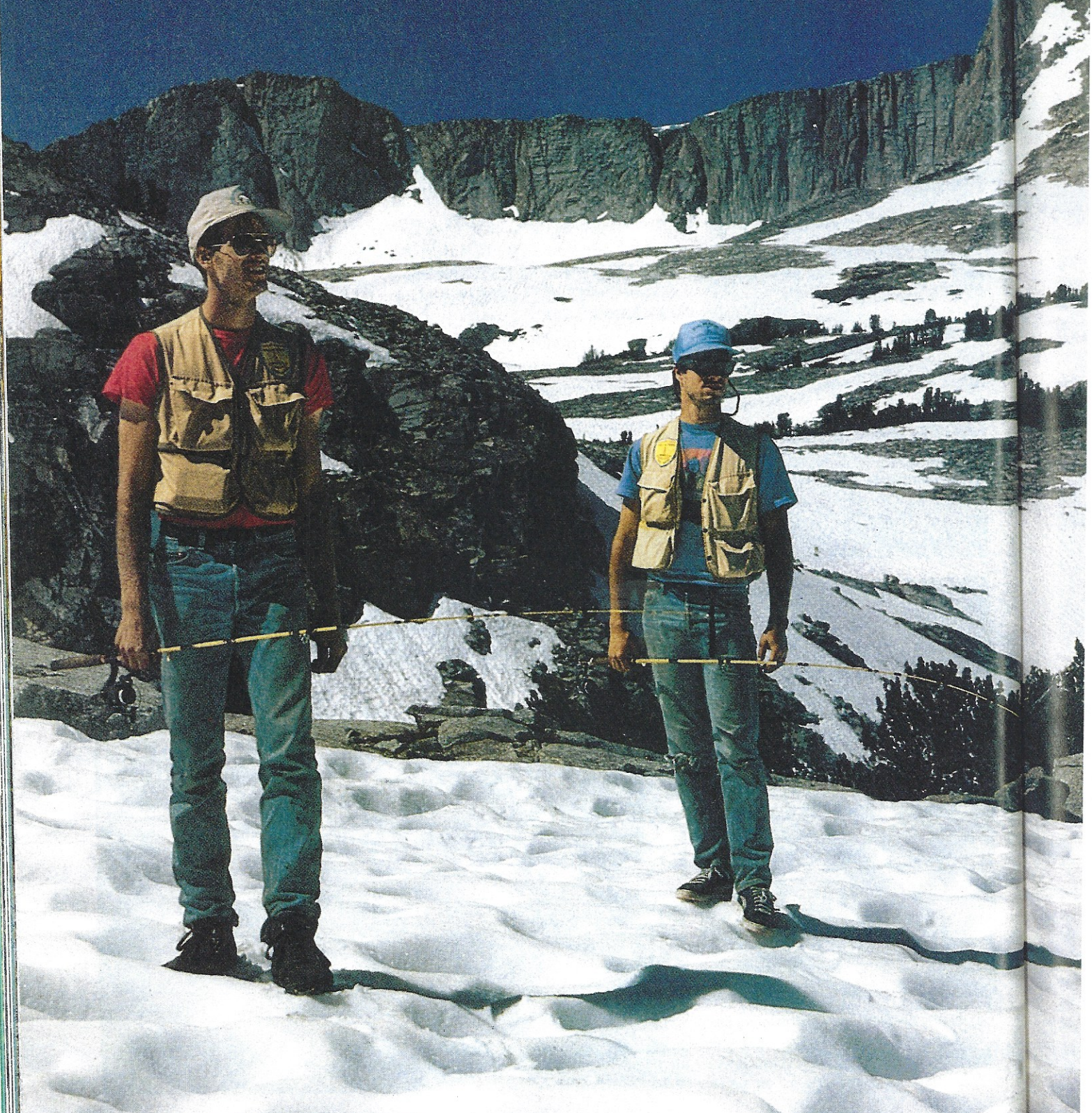


# Golden Opport



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**WHEN  
BACKPACKING  
FOR GOLDEN  
TROUT,  
GETTING  
TO THEM IS  
ONLY HALF  
THE ADVENTURE.**

**BY DON VACHINI**

**A**s I crawled from the tent, the sun was barely illuminating the jagged eastern escarpment. I grabbed my flyrod as cool mountain air caressed my face, and within minutes I was following a nearby stream that unhurriedly cascaded to merge with the lake a hundred paces below. The pleasant sonata played by the gurgling rivulet helped me loosen the muscles that were stiff and aching from the previous day's demanding backpack trip.

Set like a blue jewel in a white ring of granite and reflecting a replica of the serrated sentinels above, the glassy lake surface was disturbed by an ever-increasing array of concentric rings. Within moments of my first cast, the tan Caddis disappeared in a brilliant swirl. Autumnal shades flashed through the crystalline water like pulsating neon lights as the 8-inch trout danced vigorously against a 2-lb. tippet. Wriggling in my hand prior to release, the handsome specimen was splashed in iridescent crimson, lemon yellow and flaming orange hues. Small wonder the golden trout has been labeled the "crown jewel" of the salmonid family!!

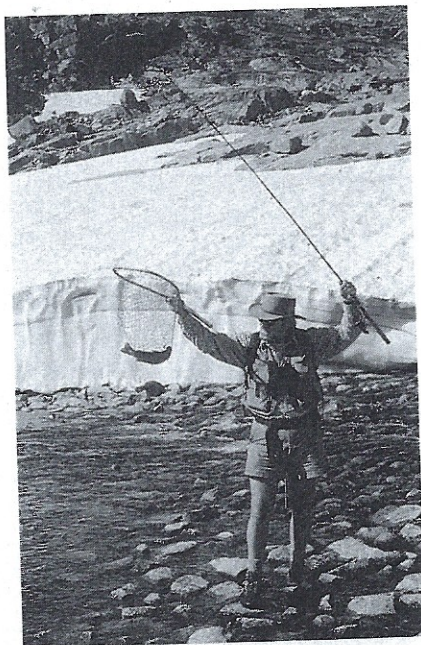
The origin of this trout, a product of what biologists refer to as variation by isolation, began when the last Ice Age created a hanging valley 2,000 feet above California's Kern Canyon,



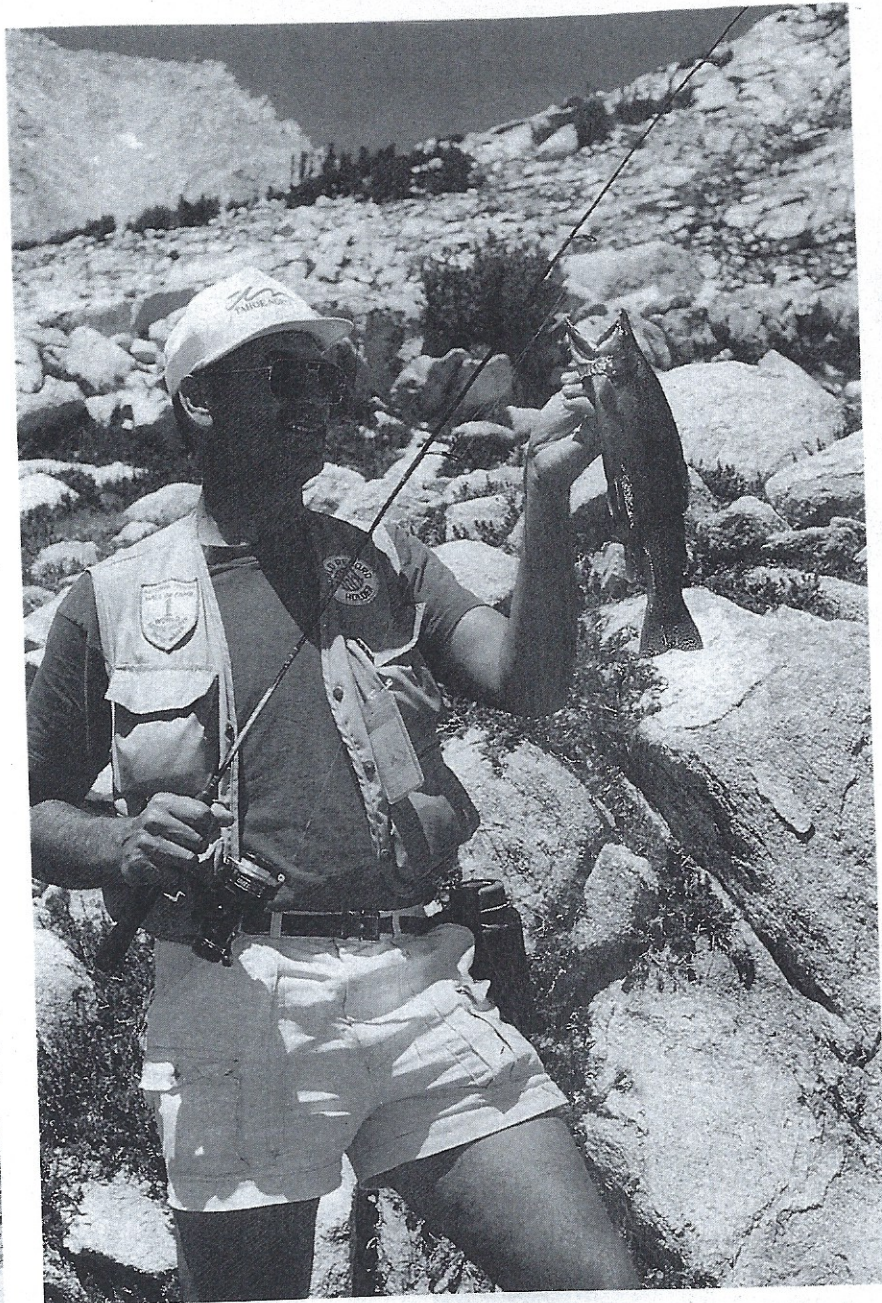
## GOLDEN OPPORTUNITIES

stranding a population of Kern River rainbows. Here—and nowhere else in the world—these fish evolved through countless generations, maintaining their genetic integrity as they dwelled for centuries in the broad meadows and meandering streams lying in the shadow of Mt. Whitney.

Discovered by pioneers who first probed this southern Sierra plateau in the late 1800s, the gaudily attired trout was soon introduced to nearby waters via coffee-can transplants. Then, at the turn of the century, California Department of Fish and Game personnel began transplanting the fish by horse and mule train. By 1915, a 100-mile swath of previously barren waters tucked along the Sierra Nevada backbone contained healthy, self-sustaining numbers of *Oncorhynchus aqua-bonita*. Designated the state fish in 1947, this true native trout, which to many has become a symbol of the High Sierra, remains abundant between the Kern Plateau and Yosemite



Most trophy lakes are guarded by limited access, icy snowfields and jumbled talus. The moving water of inlets and outlets is always a prime locale to seek.



Golden trout come into their own as a game fish at elevations between 9,000 and 12,000 feet. They can be found only between the Kern Plateau and Yosemite National Park in California's Sierra Nevada Range and along the Wind River Range in Wyoming.

National Park at elevations between 9,000 and 12,000 feet.

Exported California eggs helped establish Wyoming populations beginning in 1936, the principal beneficiaries being several headwater lakes scattered along the 120-mile crestline of the rugged Wind River Range. Large expanses of mountainous terrain, much of which has remained the same as when Jim Bridger and Chief Washakie roamed there, offering more terrestrial activ-

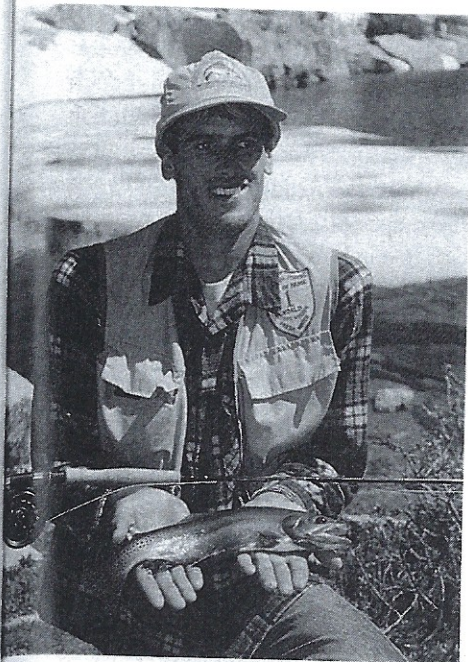
ity than their Sierra counterparts, have put extra weight on Wyoming's fish. Not only have these mountains produced the all-tackle world-record 11-pound, 4-ouncer, which has stood since 1948, but they also routinely yield specimens in the 3- to 5-pound range!

While Wyoming produces the larger fish, the Sierra Nevada offer a much wider and varied selection of waters. Lying just north of the King's Canyon National Park boundary are

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Author's son, Jason, cradles a 1½ pounder that set an 8-lb. tippet world record. The fish was caught during ice-out.

French Canyon, Humphrey's Basin and Bear Creek, a trio of interconnecting drainages within the vast, half-million-acre John Muir Wilderness between Fresno and Bishop. Indeed, their combination of 125 lakes—ranging from shallow ponds to deep, 100-plus-acre lake—and 52 miles of streams make up the largest concentration of golden trout waters in the world and are good places to get on intimate terms with this exotic species.

In these backcountry extremes above timberline, food forms are small and growing seasons short, so its citizens do not attain especially large size. Darrell Wong, a fisheries biologist with the California DFG office in Bishop, considers 10 to 11 inches to be trophy size, with fish in the 13- to 15-inch range and approaching a pound to be noteworthy prizes. He feels the size of a lake and its richness in natural food and spawning habitat pretty much indicate the type of fishery to be expected. While waters with huge numbers of stunted 6 to 8 inchers possess fair nutrients and abundant spawning gravel, their residents are subject to plenty of competition for food. Other

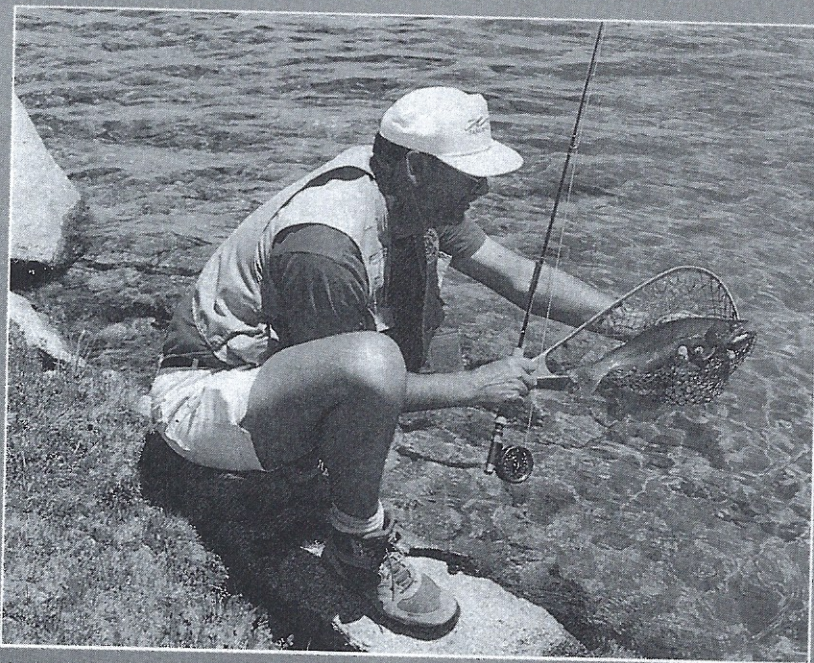
## PROSPECTOR'S TACKLE AND GEAR

Understanding this species' high-altitude food chain and eating habits goes a long way toward duping these wary, often highly selective feeders. While mosquitos, mayflies, damselflies and midges are present, caddis flies and freshwater shrimp seem to make up a good portion of their menu in either state. 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 freshwater crustaceans are understandably a favorite of the broad-chested fish and account for a significant portion of their diet. 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.

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.

Lengthy casts are not necessary. A 7½-foot, 4-weight outfit with matching floating or sink-tip line and a 9-foot leader is perfect when opting for the more attainable littoral zone. Rather than simply blind casting, I attempt to locate a cruiser, then flick my offering 6 to 8 feet ahead of the leader-shy fish. Since the bottoms of these



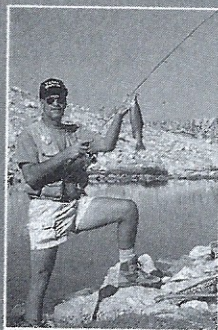
glacial lakes are often paved with sharp, jagged rocks and abrasive boulders, it is wise to check leaders for nicks or abrasions after a dozen or so casts.

A 5½- to 6-foot ultralight rod and reel loaded with 4- to 6-lb. line is a very sporting choice when opting for spinning gear. 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 they demonstrate a tendency to ambush their prey, herky-jerky retrieves between and around submerged boulders often lead to jarring strikes. While old standbys, such as yellow Rooster Tails, yellow/orange Panther Martins and bronze-plated Mepps and Vibrax spinners, gold-hued Wob-L-Rite, Kastmaster, 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, Crippures and HumDinger lures resemble bite-size goldens via their coloration, and their action is scientifically designed to trigger aggression, especially in the bigger fish.

## BACKCOUNTRY PREP

Due to distances and gains in elevation, golden country is never easy to reach whether in California or Wyoming. Hikers should be in good shape with proper-fitting and well-broken-in footwear. For those unwilling or unable to enter the backcountry on foot, pack stations with sure-footed mountain horses and mules cater to first-time or seasoned riders. For a list of Golden State backcountry outfitters, contact the Eastern High Sierra Packers Association at (760) 873-8405. For a list of Wyoming licensed guides or outfitters, call (307) 777-5323. Additional Cowboy State information is available from the Wyoming Outfitters Association, (307) 527-7453.

Fish and Game biologists Darrell Wong ([760] 872-1171) and Dale Mitchell ([209] 222-3761) are good sources of Sierra Nevada angling information. East-slope Wind River angling information can be



obtained by contacting the Game and Fish Department, Lander office ([307] 332-2688). For west-slope information, contact the Pinedale office ([307] 367-4352).

While a free permit is required for wilderness travel, necessary gear should include a lightweight tent with a rain fly, poncho, backpack stove with fuel and a high-quality sleeping bag. Sunscreen, chapstick, a cap and sunglasses are also advisable.

Backcountry weather is unpredictable. Temperatures may vary from 80° during the day to below freezing at night, and travellers should be prepared for both blazing sun and snowstorms.

Topographical maps of specific minuted quadrangles help plan destinations and crosscountry routes. For California maps, permits and trail information, contact the White Mountain Ranger District, 798 North Main Street, Bishop, CA 93514; (760) 873-4207. Wyoming map indexes are available through the U.S. Geological Survey, Box 25286, Federal Center, Denver, CO 80225.

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lakes are fertile but encourage little spawning and house specimens up to 11 inches. "However, while many of the deep, rockbound lakes in the higher elevations discourage spawning altogether, they do possess adequate food and will grow thin densities of goldens to 24 inches," he says. "Two-to five-pounders are fairly common in these locales because there is less competition for available food and they are lightly fished."

Without doubt, these world-class specimens are not for the casual angler. Visitors to these quintessential lakes near the clouds need to be armed with an arsenal of special tactics and techniques, not to mention a mind-set for strenuous effort. Utilizing the base-camp strategy, we bivouac near timber and day-hike to a targeted headwater punchbowl. My sons, Jason and Matt, and I have scrambled over some of the most God-forsaken arrays of loose talus, icy snowfields and remote ridgelines to test these grim, foreboding bodies of water guarded by precipitous cliffs with tough or limited access. Besides battling hypothermia, narrowly averting lightning and deftly dodging a

mini-rockslide, we have managed to establish a combined 28 line or tippet-class world records. Even though we have landed nearly two dozen fish over 2 pounds and observed countless others in the 3- to 5-pound category, these special fish prove just as difficult to catch as they are to reach.

Big fish often relax their inherent caution during the subdued light of dawn and dusk, and also become vulnerable when they gorge voraciously right after ice-out and again prior to winter. Scouting from a higher vantage point with polarized glasses helps locate both trophy fish and their structural haunts, such as inlets, outlets, shelflines or the deep side of a lake. However, once you find the fish, you've got to practice extreme stealth. Crawling stalks on hands and knees, using shoreline rocks as cover and casting from sitting, kneeling or prone positions help prevent spooking these biggies.

In June of 1987, I found myself flat on my back at the Royce 2 outlet with an uncomfortable rock for a headrest. Stripping flyline onto my stomach and executing a short, well-placed cast above the nearby trout, I watched one unceremoniously inhale the nymph mere feet from me. A second after setting the hook, the crystalline water was instantly set on fire as the thrashing 14-incher resembled

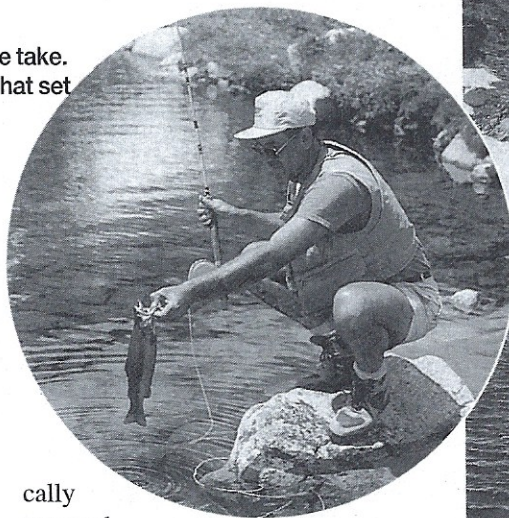


Crawling stalks and demanding casts from sitting, kneeling or lying positions are often necessary to stay out of golden's window of vision.

A well-placed fly often results in a massive take. Here, the author lands a thick 2 pounder that set a 10-lb. tippet world record.

glowing embers. Within half an hour, the International Game Fish Associations' (IGFA) 4- and 8-pound tippet-class world records were netted before back spasms forced me to quit.

Team angling, whereby one angler spots and directs casts for another, can provide yet another valuable edge on these crag-framed waters. Concealed behind a small outcropping that overlooks the Three-Island Lake outlet, Matt, Jason and I worked this technique to perfection during a July '93 trip. From this lookout, each of us took turns guiding casts to a number of sizable fish nonchalantly cruising back and forth along the undercut shoreline a mere four to five feet from the prostrate angler trying for them! Our two-hour cooperative session netted five 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, the well-coordinated teamwork also provided an aestheti-



Wyoming's goldens, which frequently weigh in the 3- to 5-pound range, tend to be bigger than California's. Here, the author plays a world-record contender from Wyoming's Deep Creek Lake.

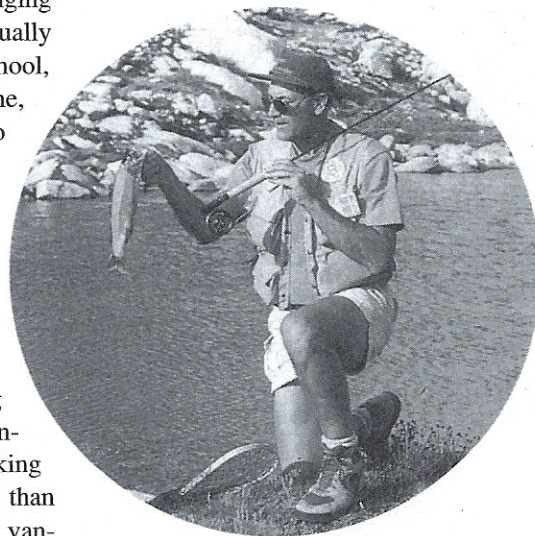
cally rewarding father-son moment!

Patience and perseverance are often a prerequisite to success. A small concentration of trout in Brown Bear Lake had ignored a variety of my offerings for over an hour. Changing tactics, I commenced an unusually rapid retrieve back toward the school, holding near the outlet moraine, then gazed in amazement as a trio broke from the pod and bore full

**Prolific numbers of gammarus help goldens attain maximum size, relatively speaking.**

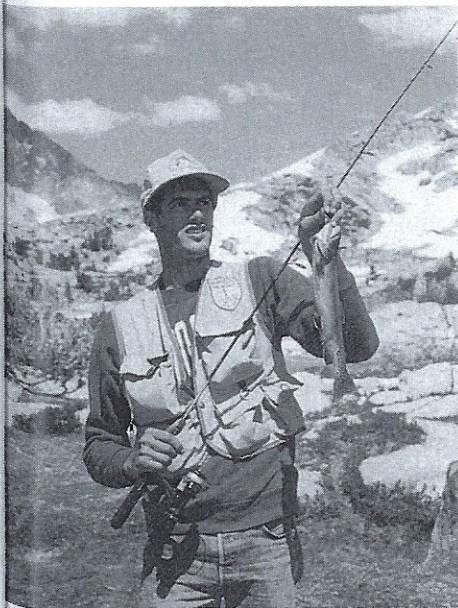
speed toward the tiny yellow Bingo Bug that was wobbling from side to side in a unique, tantalizing manner. Probably striking more out of territorial irritation than hunger, the quickest of the three vanquished it head on, then scurried for a pair of submerged boulders. With rod buggywhipping violently, I parried several runs with movements not unlike a dueling foil. Each burst and subsequent turn lit up the ebony depths like a lightning bolt, while my reel chimed in a soothing accompanying stacatto. Not only did the 2-pound, 2-ounce prize rewrite the Hall of Fame's Unlimited line class standard, but its vivid coloration served as a fitting reminder of its Latin binomial nomenclature, which translates to "pretty in the water!"

While angling for golden trout in lakes can sometimes prove frustrating, the myriad interconnecting arteri-



ole stream systems that feed and drain many of the basin lakes often provide reliable action. Generally more vividly adorned than their lake counterparts, the fish that inhabit the minipools, pockets and undercut banks of these tiny rivulets always seem hungry, so matching the hatch isn't a crucial endeavor.

Dwelling in the starkest, most remote terrain, this kaleidoscopic trout provides a true quest. Whether prospecting a lake two miles up or dredging a "nugget" out of a tributary stream, I will continue to tap these ice-carved elevations for their sparkling riches. □



Ultralight spinning tackle is a very sporting choice on these forlorn lakes above timberline. Here, author's son, Jason, admires a 1½ pounder from Three Island Lake that set the HOF's 12-lb.-line class standard.