

# YOSEMITE'S BACKCOUNTRY LAKES

Head to the park's eastern boundary, where you'll find a dizzying array of choices of clear mountain lakes with brook trout that have never seen a hook.

by Don Vachini

**D**uring a half-day visit to this lofty chain of backcountry cirques tucked along the northeastern fringes of Yosemite National Park, I saw only two other people and neither were fishermen. But I did see dozens of trout!

Much of the easily accessed attractions in this famous park are overcrowded with tourists. However, a small collection of high-elevation boundary waters offer solitude and uncrowded angling for brilliantly attired mountain brook trout!

Nestled just inside the park boundary, the Gaylor Basin lakes drain into the westward-flowing Tuolumne River system, while on the opposite side of the Sierra Nevada Crest and barely outside the park, the glacier-scoured lakes of the Hall Natural Research Area tumble eastward via Lee Vining Creek. Although vehicles will bring you near, these 14 lakes are strictly walk-in destinations.

## THE RESIDENTS

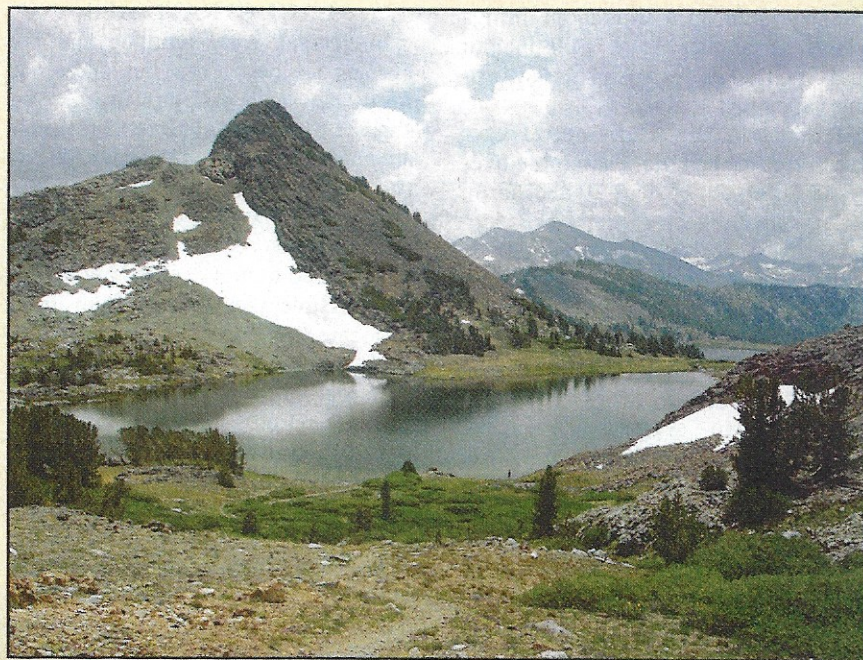
Though not particularly rich in insect populations or other nutrients, these rocky basin lakes above 10,000 feet

support a biomass capable of maintaining moderate densities of healthy, wild brook trout. Here, anglers can pleasantly expect char to range between 7-10 inches with 12- to 14-inchers about the maximum size. However, they are hardy and high-spirited, and often battle like much larger game fish.

While drifting a Size 16 beadhead nymph through the lakes' plunge pools and pockets or dapping a dry can prove

irresistible to their truncated trout, surprises do occur. Last summer, within sight of Green Treble Lake, I watched a dark-bodied, 13-inch torpedo dart from underneath a brushy tangle, its dorsal fin menacingly slicing the surface before nabbing my fly!

With no angling restrictions and a five-fish limit, visitors may either opt to catch and release or keep a few for the skillet. *(Continued)*



*Forget about the scenery — Upper Gaylor Lake has browns to 14 inches. Photo by Don Vachini.*



## GAYLOR LAKES BASIN

A steep one-hour ascent from Yosemite's Tioga Pass Entrance Station trailhead brings hikers to Lower, Middle and Upper Gaylor lakes. The tandem Granite Lakes, tucked in a small, boulder-strewn slot canyon, are reached by following the undulating trail over a finger ridge.

These five productive waters are blessed with moderate food forms and are deep enough to prevent winter-kill. They're bowl-shaped, 8- to 10-acre bodies of water with scattered timber above their turf-lined shores,

## RESEARCH AREA LAKES

Established in 1933 under the U.S. Forestry Service, the 3,888-acre Harvey Monroe Hall Natural Research Area maintains select vegetative, aquatic and geologic elements for study and research purposes. It's located above a lush meadow west of Saddlebag Lake and houses nine lakes and a number of perennial ponds, all with abundant brook trout populations.

From Highway 120, turn onto Saddlebag Lake Road and follow it to the Sawmill Campground turnoff. Sawmill is a park-and-pack campsite, which also serves as a portal to the adjacent NRA backcountry. Crossing Saddlebag Creek, the sketchy trail traverses the side of a glaciated canyon to the nearest basin lakes. Tucked on a bench at the 10,000 feet, are the tightly bunched Green Treble, Middle C and Maul lakes.

From Maul, a fairly steep cross-country jaunt up a talus slope brings views of Spuller Lake with Fantail and Shell lakes resting in the sweeping valley just below.

Productive Big Horn and Finger lakes are reached via a scramble over a glacier-polished ridge to the north, while hard-to-reach Alpine Lake is up a deceptively misleading rocky face.

Cascading water drains from these lakes and tarns to combine with other nearby rivulets and form Lee Vining Creek.

## Connecting Streams

Although no trout plants have taken place in Yosemite and the Hall NRA since the 1970s, self-sustaining populations have endured well in these basins' still waters. The key ingredient lies in the network of un-named inter-connecting streams and rivulets.

Between 5 and 10 feet wide, their vi-

## HEADING UP?



Even if you're only going up to the mountains for a day hike, a bit of planning is required for this alpine terrain.

- ✓ Wear a hat and protective clothing and apply sunscreen.
- ✓ Pack plenty of water in your daypack, as well as some light snacks.
- ✓ Besides toting minimal rain gear, keep an eye on the sky for building weather.
- ✓ While vampire-like mosquitos can be kept at bay with timely doses of DEET, be mindful of skin and eye care.
- ✓ Besides Sawmill Campground off Saddlebag Lake Road, nearby Forest Service campgrounds include Saddlebag, Lake Ellery and Tioga Lake with two others along Lee Vining Creek.
- ✓ Tioga Pass Resort (209-372-4471) has cabins for rent, and several motels can be found 12 miles away in the town of Lee Vining. Contact the Lee Vining Chamber of Commerce at (760) 647-6629 for more information.

brant flows stepladder briskly through an abundance of scaled-down structure, sparse timber and chest-high willow cover. The willows provide suitable spawning areas and allow fish movement between shallow and deep lakes.

## LAKE STRATEGIES

In general, early morning and late evening are best times, but since food forms are small and growing seasons short at these high elevations, residents are opportunists and will feed whenever and wherever they get the chance. Fan-casting from the bank covers all angles, but if no action occurs within 15 minutes, be prepared to move to another spot.

If possible, view the lake from above to locate highly productive structure, such as inlets, outlets, ledges, dropoffs or large submerged boulders, before wetting a line. Trout in these lakes typically cruise in repetitive patterns along shelves or ledges that drop off precipitously with the safety of deeper water only a fin flip away.

In order to keep the offering in the feeding zone as long as possible, conduct retrieves parallel to and on the

steeper side of these littoral zones.

While steep banks or rocky walls often hold the deeper, more tempting hangouts, I have found the shallow, moving water areas of inlets to be excellent hotspots, especially during early season runoff. Here, the water tends to warm faster and trout become frequent visitors as their metabolism increases.

Anglers should stealthily approach these locales and perform lengthier casts since hungry trout often wait where the moving current slows. Ideally, all of these lofty waters offer unobstructed casting room.

## FLY-FISHING

An 8- to 9-foot, 2- to 4-weight fly rod and reel matched with either floating, sink-tip or full-sinking line is ideal to cover all scenarios and present an assortment of flies.

Since these mountain squartails aren't too fussy about what they eat, a Spartan fly box carrying size 12-16 dry Stimulator, Parachute Female Adams and Humpy or wet beadhead Flashback Pheasant Tail, Bird's Nest or Copper John patterns is sufficient. Additional selections should include terrestrial and midge patterns.

Midday often brings some healthy winds, and casting into these zephyrs can require extremely challenging efforts. However, a phenomenon called "upslope blow-in" can often make these blustery times rewarding. In this scenario, rising updrafts from the valley collect and lift weak flying insects and dump them into these lakes. Indeed, trout have become so dependent on these "deliveries" that they are conditioned to feed on the surface or along scum or foam lines during gusts.

Ant, ladybug, hopper and tiger beetle patterns are among the most effective terrestrial patterns for this endeavor.

Where silt beds are found, midges or other macro-invertebrates are abundant. When feeding residents nose through this mucky bottom, stirring the water to sift out their meal, a carefully presented Serendipity or Disco Midge pattern can often be inhaled.

When a slight chop exists, any bead-head pattern twitched just under the surface with a strip-strip-strip-pause retrieve can be deadly. Takes can manifest as either gentle sips or more violent slashes. □

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