

Catch A Mono Creek Trout Slam!

Draining a multitude of high-elevation backcountry lakes, this basin catchwater high in the Sierra Nevada offers adventuresome anglers the chance to pursue four trout species.

by Don Vachini

The tumbling rivulet cascaded through lodgepole pine and quaking aspen forest on its way down the canyon, and from its swirling domain, I found a challenge to my liking just as Mt. Izaak Walton caught its first glimpse of morning sun. On this particular July day, I was plying a golden-trout-infested tributary to Mono Creek and was deeply immersed in the splendor of the moment!

Originating in the glaciated cirques and windswept peaks of the Sierra Nevada Crest in northeastern Fresno County, Mono Creek collects the melted run-off of ice and snow from numerous granitic spires and peaks, and gains from arteriole feeders as it tumbles 16 miles toward its confluence with the South Fork of the San Joaquin River eight miles below Vermillion Valley and Thomas A. Edison Lake. The entire drainage is situated between the Fish Creek drainage to the north and the Bear Creek drainage to the south and lies within the vast half-million-acre John Muir Wilderness.

According to James Winn, resident fishing guide at Edison Lake's Vermillion Valley Resort, there are about 48 waters where the adventuresome angler

has a choice of stream- or lake-fishing for golden, brook, brown or rainbow trout. "While this diverse watershed can build confidence for beginners, it can also challenge experts," he says. "While the higher elevation backcountry is primarily golden (trout) country, the creek system offers a chance at what is known as a 'Sierra Slam,' which can be realistically attained in a day or accomplished over whatever timeframe is desired."

While I was here to prospect a small cluster of headwater lakes for trophy goldens, I also intended to make the slam my secondary quest.

THE UPPER DRAINAGE LAKES

Geologically speaking, a glacier flowed down this valley some 10,000 years ago, carving out the riverbed that exists today. A stark testament to the forces that formed it, the upper extremes of the drainage comprise bleak waters sitting among granite outcroppings at or above timberline guarded by jumbled talus and precipitous cliffs. Since most of these lakes sit on benches above hanging valleys with demanding or restricted access, the base camp approach is a most feasible solution to visiting nearby lakes without the con-

straints of a heavy backpack.

For my early July endeavor for trophy gold, I set up headquarters at 10,000-foot Mott Lake, one of seven lakes forming the North Fork Mono Creek. A steady hour of chest-heaving, lung-searing ascent from base left me overlooking rock-bound Rosy Finch and Bighorn lakes, which sit in tandem bowls near 11,000 feet of elevation. With the sun barely touching the eastern escarpment, I maintained a low profile while approaching Bighorn's moving outlet, which revealed a few concentric rings from dimpling trout. Expecting a nimble 7-incher, I gently set the hook as my strike indicator flinched lightly in the gentle current. The crystalline water exploded with flashes of flaming orange and lemon yellow, and my rod bucked pleasantly, leaving little doubt as to the fish's identity. The 15-incher's vivid coloration and hooked jaw typified the crown jewel of the trout family as it finned to freedom.

Saving valuable travel time with a vigorous off-trail "ridge hop" the following day led me to the adjoining canyon's Laurel, Little Grinnell and Grinnell lakes; here, the action for

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One of the Pioneer lakes produced this 2-pound golden trout for author Don Vachini, who holds several world records. Photo courtesy of Don Vachini.

midsized goldens largely took place near the lakes' inlets and outlets. The 20-plus specimens released from this trio of waters were between 9 and 11 inches, wide-girthed and pugnacious.

Their presence pervades these lofty waters as well as neighboring cirques and benches Pioneer Basin, Second Recess, Third Recess and Fourth Recess. Tucked along the steep ridgelines of the Silver or Mono divides, Mott, Bighorn, Rosy Finch, Laurel, Grinnell, Upper Hopkins, Silver Pass, Pioneer No. 5 and No. 6, Golden, Upper and Lower Snow, Summit, Upper and Lower Mills and Third Recess lakes are strategically managed by the DFG for the perpetuation of *Oncorhynchus aquabonita*. Usually situated above impassible falls and only reached via minimally defined off-trail routes or ducked "ways" from the Mono Creek

or John Muir trails, their pan-sized-to-trophy populations, which are enhanced by air plants every two to five years, remain virtually isolated from below.

In addition, Blue Jay, Lower Hopkins, Trail, Pioneer 1 and 2 and Fourth Recess lakes possess just the right combination of nutrients and spawning habitat to produce healthy numbers of brook trout nearing 10 to 11 inches. A few, such as Pioneer lakes 1, 2, 2A and 4, contain both species.

Since the residents of these high-altitude lakes are basically small, tackle geared accordingly will provide a sporting match. An ultralight spinning rod and reel with 2- to 4-pound line provides an excellent choice for working small Rooster Tail, Vibrax, Panther Martin, Needlefish, HumDingers, Bingo Bugs and Wob-L-Rite lures

parallel to deep shelves, or from deeper to shallower water. In recent years I have found micro-lures or 1/100-ounce red or yellow plastic mini-jigs to be very effective on these sometimes wary natives.

For the fly-tosser, a 3- to 4-weight fly rod with floating or sinking lines will be effective for presenting most dark patterns in the 10 to 16 size range. While caddis and mosquito hatches occur regularly, it is the highly abundant freshwater shrimp, or *Gammarus*, that the residents seem to relish; size 10-14 scud, shrimp, caddis pupa, Woolly Buggers and leech patterns in

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tan, orange, green and olive shades suffice. On some of the higher, wind-blown lakes, I have found a fly/bubble setup allows for lengthier casts than a fly rod does. A BB shot or two keeps the trailing fly a foot or so below the chop.

HEADWATER STREAMS

Connecting or draining the upper-echelon chain lakes are tiny rivulets that greatly augment the lake fisheries. According to Winn, these upper waters serve as wellsprings, with goldens and brookies washing into the lower stream system during high water run-off. While small by nature, Pioneer Basin, Golden, Hopkins, Laurel, Second Recess, Third Recess and Fourth Recess creeks are brisk, cascading streams with outstanding self-sustaining trout populations. Tumbling over glacier-polished granite and meandering through fragile meadows, these minuscule tributaries, anywhere from 5 to 15 feet wide, converge within a few miles of each other to form the main stem of Mono Creek.

Because of short growing seasons, these residents are quite unselective, often using hit-and-run tactics. Dabbing barbless size 14 to 18 Pheasant Tail, Bird's Nest, Gold-Ribbed Hare's Ear or A.P. nymphs through scaled-down pools, riffles and pocket water can be a real confidence booster. On one particular trip to Pioneer Basin Creek when sons, Chris, Matt and Jason were much younger, action was virtually nonstop; they enjoyed derriking iridescent stream dwellers over streamside cover while their ear-to-ear grins told me their young egos were getting major strokes.

UPPER MONO CREEK

Bolstered by increased flows, the main Mono cascades and meanders down a heavily wooded canyon with excellent pools, pockets and riffles. According to Winn, the four-mile section above the North Fork is considered its upper section. "Now between 40 to 60 feet wide, it has outgrown the tiny 'crick' moniker, roaring with significantly more volume," Winn says. "Actually, the uniqueness of this creek comes from its exotic species, rather than their size."

Mono's numerous trout are largely pan-sized. While goldens reach 10 inches, most average 6 to 9 inches with

brookies generally in the 5- to 8-inch range. Browns up to 15 inches have been taken in the lower sections, while rainbows fall in the 6- to 12-inch range and are noted for their jumping ability. "This section of stream will yield all four species, but not easily," Winn adds.

In these elevations, July is considered spring, and run-off translates as high, cold and fast water. One of the best ways to fish these conditions is with a short line and a high-stick nymphing technique, since most fish now feed subsurface. I have found this method to work for both upstream or across current with a weighted nymph.

Besides bouncing the nymph near bottom, where drifting insects are often trapped, I search for the places where the current is slowed by rocks and boulders. Leaning over a patch of scrub willow, I placed a size 16 Bird's Nest into a water column on the upstream side of two rocks. Using as little line as possible, I maneuvered it into the seam of an eddy created by the obstacles, keeping the rod high and following the offering with the rod tip. As soon as it was pulled into the swirl, a dark 7-inch form darted for it. Black and white edged fins, blue halos surrounding red dots and orange undermarkings firmly identified *Salvelinus fontinalis* wriggling in my palm. Half my Sierra Slam was complete!

LOWER MONO CREEK

In the section below the North Fork's confluence, the stream gains muscle and widens, flowing another two miles before emptying into Edison Lake, while its fare shifts predominantly to rainbows. Although the 'bows will primarily select subsurface meals during high water, I have had them rise to dry imitations Mahogany Dun, Spotted Sedge and Brown Parachute. Tube caddis and green rockworm are productive wet choices.

On a more open section of creek in the vicinity of the John Muir Trail footbridge, a narrow slick between a pair of boulders implied trout, and I instinctively flicked my weighted black ant through the structure. Tipping off their identity upon feeling the sting of steel, three successive residents took heartily, then proceeded to go airborne, their silvery sheen a marked contrast to the flaming orange and lemon yellows



Jason Vachini's rainbow trout came on a fly from tiny Mono Creek. Photo by Don Vachini.

of their gaudily attired cousins farther upstream.

A bit more difficult to entice, browns perennially prefer undercut banks or deeper holes near brush or sunken logs, where they can maintain a low profile and ambush their meals. Rounding a bend about a mile from the lake, a huge log had fallen into the creek creating a protected drift. Letting out fly line from above, I let a tan Hopper drift under the log from above, then began tugging it upstream. On the fourth attempt, it was inhaled on the retrieve. Staying deep, the battler struggled in vain to reach the snag. A bronze cast flecked with black and red dots identified the brown, at 13 inches a real trophy for this creek, and a fitting completion of my slam quest!

In addition to hoppers, meaty Mud-dler Minnow, Woolly Bugger, Woolly Worm and sculpin patterns in size 10 to 14 are favorites of these resident predators.

During this past August, a 7-pounder was landed from the creek above Edison Lake. Silvery and light, it was obviously a fresh lake-run fish. "This certainly lends credence to the belief that these large lake-dwelling browns enter and retreat from Mono Creek," Winn attests.

STREAM TACKLE AND TECHNIQUES

While a matching 1- to 2-weight fly

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MONO CREEK ... Continued

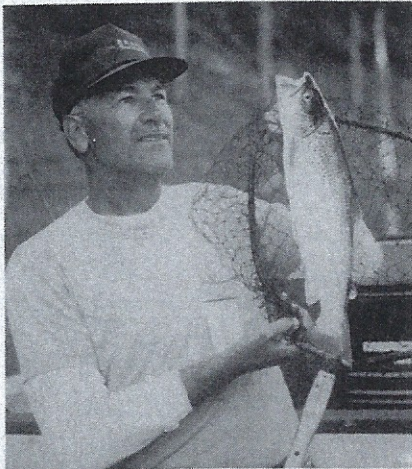
rod and reel are very sporting for this stream system, especially when matched with light- to dark-hued nymphs, ultralight spin tackle also has its place. Wherever larger pools are found, ultralight spinning tackle is useful. A fly/bubble setup is perfect, since it allows fly placement under brush and sweepers.

When working a dry fly, I try to locate the quieter sections and again use a short line. To negotiate the space under limbs or brush, keep the line above the fly to ensure a long, drag-free drift. I commonly utilize a downstream presentation and, as the fly comes to the end of its drift, raise the tip and skate the fly upstream, often provoking a strike.

Mono Creek residents are opportunistic feeders, so some of the best imitations are attractor patterns. Sierra Bright Dots, Humpys, Royal Wulff, Royal Trudes, Stimulators and Brown Bivisibles in the size 12 to 18 range are highly effective. Some of the best hatches occur during July as water temperatures reach 43 degrees and up. Prolific insects include caddis, mosquitos and gnats, along with terrestrial grasshoppers, flying ants and carpenter ants. Good nymph patterns include imitations of these while Olive Parachute and Olive No-Hackles, size 16 to 20, are other dry choices.

STILLWATER OPTIONS

Formed by a lengthy dam across Vermillion Valley, Edison Lake sits at the base of Bear Ridge at an elevation of 7,700 feet and is a water-storage



The best time for Edison Lake browns is early morning. This is a 4-pounder. Photo courtesy of Don Vachini.



Author Vachini prepares to release a 10-inch brookie from Blue Jay Lake. Photo courtesy of Don Vachini.

facility for the Southern California Edison Power Company. Although a few brookies are present, the water is most notable for its resident rainbows and rather large but elusive browns. The trout residing here are true natives, maintaining future generations by spawning in the cold tributary creeks, which offer nonconsumptive anglers yet another early-season option.

With an imposed 15-mph speed limit, most boaters topline frog and fire-tiger Apex Trout Killers, Needlefish, Crippures and Swiss Swing or 'crawler/flasher combinations on lead-core line for sleek rainbows in the 12- to 13-inch range.

Possessing deep, expansive water, a good food base and abundant spawning access, the lake certainly offers the right conditions for growing leviathan browns. While most fall into the 13- to 15-inch range, browns in excess of 27 pounds have been caught previously. Although very few huge ones are duped, Winn feels the next state record brown could come from here: "Using sonar, anglers have identified outrageous specimens along the deep channel. It is just a matter of time!"

While early to midsummer is a great time to pursue resident rainbows, late summer/early fall is prime time to try for reclusive browns, which begin looking for easy meals as they gear up for spawning. Although trolling with

leadcore line is popular, a downrigger matched with a good quality fishfinder and depth indicator will prove invaluable for locating fish and adjusting lures rapidly. While attention should be focused on dropoff edges and along the inlets of feeder creeks, including the Mono inlet, trolling across or parallel to the deep creek channel with Rapalas, Rebels and Bingo Bugs is also a good bet; proper depth varies within the top 15 feet. Winn strongly believes that the best times for double-digit trophies are early and late in the day, when the biggies tend to let down their guard. "From 5 a.m. to sunrise are top times," he says.

Whether attempting a grand slam on a day hike or over an extended backpack trip, a relaxing outing with scenic implications spent chasing the monster browns of Edison or just sampling its overall variety, the Mono Creek drainage offers an ideal angling mecca!

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

For additional information on the area, contact Winn at Vermillion Valley Resort, (559) 855-6558; e-mail <vvr@edisonlake.com>, or visit the Web site at <www.edisonlake.com>.

Bag limits remain five per day, 10 in possession. There are no special regulations or gear restrictions on this watershed with the exception of common sense. Day or seasonal fishing licenses are available at the resort.

To reach the Vermillion Valley Resort trailhead, follow Highway 168 over Kaiser Pass from Huntington Lake. The Edison Lake trailhead serves as the western approach to the John Muir and Ansel Adams wildernesses while also providing a creekside connector to Mono Pass and the eastern slope of the Sierra. For hikers or backpackers, a boat shuttle service (available at 9:45 a.m. and 4:45 p.m. daily) is available offering one-way or round-trip passage.

Both the D&F Pack Station, (209) 893-3220, and High Sierra Pack Station, (209) 299-8297, offer a variety of day or extended trips into the Mono backcountry.

Mono Hot Springs, located a 20-minute drive away, offers a pleasant way to soak away trail dust or just enjoy the evening sunset. □