of fish. Crawling stalks on hands and knees and demanding casts from sitting, kneeling or prone positions may be necessary, especially when little shoreline cover is available. I always try to remain under the 10-degree angle associated

with their window of vision.

Using the buddy system, which involves a spotter observing the fish from a higher vantage point and verbally directing his partner's casts, is often a deadly ploy. This system worked to perfection at the funneled outlet of Steelhead Lake, where I watched Jason meticulously crawl to within 5 feet of several outsized goldens stacked up against an undercut bank. Calling out instructions to him while concealed behind a small outcropping on the opposite bank, I watched him shortline a Hare's Ear nymph in the slow-moving current. As a fish moved to intercept it, I shouted, "Pull!" and he blindly set the hook at just the right instant. Remaining low, he not only managed to deftly subdue but also to 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 NFWFHF tippet records!

FLY TACKLE

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. "In addition to an abundance of zooplankton, most support caddis hatches in good numbers while all contain seemingly prolific numbers of *Gammarus*," Mitchell said.

Since the weighty residents prefer to dine subsurface and are accustomed to tiny morsels, size 12 to 16 Hare's Ear, beadheads, caddis pupa and caddis nymph patterns in tan, brown, green and olive shades are most suitable. However, Mitchell says, it's the scuds, present in amazing abundance, that account for a significant portion of their diet. "Not only are scuds an important source of caloric intake, but they are responsible for amazing growth patterns among these beautiful trout," he said. "Goldens patrol the shallow dropoffs relentlessly in pursuit of freshwater shrimp."

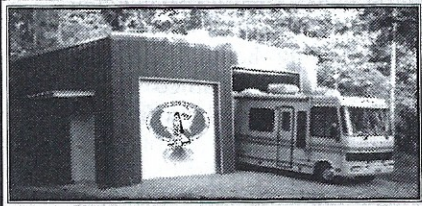
Scuds here are typically 1/4- to 1/2-inch in size, are transparent and range from tan to olive with pink or amber highlights. Size 12 to 18 scud patterns with olive-gray, pink and orange bodies and tied with a

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Demanding casts from sitting, kneeling or even prone positions are often necessary to prevent spooking golden trout in this super-clear water. Photo courtesy of Don Vachini.

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TRIANGLE ... Continued

weighted underbody seem to pique the interest of these goldens. 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 also sets firmly in the trout's snout. For best results, fish a fast-sinking scud with a floating line and a 9- to 12-foot leader with a 4X tippet. A 7- to 8-foot 4-weight system is an ideal match for this setup.

Retrieve with a sink-and-draw technique over deep water or by



Jason Vachini cradles a 1 1/2-pound golden from Three Mile Lake; it set a NFWHF 8-pound-tippet world record. Photo by Don Vachini.

darting the fly off a sandy bottom and letting it settle before resuming the retrieve. Since the take can be manifested as either a dull tug or a slashing jolt, anglers should set the hook at any line movement. To aid in a more efficient hookset, the rod tip should be pointed toward the fly and just about at water level.

I usually don't attempt lengthy casts in these open lakes, instead opting to work the more attainable shallow zone with well-placed presentations. Rather than cast blindly, I commonly attempt to locate a cruiser and then flick my offering 6 to 8 feet ahead of it, careful that my leader doesn't spook the fish. While there is often plenty of room for backcasts, jagged slabs or rocky outcroppings often take the place of

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trees and bushes as obstacles.

SPIN GEAR

As a general rule, when fish vacate the shallows (usually during the intense light of midday), I find it a good time to change tactics and ply the deepest part of the lake with spinning gear. These trophy goldens will succumb to hardware if it is presented properly. Since they demonstrate a tendency to ambush their prey, herky-jerky retrieves often lead to jarring strikes as it 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 will sometimes make exasperatingly lengthy pursuits before deciding to either attack or swim away right along the bank.

Yellow Rooster Tails, yellow and orange Panther Martins, bronzed Mepps and Vibrax spinners, gold Kastmasters, Wob-L-Rites, Phoebes, Needlefish spoons and brown and yellow Rapalas have treated me well over the years. I've added the new line of Bingo Bugs, Pro Secrets, Crippures and HumDingers to my arsenal. Size 0-2 artificials with weights under 1/8 ounce are best.

Perfect for presenting dainty offerings, an ultralight spinning rod really enhances the fighting qualities of these trout. Once they feel 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 to keep them near the surface.

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A net is virtually a must, not only to land the quarry over harsh granite and cumbersome boulders but also to ensure a safe, gentle release.

GETTING THERE

Entry into these headwater lakes is limited strictly to pedestrian locomotion with off-trail movement a requirement. Major passes such as

Forester, Muir, Mather, Pinchot, Glen and Selden are linked by the well-traveled John Muir Trail, plus numerous well-maintained arteriole connectors from east- and west-slope trailheads can be identified by scanning topo maps. From these major trails you'll need to plan a cross-country route across sketchy terrain to reach the Golden Triangle lakes.



This 2-pound Crabtree Lake No. 2 golden, which was caught by the author, set the NFWFHF 10-pound-tippet world record. Photo courtesy of Don Vachini.

Although not always identified on maps, Alpine, Feather, Granite, Steelhead, Miter, Vacation and Thunderbolt passes offer demanding yet feasible shortcut 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. Forest Service maps of the John Muir Wilderness can be obtained from the White Mountain Ranger District, 798 North Main St., Bishop, CA 93514; (760) 872-1171.

Hikers commonly battle fatigue at the elevations. If, after research, you deem a water to be beyond comfortable hiking range, have a horsepack outfitter drop you and your gear close to the water. Establishing a base camp will enable one to reach the target lake much more refreshed and with plenty of energy to fish. For a list of reputable packers, contact the Eastern High Sierra Packers Association, (760) 873-8405. □

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