

John Muir's Fishing Trail

Forget the Yellow Brick Road. Golden State anglers can follow the John Muir Trail to reach a magical land of trout fishing!

Don Vachini



Taken from an azure pool on cascading Bear Creek nearly 40 years ago, my first golden trout barely reached seven inches. However, vivid splashes of flaming orange, lemon yellow and vermilion, glowing like fire in the crystalline water, left an indelible impression.

On another trip several years later, I trudged three miles further upstream, to Bear Creek's headwater source, tucked below 11,000-foot Selden Pass. Carefully peering into 92-acre Marie Lake's outlet below the prominence of snow-capped Mt. Hooper, my heart pounded with excitement. The dozen or so lengthy forms pulsating like embers along the bottom were a far cry from the diminutive "nuggets" found downstream and I hastily fumbled to rig my fly rod.

Each of these rugged, backcountry destinations between Fresno and Bishop were attained via the John Muir Trail, attesting to a sample of its incredible trail-side piscatorial variety.

THE ROUTE

From the shadows of Mount Whitney on through Yosemite National Park, the 211-mile long John Muir Trail (JMT) is the major bipedal route coursing the serrated backbone of the southern Sierra Nevada Range. Undulating through mixed conifers, glacier-polished granite and pristine meadows, alongside 40 trout-filled lakes and across another 40 bouncy creeks and rivers, this backcountry byway offers some magical angling opportunities as it cuts a swath through two-mile high passes and headwater basins between 9,000-12,000 feet.

Showcasing the range's full grandeur, it also traverses lofty portions of the John Muir and Ansel Adams Wilderness areas in addition to Kings Canyon and Sequoia national parks, which collectively house the largest concentration of golden trout waters in the world. Indeed, visitors will always be near any of four trout species along the way.

TRAILSIDE TREASURES

A symbol of this high country, *Oncorhynchus aqua-bonita* (which accurately translates to "pretty in the water") is the kaleidoscopic prize JMT anglers most often seek.

Co-existing in this pristine environment, brook trout either augment "bonita" waters or are the primary species in several trailside fisheries.

Lightly-distributed populations of rainbow trout reside in a dozen waters

interspersed along the northern-most trail sectors, while reclusive brown trout are the least common of the JMT species.

CURRENT MANAGEMENT PLANS

Thanks to a decade-long environmental review, the DFG has a new fishery management plan in place for the entire Sierra Nevada Range, according to Curtis Milliron, a DFG senior fisheries biologist in the Bishop office. "The department now looks at each lake individually rather than collectively to meet site-specific fishing objectives."

While crews have removed brook and goldens from some lakes to mitigate for the imperiled mountain yellow-legged frog, many of the remaining lake populations are now showing signs of increased size rather than large numbers. Milliron believes that low-density populations yield higher individual growth than a high-density population. "By optimizing a lake's potential, resident golden and brook trout are capable of attaining larger size, given the right conditions."

The DFG's long-range hopes are backcountry fish approaching the 12- to 16-inch range in selected waters.

FOOD FORMS

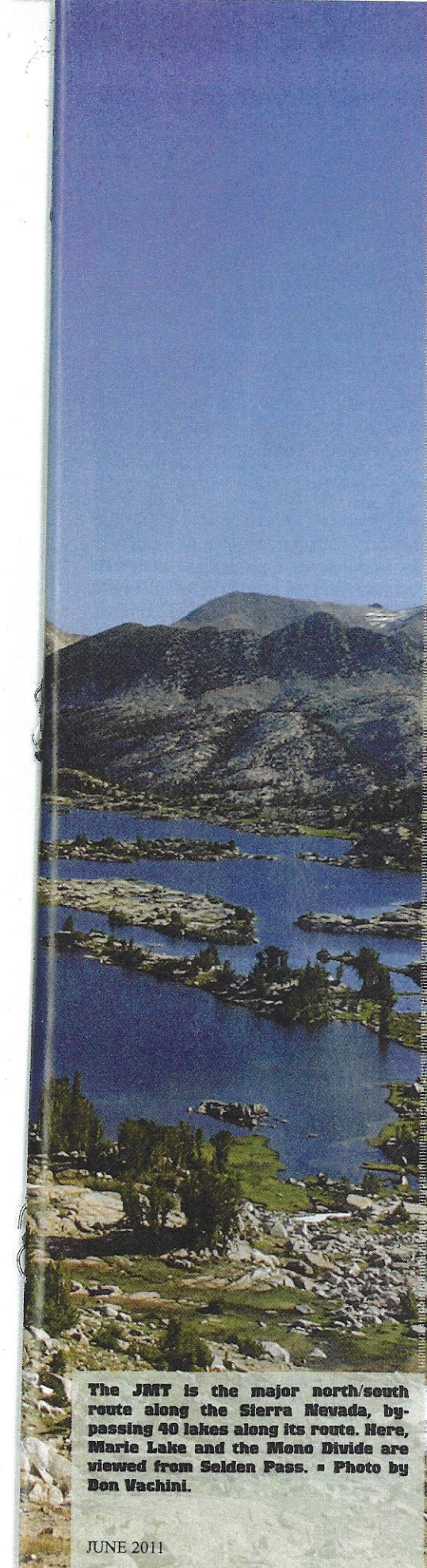
Stream-borne caddis, mayfly, stone and mosquito, plus terrestrial grasshoppers, flying ant and various beetles make up the residents' primary high altitude diet. In addition, freshwater *gammarus* (shrimp) are abundant in many deeper waters providing high-caloric intake for residents, which also dine on near-microscopic zooplankton blooms and other benthic life forms.

While no baitfish are present in JMT waters, larger trout specimens tend to be highly piscivorous, often dining on the less wary, bite-sized fingerlings when the opportunity presents itself.

HEADWATER STREAMS

Probably the most feasible opportunity to get to know the gaudily-emblazoned, state freshwater fish is from the arteriole network of interconnecting stream systems which gather snow and glacier melt from granitic spires and jagged peaks touching the sky. Trickling down slope, they eventually feed either the west-flowing Merced, Tuolumne, San Joaquin, Kings and Kern rivers or the Owens River on the east slope.

Whether tumbling over boulders, un-



The JMT is the major north/south route along the Sierra Nevada, bypassing 40 lakes along its route. Here, Marie Lake and the Mono Divide are viewed from Selden Pass. • Photo by Don Vachini.

der a sparse forest canopy or winding through an idyllic meadow in their headwater regions, Bear, Hilgard, Tyndall, Dusy, Evolution, Piute, Purple, Fish, Sallie Keyes, North Fork Mono, Wallace, Wright, Whitney, Palisades, Woods, Minaret, Bubbs and Darwin creeks plus South Fork San Joaquin and South Fork Kings rivers contain scaled-down habitat but provide reliable action, albeit for smaller specimens.

More vividly adorned than their lake counterparts, the goldens and brookies found in the pools, pockets, seams and undercut banks of these tiny, cascading rivulets always seem hungry. While matching the hatch isn't crucial, simple water reading skills and keeping shadows off the water definitely improve odds of a hookup.

WAYSIDE STILL WATERS

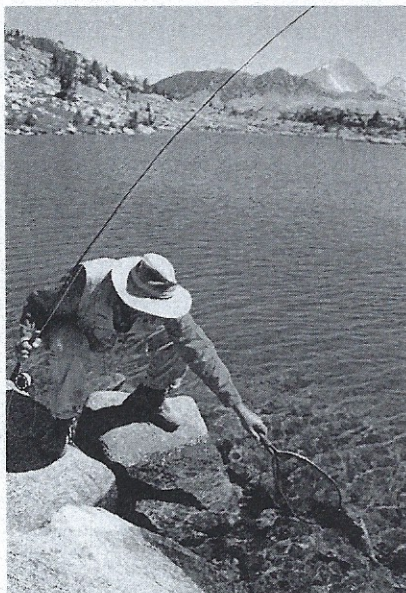
Milliron reveals the size of a lake, its richness in natural food and spawning habitat often determines the type of fishery to be expected. "There are basically two types of still waters in John Muir country; those with spawning habitat and those without."

Turf-lined waters such as Heart, Marjorie, Upper, Middle and Lower Rae, Timberline, Upper and Lower Twin, Evolution, Garnet, Chief, Warrior and Silver Pass lakes abound in plentiful spawning gravel plus a good food base and house large numbers of stunted fish up to 8 inches.

Sparsely-timbered Thousand Island, Purple, Virginia, Marie, Sallie Keyes, Sapphire, Upper and Lower Palisades, Dollar and Guitar lakes combine minimal spawning channels with adequate food, producing moderate densities of medium-sized specimens ranging from 8-12 inches. "These lakes are self-sustaining and, under current plans, will simply be monitored."

OFF TRAIL OPTIONS

Milliron points out there are a few widely-scattered lakes containing thin-densities of world-class golden trout reached via interconnecting passageways from the JMT. Situated at or near the tops of drainages and guarded by precipitous cliffs, serrated sentinels and limited access, Royce 2-5, Paris, Puppet, Star, Desolation, Paine, Ramona, Upper and Lower Goethe, Three-Island, Vee, Peter Pande, Darwin 1-3, Italy, Jumble, Brown



Author lands a trophy-sized golden from a headwater lake. The fish required lengthy casts along a transition zone. ■ Photo by Don Vachini.

Bear, Sixty Lakes, Wallace, Sky Blue, Barrett, Spire and Bighorn lakes contain residents reaching 17 inches and pushing 1-2 pounds. "However, with no recruitment, they are reliant on calculated air plants every two or so years to produce bigger fish over time."

Probably the best way to prospect these forlorn punchbowls near the clouds is by establishing a timbered base camp below the targeted cluster of lakes, then day hiking to investigate without the burden of a heavy pack. Negotiating sketchy paths, jumbled talus fields or blazing cross-country routes as Muir once did, sons Matt and Jason and I have located some granddaddy specimens residing in rock-bound, windswept cirques over the past three decades.

While fortunate to have established a collective 27 line and tippet class golden and brook trout world records with the National Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame, more often than not we were required to use demanding technical techniques such as casting from sitting or kneeling positions while mastering shooting fly lines, roll casts and tedious retrieves through maze-like structure.

The Bubbs Creek trail into the Sixty Lakes Basin, Evolution Valley to Humphrey's Basin and the Piute Creek, French Canyon and Italy Pass loop offer challenging, off-trail adventures.

TRIED AND TRUE LAKE TACTICS

Although the vast majority of JMT through travelers pay little attention to its fisheries or to venturing off-trail, those who put in the effort will most certainly enjoy success. It is always wise to enlist the help of fisheries biologists, local tackle shops and the Internet to conduct research and obtain information on specific drainages. Formulate a plan of action regarding objectives, fishing strategies and routes beforehand.

While each lake along the JMT has its own unique identity, Milliron hints that trout orient primarily in relation to prime feeding areas. "Basically, find the food source and you'll find fish," he says.

Seek vantage points from above to study a lake's subsurface topography, especially during bright days. Isolate points of land, transition zones and underwater boulder gardens in addition to inlets and outlets, which provide oxygenated flows and tend to funnel food forms into narrow channels.

Slowly stripping a bead-head Caddis through Marie Lake's ebony channel, I set the hook on its first hesitation. Quickly subduing the surging force, I netted a girthy, 15-inch brookie and, within 30 minutes, released a brace of flashy, 14-inch goldens and another 14-inch char! On subsequent visits, this structure astride the JMT has indeed proven to be a mecca for notable trailside trout.

Many weak-flying insects from down-canyon are lifted into the higher elevations and deposited on the lakes via a phenomenon known as "upslope blow-in." In-the-know trout commonly line up along foam-lines on the leeward sides of a lake to feed as zephyrs subside. Trout also routinely forage for macro-invertebrates in the silt beds of debris fields from avalanches and spring runoff.

Once fish are pinpointed, initiate a stalk, maintain stealth and utilize crawling approaches to stay below their window of vision. Begin casting close to shore first and don't give up on casts too soon. I've observed fish follow and hit an offering just as I was about to lift it out of the water!

Existing well offshore and at depths unattainable to anglers, residents often let down their guard a bit during the day's first and last light and at ice-out.

FLY TACKLE

A good number of trailside creeks are



The golden is a very rare and beautiful trout, making catching even smaller specimens like this a treat for backcountry anglers. Of course, much larger goldens are available, too, but be ready to work for them! • Photo by Don Vachini.

often just a series of small plunge pools no larger than a kitchen sink while others are full-blown creeks 25-50 feet wide. An 8- or 9-foot, 3- or 4-weight fly rod matched with a floating line and 9-foot, 6x tippet is perfect for dapping or probing standard Sierra-issue nymphs such as size 12-16 Sparkle Caddis, Gold Ribbed Hare's Ear, Pheasant Tail and Bird's Nest in plain or bead head into their icy flows. Personally, I have found the E/C Caddis to be the ultimate go-to pattern on Muir Trail's moving waters. With a parachute hackle, it floats low in the water; its profile mimics crippled caddis, midges, hoppers and other terrestrials and it can be fished wet or dry.

Solid still-water dry flies include size 12-16 Parachute Adams, Elk Hair Caddis, Callibaetis Mayfly, Humpy, Stimulator and Perfect Ant. Often neglected but highly sought adult damselfly (aka dragonfly) imitations are often pursued by larger trout seeking a meaty morsel.

A 5- to 6-weight rod and high-density sinking line are needed for both distance casting and to quickly bring offerings down to depths of 30 feet on the deeper lakes. Although exasperatingly selective, hefty, lake-dwelling leviathans often show an affinity for subsurface, size 14-18, orange or green Scud imitations, Sparkle nymph, Midge Pupa, Bead Head Pheasant Tail and Caddis nymph patterns in tan, brown, black and olive shades.

While daytime leaders on clear water

should be 12 feet tapered to 6x to fool wary residents, a 9-foot leader will be sufficient during morning and evening times.

SPIN GEAR

A 6- to 7-foot light to ultra-light action spinning rod and reel loaded with 2- to 4-pound mono is ideal for performing lengthy casts on lakes or daintily placing offerings on moving water.

Stillwater spin-anglers will often find success exploring deeper structure with size 00- to 2-size spinners, spoons or soft-plastic grubs on jigheads. Yellow/orange Panther Martin, yellow/white Rooster Tail or gold Vibrax spinners and Thomas Bouyant and Kastmaster spoons are highly successful for achieving distance. Let the lure settle on the bottom, then begin an erratic retrieve, swinging the rod tip from side to side.

While a fly/bubble setup is an ideal way to present flies over long distances, yellow or white-hued mini-jigs twitched 3-4 feet under a bobber also take their share of trout. The subtle, chopping wave action during light breezes can impart a "magical movement" that can also entice a bite.

GETTING THERE

The Eastern gateway to John Muir trailheads is Highway 395, with several popular trailheads available via paved side roads from the lengthy, north/south con-

course. Silver Lake from the June Lake Loop, Mammoth and Duck Passes out of Mammoth Lakes, North and South Lakes out of Bishop and Onion Valley and Whitney Portal near Lone Pine offer the most feasible east-side linkups.

Preferred west slope starting points include trailheads from Highway 168 at both Florence and Edison Lakes and from Highway 180 at Cedar Grove in Kings Canyon.

RESOURCES

A free wilderness permit is required for JMT travel. Hikers should be in good shape, aerobically fit and acclimated to altitude before beginning. Necessary gear should include a lightweight tent with a rainfly, backpack stove with fuel, lightweight rain gear and a high-quality sleeping bag and mat. While durable, proper-fitting footwear is essential, sun-screen, sunglasses and wide-brimmed hats are also advisable.

A topographical map is invaluable for exploring alternative routes or locating desired waters. For specific quadrangle maps and information, contact the White Mountain Ranger District in Bishop at (619) 873-4207 or visit www.fs.fed.us. The DFG Web site, www.dfg.ca.gov, offers updated angling information.

Pack stations are located at most trailheads, catering to both first-time or seasoned riders. Contact the West Slope High Sierra Packers Association, www.highsierrapackers.com or the Eastern High Sierra Packers Association www.easternsierrapackers.com for more information.

Little has changed since Muir traipsed this majestic, ice-carved escarpment. Whether sampling a lone water, exploring a small segment or walking the entire trail on one trip, the JMT remains the main conduit to stunning scenery and abundant wild trout. □

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