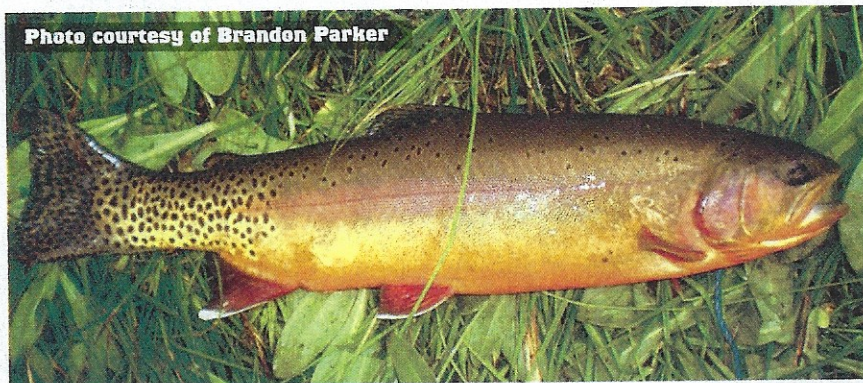


# Fishing FOR Gold

*An amazing golden trout catch — a 7-pound, 8-ouncer — in the Eastern Sierras is sparking the interest of anglers across the state. Get in on the action now.*

**BY DON VACHINI**



A product of what scientists refer to as variation by isolation, the golden trout evolved and flourished nowhere else on this planet but the headwater creeks of the Kern River Plateau. Adapting to the harsh habitat throughout this “hanging valley,” they are brilliantly adorned with vivid crimson, lemon yellow and flaming orange shades. First discovered by European settlers during the 1850s, they were transplanted by mule train to numerous high-elevation destinations, and by 1915, populations had been established along a 150-mile swath of the Sierra Nevada Crest.

## **DIMINUTIVE TROPHIES?**

According to Curtis Milliron, senior fisheries biologist with the DFG’s Bishop office, California’s designated state freshwater fish is exclusively a high-altitude trout, comfortably existing

at elevations between 9,000 and 12,000 feet. While this rainbow sub-species has become a symbol of the state’s high country, they generally don’t attain large size, since growing seasons are short and food forms small. Golden trout range between 6 to 9 inches with few over 12 inches.

## **WORLD RECORDS**

Few secluded Golden State waters hold world-class specimens ranging between 1-3 pounds, or more in some cases. During the mid to late 1980s, I set my sights on numerous golden trout vacancies in the International Game Fish Association (IGFA) and National Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame (HOF) record books and began targeting lofty waters reputed to hold hefty specimens. During this time, I focused on waters tucked in glacial cirques at the



tops of Bear Creek, French Canyon and Humphrey’s Basin drainages. Located between Fresno and Bishop, these three interconnecting flows all sit in the vast John Muir Wilderness and make up the world’s largest concentration of golden trout waters.

Joined by my sons, Matt and Jason, we managed to establish 23 IGFA and HOF line or tippet-class world records between 1987 and 1997 with all fish weighing less than 3 pounds. After almost two decades of research, personal observation and scouting high-altitude water, I surmised that these big



fish maxed out at around 3, maybe 4 pounds.

### A WHOPPER

This theory held until Aug. 1, 2009, when 31-year-old Brandon Parker of Bishop landed a mind-boggling golden from an undisclosed Eastern Sierra lake.

Shortly after his memorable encounter, he told *California Game & Fish* that he had made a return trip to a lake he had visited several times before.

"Strangely, the lake had not given up a single trout during the prior six trips,

but I still believed it held big fish."

Accompanied by his two dogs, he completed the six-hour trek to the remote, 10,500-foot elevation still water, planning to stay for a couple of days. Before setting up camp, he rigged his spinning rod for a few casts where an inlet stream entered the lake.

Parker usually fly-fishes, but it hadn't worked at this lake in the past, so he brought along spinning gear.

"I was pleasantly surprised when a representative trout struck my red/gold Thomas Buoyant on the first cast." He subsequently landed a near-2-pound

**Author Don Vachini works to land a frisky 10-incher from a backcountry gem. • Photo courtesy of Don Vachini.**

golden, quickly photographed and released it. His second cast produced yet another strike, and moments later a healthy 11-incher was also set free.

"However, my third cast was intercepted by a solid force which immediately ran deep while taking line, and I knew instantly it was a special fish." As he tried to remain calm and fight the leviathan, he suddenly realized he had no net. Using a light drag, he cautiously

played the fish on 4-pound line for nearly 15 minutes before working it closer.

"It was one of the biggest goldens I had ever seen and I also realized I needed to get in the water to have a chance at landing it!"

Coaxing it between himself and the shore, he grabbed it by the mouth and tossed it high up on the bank. He then pounced on it like a cat as it flopped back toward the water.

Parker confided that his previous best golden was about 12 inches, maybe approaching a pound. "Until I saw this fish, I did not think they could be that big!"

"I usually release most of my fish, but thought it might be a record, so I immediately hiked back out to have it weighed." Seven hours later in Big Pine, it measured 27 1/2 inches in length and tipped the certified scale at an incredible 7 pounds, 8 ounces.

Although 3 1/2 pounds shy of the All-Tackle mark and 2 pounds short of the state record, the big trout will shatter the 4-pound line class mark in both IGFA and HOF books.

To put this in perspective, all of the current species line and tippet class record weights are between 1 1/2 to 5 1/2 pounds. It's certainly one of the largest

goldens to come out of California since the state record in 1952.

### A BIGGER TREND?

Although Milliron feels Parker's trout is sort of an anomaly, it points out they are definitely capable of attaining large size. In fact, plans for larger goldens throughout the Sierra Nevada have been in effect for some time. After an exhaustive, decade-long environmental review, the DFG has a fishery management plan in place for this mountain range that takes into account the ability of goldens to reproduce and their impact on the imperiled mountain yellow-legged frog. While Milliron's crews have removed goldens from some lakes to help the endangered frogs, they have also set in motion the new philosophy of establishing trophy-sized populations. The DFG now looks at each lake individually rather than collectively to meet site-specific fishery objectives and implement responsible native species management objectives.

According to Milliron, a low-density population yields higher individual growth than a high-density population. "By optimizing the targeted lake's potential, the DFG is aiming for goldens in the 12- to 16-inch range with possible long-range hopes of achieving weights

approaching 2-6 pounds!"

### SEEKING GOLD

The golden's high-altitude habitat is only accessible via lengthy, demanding routes on foot or horseback. With less hiking efficiency at altitudes approaching 10,000 feet or more, most trips will necessitate overnight or longer stays.

For those anglers simply seeking "the golden experience," numerous opportunities exist along either side of the Sierra backbone, usually from ice and snow-fed creeks emanating from higher lakes. A maze of interconnecting streams and rivulets offer steady action for miniscule-but-gaudily-emblazoned "nuggets." West flowing creeks Evolution, Darwin Canyon, Wallace, Volcano, South Fork Kern, Piute, French Canyon, Bear, Hilgard and Mono are densely populated while Alger, Cottonwood and Pine creeks are prolific east-draining streams. Carefully dapping size 14-16 dry Adams, Coachman or Humpy patterns on them can be extremely rewarding.

Milliron hints there are two types of golden still waters — those with spawning habitat and those without. Waters with plenty of spawning habitat and good food supplies usually contain large populations of colorful, albeit stunted fish, while lakes with minimal spawning channels and adequate food usually house moderate densities of medium-sized specimens. Westslope lakes Evolution, Upper and Lower Golden Trout, Desolation, Paris, Star, Apollo, Orchid, Elba and Sally Keyes house mid-sized 6- to 10-inches, as do Cottonwood 1-6, High, Long, Alger 1-4, Thousand Island, Lower Thumb and Treasure 1-2 (Bishop) lakes on the Eastside. "Under the current plan, these lakes are self-sustaining and will be monitored but not planted unless deemed necessary."

The more expansive, rockbound waters tucked near or at the top of the drainage with no spawning opportunities contain extremely thin densities of big fish and are completely reliant on periodic air stockings to maintain their fisheries. Notable Westslope waters housing trophy-sized specimens include Wallace, Sixty Lakes, Sky Blue, Upper and Lower Goethe, Steelhead, Puppet, Royce 2-5, Vee, Brown Bear, Italy,

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**Brandon Parker with his incredible 27 1/2 inch 7-pound, 8-ounce golden trout.**  
■ Photo courtesy of Brandon Parker.

Teddy Bear and Bighorn lakes. Upper and Lower Laurel, Spire, Split, Treasure (Rock Creek) and Summit lakes are reliable Eastside choices. These lakes scattered along the north/south meridian of the Sierra receive calculated stockings every other year and are managed to produce larger fish over time.

### PROSPECT FOR GOLD

To ensure success, conduct research during the off-season and formulate a plan of action. Check on reputed golden waters, isolate a target lake or lakes, pore over topo maps and contact packers, local guides and sporting goods stores. Listen for tips about productive waters. Area or regional fisheries biologists are also excellent sources of specific advice.

Try to choose a drainage or basin with multiple options (two to three lakes in tandem or nearby day hike-to destinations) to minimize additional physical effort. If possible, establish a base camp at or near your targeted water, since morning and evening often bring the best action.

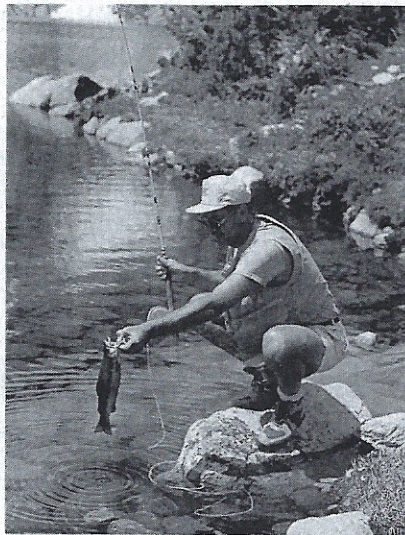
In addition to fishing, plan an itinerary to include shelter, meals and protection against wind, sun and rain.

### ODDS FAVOR FISH

As a rule, the high country is only accessible from late June through mid-October. While each lake has its unique personality, visitors often find the resident fish just as hard to catch as they are to reach. Although action is never fast-paced, a few bits of advice can shift the odds slightly toward the angler.

Although my sons and I have had to cross thigh-high snowfields, negotiate jumbled talus and endure brisk temperatures, I have found ice-out to be one of the most productive times of the season. During this phenomenon, as lake ice breaks up and melts, fish move to the slightly warmer, moving water of the inlets or outlets. As their metabolism awakens, they begin to feed actively and stage for spawning rituals. Fixated on food and mating for a brief one- to two-week window, hefty goldens are exposed and somewhat vulnerable in the shallows.

In late June of 1987, I crawled to within 6 feet of the narrow Royce Lake No. 2 outlet where possibly two-dozen dorsal fins protruded. Lying flat on my back, head resting on a granite pillow to



**Beautiful scenery and equally beautiful trout await those willing to hike to golden trout territory. ■ Photo by Don Parker.**

avoid detection, I managed to fill three vacant IGFA fly rod slots. In a half hour of cramped-but-memorable angling, I actually watched each trout open its mouth and grab the size 14 tan caddis nymph from about 6 feet away.

At ice-out the following year, I proudly watched 16-year-old Jason claim his initial world record from the same channel.

Once the lake is free of ice, goldens scatter and retreat to deep water and become somewhat reclusive. I have observed individual fish follow a pattern of cruising in more or less regular routes along dropoffs, near shoals or around large submerged boulders. Repeatedly fan-casting around this structure allows coverage of both shallow and deep water.

Don't give up early on a cast. Goldens show a remarkable penchant for following offerings great distances before either turning away or striking, often within a few feet of shore.

Persistence also pays off. While casting to a group of goldens at Brown Bear Lake in 1994, I retrieved a variety of lures without success for over an hour. I finally landed a 2-pound, 2-ounce specimen that still holds the HOF Unlimited line class mark.

### SPIN TACKLE

While a light-action spinning rod and reel loaded with thin diameter 4- to 6-pound monofilament is perfect for performing

lengthy casts and plying bottom structure, a smooth operating drag is crucial for efficiently battling larger fish. With no baitfish inhabiting golden waters, the slow, vibrating action of gold, yellow or orange-hued Rooster Tail, Vibrax or Panther Martin spinners best resemble bite-sized morsels. The erratic, side-to-side action of bronze Kastmaster and Super Duper, yellow Phoebe and rainbow Thomas Bouyant spoons worked slow and deep often prove deadly on the bottom huggers.

One of my favorite tricks is trailing a size 10-14 beadhead Pheasant Tail or green, tan or brown Caddis nymph 16 to 18 inches behind a lure.

When there is a slight chop on the water, a fly/bubble setup or a yellow or white mini-jig draped 2 to 3 feet under a bobber not only allows for lengthier casts, but the waves impart a seductive action to the offering, often triggering a response.

### FLY TACKLE

A 7- to 9-foot, 3- to 5-weight matching system is perfect for high-elevation lakes. Although smaller residents show a preference for size 14 to 16 Adams, Parachute Adams, EC Caddis or Mosquito paired with floating line, the deeper lakes require a sink tip or full sinking line to get the fly deep quickly.

While beadhead Copper John, Black Ant, Midge Emerger, Hare's Ear Nymph or tan Caddis nymph patterns are effective in subdued light conditions, bright sunlight makes fishing a challenge. Midday efforts commonly require meaty size 8 to 12 Clouser Minnow, Woolly Bugger and Muddler Minnow streamers in white, yellow and chartreuse shades. Perform lengthy casts, allow the streamer to sink, and then retrieve it tediously along deep structure, stripping in 4- to 6-inch bursts.

Since fish often let down their guard a bit and come near shore during early and late day shadows, I prefer waiting for the evening glass-off. Then, when fish become visible, I twitch a black size 14 to 16 beadhead dropper nymph under a dry Stimulator or Humpy pattern, which acts as an indicator.

While Parker humbly attributes his "granddaddy golden" feat to, "... being in the right place at the right time," the amazing catch helps dispel the myth of diminutive aqua-bonita. □