

down the rod guides toward the reel, and fishing a heavy fly eliminates this annoyance, allowing you to concentrate more on your fishing.

But given the jaw-dropping spectacular surroundings, the fishing is but a small part of an unforgettable experience. The Tusas is not a place for the lunker hunter, the largest fish being about 10 inches long. Nor is it for timid drivers or those without a good four-wheel-drive vehicle, or for that matter, good drivers of good vehicles who don't have the sense to leave when they see a black storm front coming, in most cases, from the west. Make no mistake: if you get caught in a storm during the rainy season, you will be spending the night in your car. I'd like to say also that if you're not too squeamish, take a few of the introduced rainbows for the frying pan. The Tusas is simply too precious a cutthroat fishery to let slip away.

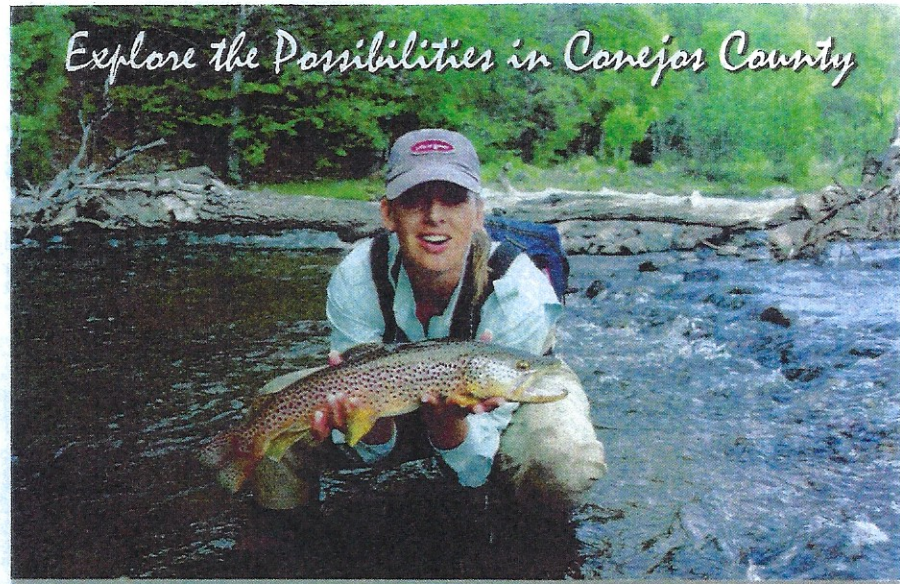
Bear Creek, CA

By Don Vachini

Visions of my first golden trout, caught from an emerald pool on cascading Bear Creek more than 35 years ago, have never left me. While its vivid arrays of vermilion, lemon yellow, and flaming orange painted an indelible impression, its natal creek also became etched in my long-term memory.

Years later, my 13-, 11-, and 9-year-old sons joined my trudge to the same destination, followed on yet another trip by my daughter when she turned 11. Squeals of delight and fascination not only confirmed their initial *Oncorhynchus aguabonita* landings but also signified that they, too, had become smitten with "gold fever" on this water.

Bear Creek originates among the vast glacial cirques and ice-carved spires of the Sierra Nevada crest 110 miles east of Fresno. Spillage from more than 30 lakes tucked high in the John Muir Wilderness backcountry creates the East, South, and West forks, which converge just below idyllic Rosemarie Meadow. A substantial west-slope stream, Bear Creek stepladders



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briskly over a granitic streambed, maneuvers through stands of quaking aspen, plus a Jeffrey and lodgepole pine forest canopy, while descending from 10,300 feet to 7,300 feet elevation over a 15-mile course. Flows are ultimately diverted to Huntington Lake for hydroelectric and drinking purposes.

Whether plying any of the meandering meadow forks or the 40-foot-wide main stem, hiking anglers will find the courses above the impassable falls loaded with healthy, self-sustaining goldens. Ranging from 8 to 10 inches, these gaudily-emblazoned specimens rely heavily on a variety of insect life stages and a plethora of gravel spawning areas to maintain solid densities. Small numbers of brook trout are also present.

From California Highway 99 in Fresno or Madera, connect to California Highway 168, travel past Huntington Lake, then over tediously narrow and winding Kaiser Pass Road to its terminus at Lake Thomas A. Edison. Allow three hours driving time from Fresno. The demanding, 8-mile backpack route from Edison follows the Bear Ridge Trail, then joins the John Muir Trail

before a steep, switchbacking descent into the canyon.

Over the next 8 miles, the Muir Trail tightly parallels the creek with almost every section beckoning anglers to wet a line. Fans of fast water will encounter swirling eddies, inviting seams, broad pools, braids, and churning pocket water, all necessitating constant reading of the varying currents, nimbly

flicking accurate casts, and executing dainty strip retrieves.

Short growing seasons create opportunistic feeders; the trout dine enthusiastically all day. While size-14 and -16 standard or bead-head Prince, Flashback Pheasant Tail, and Bird's Nest nymphs in black, brown, or olive renditions replicate most subsurface food forms, ant and beetle patterns prove effective terrestrial choices. As flows recede and fall approaches, the bejeweled residents unabashedly pursue high-floating, size-14 and -16 Parachute Adamses, Mosquitoes, or Elk Hair Caddises worked along the edges of swift water. A 9-foot, 4-weight rod, floating line, 7- to 9-foot leader, and 5X tippet will handle both situations.

Staking a claim at any informal campsite near the creek provides a soothing sonata, and magical morning and evening prospecting as well. Remember to bring plenty of insect repellent. Required wilderness permits are available at the U.S. Forest Service office in Prather, (559) 855-5355. The Vermilion Valley Resort, (559) 259-4000, www.edisonlake.com, offers food, lodging, and ferry services for car travelers, day hikers, and backpackers. For those unwilling or unable to hike, the High Sierra Pack Station, (559) 299-7225 (June 15–October 15), www.highsierrapackstations.com, provides sure-footed horses and mules.

I am eagerly awaiting my next visit, which will include my 11-year-old grandson and a particularly familiar azure pool. The intent will be inflicting a case of gold fever on yet another family member.

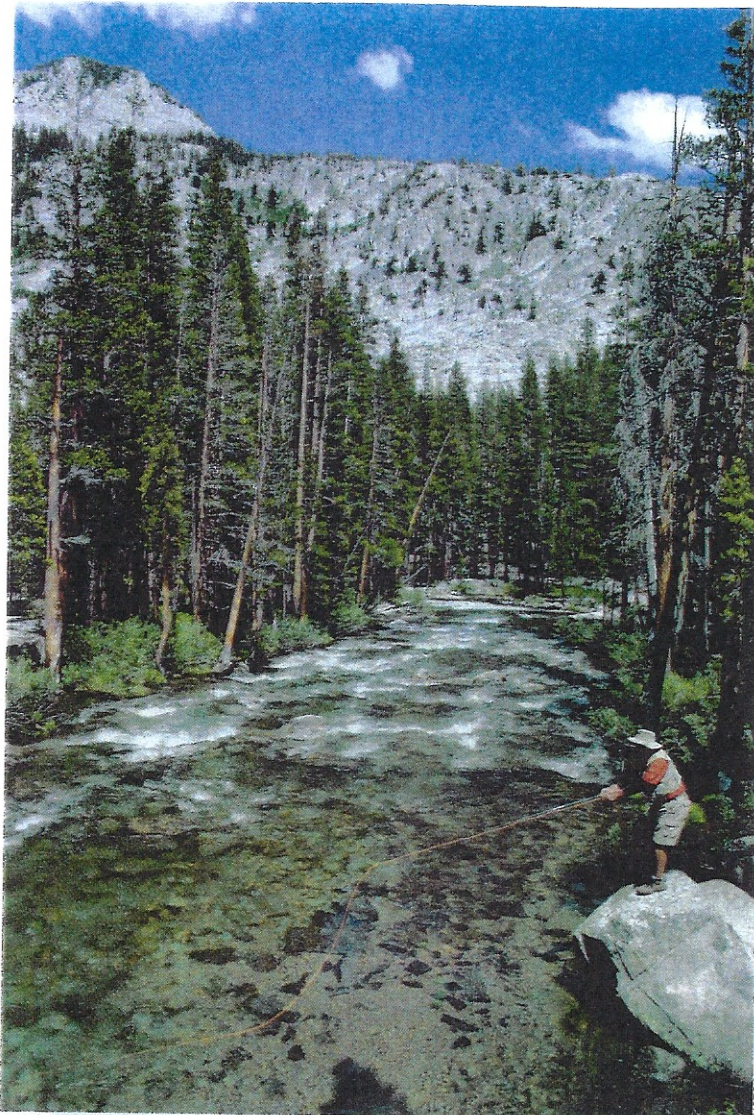


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