



*Boasting iridescent arrays of cadmium, lemon yellow and flaming orange, the golden is the crown jewel of the trout family.*

# The Cottonwood Lakes

**“A quartet of historic golden trout lakes are opened to angling after nearly six decades, presenting some unique angling for willing trout!”**

Don Vachini

Cresting the small, snow drift which draped the lip of the bench, my attention was immediately drawn to the lake's bottlenecked outlet where a dozen or more lengthy forms were crowded in its narrow channel. As I crawled to within casting distance, the 13- to 17-inch trout resembled hot embers fanned by a breeze as they unsuspectingly finned back and forth in the moving current—just the situation I had hoped for. Heart pounding like a cannon, I prepared to cast! Accompanied by my son, Jason, we were here to ply one of the famous four Cottonwood Lakes for the very first time. The Cottonwood Lakes Basin, located along the harsh escarpment of the Eastern Sierra about 25 miles south of Lone Pine, California, is situated at the southern tip of the half-million acre John Muir Wilderness. These exclusive golden trout waters, which are part of a six-lake chain tucked at the base of 14,042-foot Mt. Langley, serve as a broodstock sanctuary containing pure-strain residents which have never witnessed a hook.

## Cottonwood History

A product of what biologists refer to as variation by isolation, this rainbow descendent evolved into a separate subspecies

nowhere else on earth but in the tiny streams and rivulets of the Kern Plateau sometime after the last Ice Age. Imagine shepherders' surprise as they came across this gaudily emblazoned trout while searching for suitable grazing meadows in the early 1860s. The first white men to lay eyes upon this fish with distinctive glowing pigments, they were obviously mesmerized by the kaleidoscopic crown jewel of the trout family!

In 1873 Civil War veteran, Col. Sherman Stevens, built a sawmill in the upper reaches of Cottonwood Creek, which served its purpose of supplying power for the sawmill very well but was devoid of trout. A resourceful man, Stevens had noticed on his trips through the backcountry the small golden trout which abounded in Mulkey Creek of the South Fork Kern River system across the divide. In 1876 he and some friends traversed the Hockett Trail and coffee-can transplanted a dozen or so of these iridescent trout into Cottonwood Creek, where they took hold in a big way. Within a decade, progeny from these stocks were transplanted upstream into the half-dozen Cottonwood Lakes at the top of the

drainage—setting in motion a piscatorially historic chain of events.

So successful were these second transplants that during the turn of the century, the Department of Fish & Game (DFG) began transplanting them directly via mule train, gradually expanding their range. By 1914, goldens were present in many formerly barren waters nestled along a 150-mile swath of the Sierra Nevada Crestline. According to Darrell Wong, a fisheries biologist with the Bishop's DFG office, the Cottonwoods lived up to their potential in yet another facet. “The Department began the process of taking eggs from Cottonwood brooders in 1918 and, with the exception of three years, has continued the process annually,” he informs. “Today,” he continues, “...air tankers have replaced the mules but the broodfish from the lower four lakes still provide the state's sole source of golden trout eggs.”

Sometime in late spring, a team of DFG wardens trap spawners in the interconnecting tributaries and collect their eggs which are then stored in cans and transported back to the trailhead by mule. Eventually ending up at the Mt. Whitney Fish Hatchery near the town of Independence, they are hatched and



reared to fingerling size then air dropped into approximately 300 or so backcountry lakes, usually during late September. "The stocking plan covers about 100 lakes per season so every third year these waters, which provide the basis for one of the state's most satisfying fisheries, receive plants," Wong ascertains.

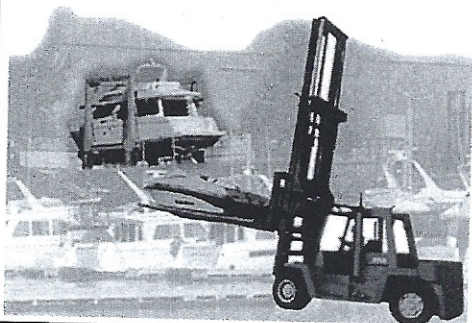
Since this quartet of lakes is such a vital source of golden trout brood stock, Wong notes they were prudently closed to angling in the early 1930s to protect their valuable population. They remained off-limits over six decades—until July 1, 1998. In an attempt to create additional angling experiences, the department opted to open these waters under non-consumptive regulations. The upper pair, Cottonwood 5 and 6, were already open to angling with five fish limits in effect. "Currently, only artificials with single barbless hooks may be used on the entire upper drainage and all fish regardless of size, must be released in lakes 1 through 4," he explained.

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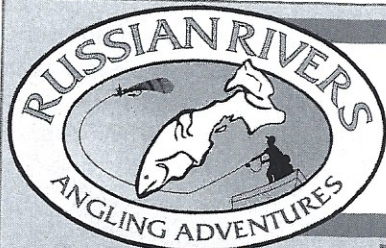
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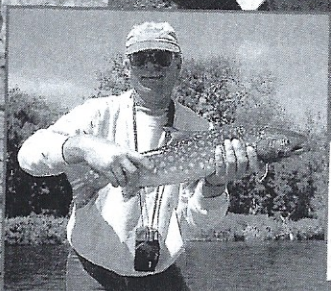
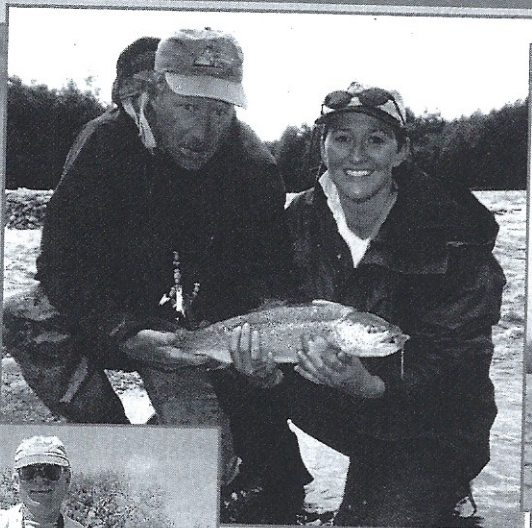
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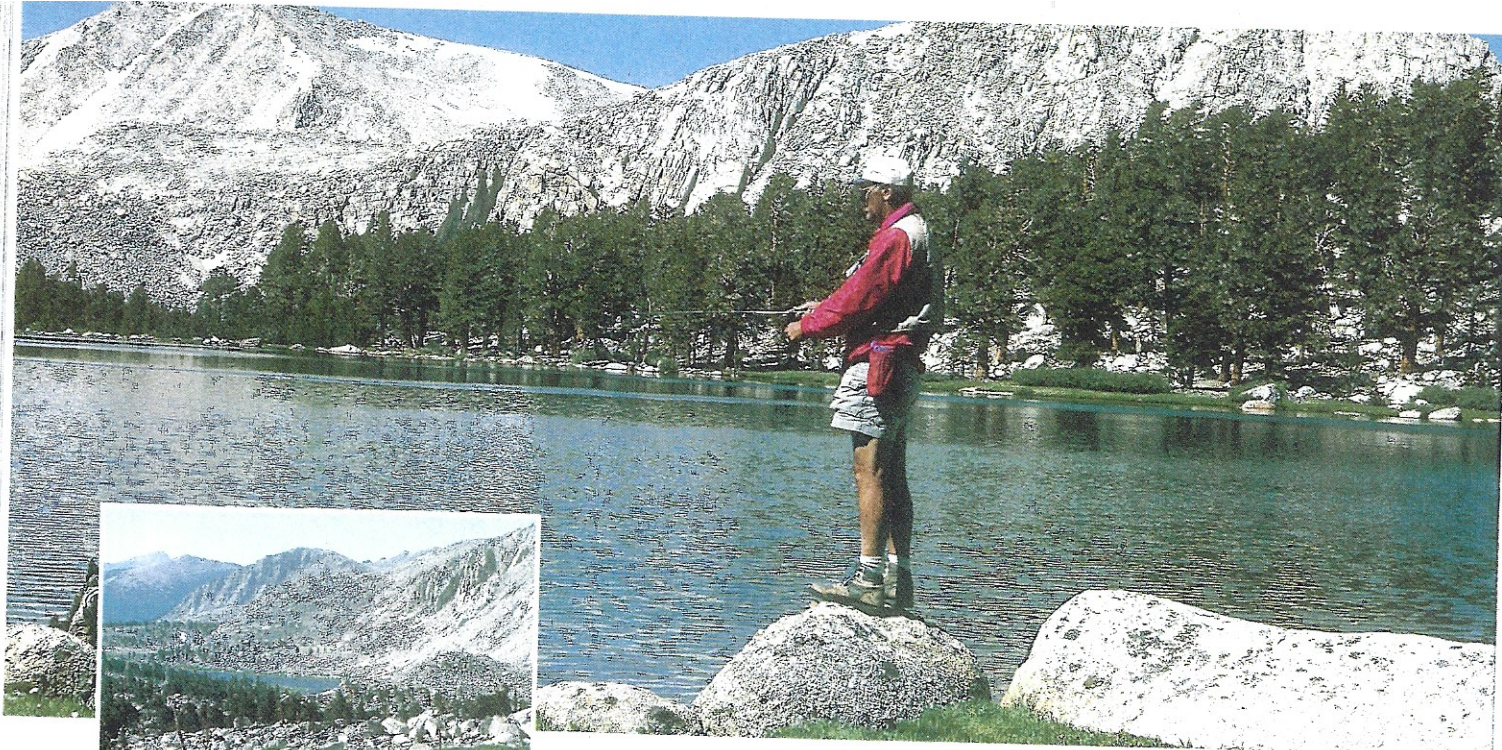
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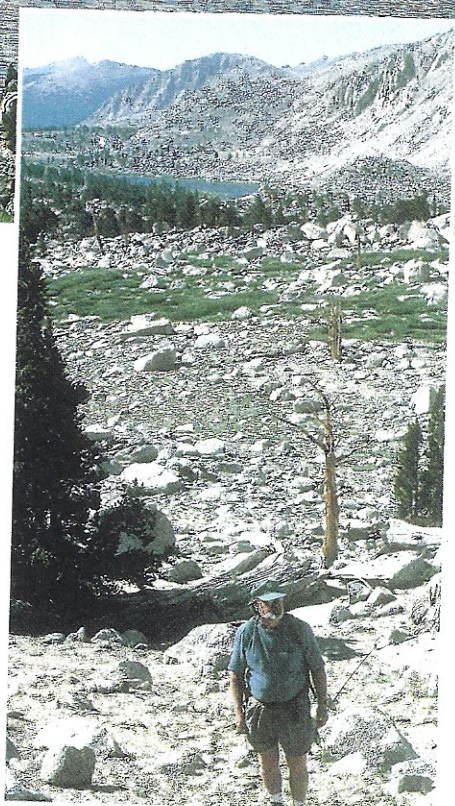
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Most Cottonwood Lakes sit at or near timberline.

Left: Approaching Cottonwood #6 with the lower basin lakes in the background.



anglers, we planned a trip as soon as winter released its grip. Snow was still on the ground when Jason and I arrived at Lake #4 during the second week in July. The thought of working over trophy trout that had no idea what a fake fly resembled accelerated my heart-rate big time as I prepared to lay out a short section of fly line. Bouncing a beadhead caddis along the bottom of the swiftly moving channel proved to be the right catalyst as a trio of large forms instantly scrambled to intercept the tidbit, white-tipped pelvics punctuating their movements. Moments after an unhesitant take, flashes of vermillion, lemon yellow and flaming orange set the crystalline water on fire as the seemingly bewildered, 17-inch bruiser performed frantic figure 8s among his unruffled creekmates. Seconds after its release,

Jason's fly rod doubled under the strain of a near-identical 16 incher.

Surprisingly, the remaining fish did not spook, nonchalantly maintaining their posturing. Over the next 30 minutes, we each managed an additional pair of 14 to 16 inchers before the conclave haughtily cruised into the main lake just out of casting range. They had already begun their adaptation to man!

Over the next two days, we sampled all six waters while base camped at #3. Of the roughly 60 gaudily-attired specimens we released, five exceptional beauties approached the 1- to 2-pound range. While a dozen fit into the 12- to 14-inch category, the majority ranged between 10 and 11 inches. Bearing in mind that the DFG considers goldens over 10 inches to be trophy-sized, we were always working over some noteworthy fish!

Sitting at or just above 11,000-foot in elevation, the Cottonwood lakes are indeed part of a unique watershed, each water with its own distinguishing character, each connected by Cottonwood Creek. Lakes 1 and 2 sit in tandem, partially surrounded by an open, marshy meadow with the creek channel making up their deepest sections. A shallow 10 and 12 acres respectively, they contain healthy numbers of very willing 6- to 9-inch takers.

Lake #3 is a long, somewhat deeper 20-acre water, nearly rockbound on the west side, with a timbered shoreline and

several campsites to the east. The greatest action for hyperactive 8- to 13-inchers took place at the inlet one-third of the lake. Here, a deep channel is gouged, courtesy of an 85-foot high near-vertical falls from a bench which creates an impassible barrier and separates it from #'s 4, 5 and 6.

Guarded by the Old Army Pass ridge-line, expansive lakes 4 and 5 sit back to back a few yards apart in twin cirques. Though only a stones throw from the upper lake, 25-acre #4 consistently afforded our best action for bigger fish—all over 12 inches.

At 30 acres, #5 is the largest, deepest and most expansive of the chain. While we observed a few larger specimens patrolling just out of casting range, we only landed a pair of seven inchers in the outlet shallows.

On our final day, we ascended the steep rocky trail to #6 which is framed against a horizon-dominating headwall. In addition to this imposing granite edifice, a steep talus slope and massive boulder field tells of its harsh formation. Small, dry mosquito patterns drifted in the outlet's moving water proved just the ticket and we released over 15 flashy residents in an hours worth of angling.

### Why So Healthy?

Although Wong infers that most Cottonwood residents range in the 7- to 12-inch spectrum, larger specimens will



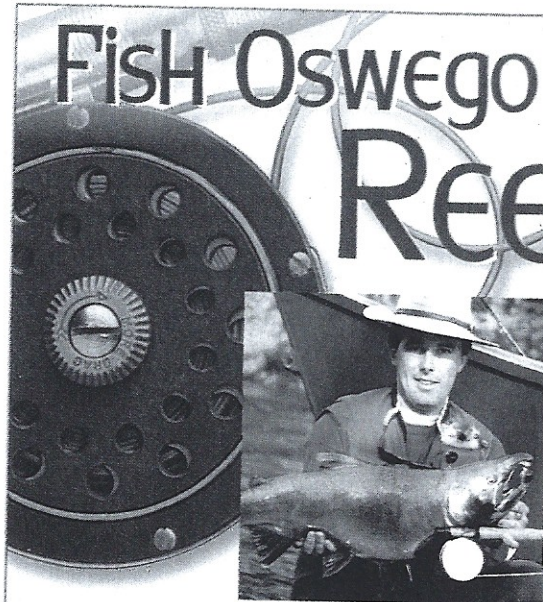
commonly approach 14- to 18-inches with some of the bulkier granddaddys ranging between 1 and 2 pounds. "While fish up to 4 pounds are present, these lakes are not noted for producing especially huge fish."

Regardless of their size, all fish we landed were not only highly pugilistic but exhibited firm, rotund bodies, sure signs of suitable living conditions. Since these lakes sit adjacent to timberline, Wong believes they benefit from a larger, more diverse insect food base than some of the higher, more desolate basins. "The overall quality of invertebrates is not greater but, due to the presence of timber, their quantity is much higher."

Although this high country has less-predictable hatches, the goldens main menu is varied between the prolific caddis, mosquito, mayfly and gammarus. "Without a doubt, the basin's bountiful and fertile food chain is responsible for its inhabitants attaining both larger numbers and greater size in an efficient manner," he maintains.

Wong hints that other food-related factors also contribute. The stream which runs through all the lakes not only provides spawning gravel but its moving cur-

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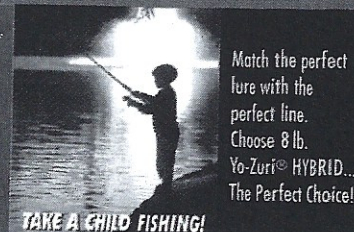
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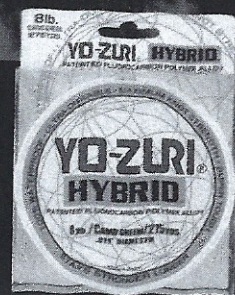
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Author briefly poses with a kaleidoscopic 17 incher which fell for a beadhead caddis at Lake #3's brushy inlet.

Hair Caddis in size 12 to 16 were also surface standbys throughout our visit.

Nymphs, too, were very productive. Twitched along the bottom in 2- to 3-inch retrieves or used with a high stick and strike indicator, size 14 to 18 Beadhead Caddis, Leech, Hare's Ear, Pheasant Tail, Woolly Bugger or Bird's Nest patterns in black, brown, tan, green or olive shades consistently worked their magic. Productive terrestrial imitations include size 14 to 20 black and cinnamon Ant, black, brown and peacock Beetle, orange and black Lady Bug and yellow, tan and brown Hopper patterns.

A 3- to 4-weight, 7- to 8 1/2-foot fly rod is a very efficient and sporting choice when worked with either a floating or high density, weight-forward tip fly line. A 10-foot, 5X or 6X leader rounds out the ideal setup.

Whenever afternoon breezes buffet the basin, plan to fish the windward side of the lake. The annoying wind actually pushes aquatic insects toward shallow water where they collect in a "food ribbon" which represents easy pickings for opportunistic goldens. Since the food forms trout seek are usually close to shore rather than the middle of the lake, a float tube offers the ideal positioning for this endeavor.

## Spin Tactics

For those opting for spin gear, a 5- to 6-foot, ultra-light rod and reel loaded with 2- to 4-pound line is perfect. A fly and bubble setup, utilized with the aforementioned selections, allows for lengthy casts and retrieves while spinners and spoons can cover greater portions of productive water. Probably resembling bite-sized meals, size 0-2 yellow/orange Panther Martin, yellow Rooster Tail, bronze-hued Vibrax spinners and bronze Crippures, yellow Z-Rays and frog Needlefish performed admirably when worked parallel to steep dropoffs or shelflines. However, it was a flaming orange Bingo Bug, retrieved upstream against lake #3 and #4 currents, that provoked an abundance of previously-hidden aggressions—and in the process, illicit some palpitating reactions. Of the half dozen 14 inchers that aggressively smashed it, at least twice that number made more than one purposeful swipe at it, seemingly out of territorial irritation. At #4, one particular crimson shaft actually went airborne to attack the lure from above!

## Fly Basics

Whether intent on dining or defending spawning territory, fish are not far from inlets or outlets, virtually each lake's most productive locale. Entomologically speaking, a wide array of insect replicas is suitable for their moving waters. Although dry, size 14 to 16 Adams and Mosquito patterns were very dependable early morning and evening choices for us, when rise forms usually resembled falling rain, Mayfly, Caddis Emerger, Humpy and Elk

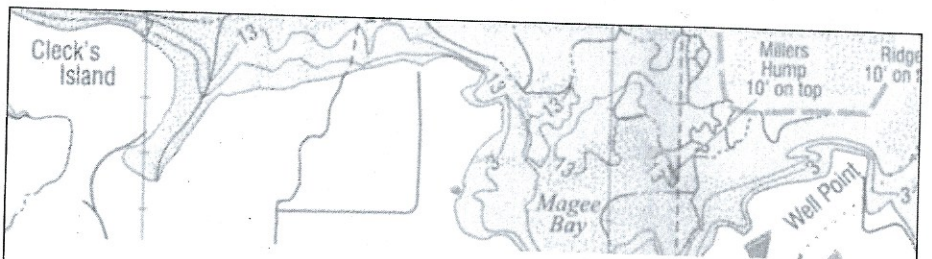


## Creek Options

Tumbling over the benchline a short distance below Cottonwood #1, the main stem of Cottonwood Creek picks up muscle as it meets the South Fork a mile and a half below the basin. Coursing through pine, aspen and cottonwood forest cover, its pleasant, babbling sonata fortifies hikers, while its pools, pockets and riffles sustain a plethora of 6- to 7-inch golden shafts of light.

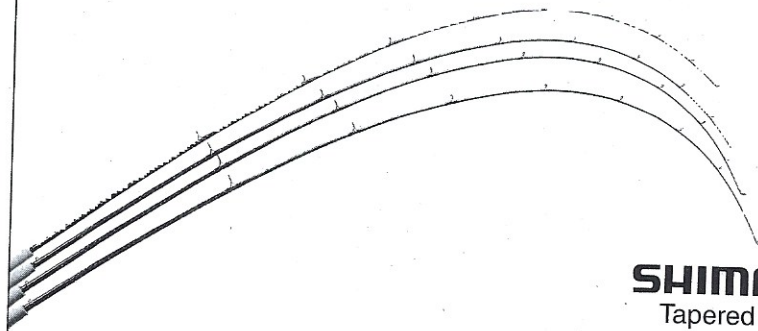
With the best holding water right along undercut edges of the bank, most endeavors are a short line affair. Whether dapping a size 14 to 18 Humpy, Goddard Caddis, Trude, Beadhead Caddis, P.T., Bird's Nest or Flying Ant, anglers still need to be as sneaky as a White House lawyer if they hope to witness a pulsating neon "nugget" dart to smash their offering!

For those unable to hike on foot, the Cottonwood Pack Station is available to carry both gear and rider to their destination. For additional information on trip types and costs, call owners Dennis or Jody Winchester (760) 878-2015. For map or trail information, contact the Mt. Whitney Ranger District (760) 876-6200. □



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