



ALL PHOTOS BY DON VACHINI

Sally Keyes Lakes and Creek, CA

Golden Nuggets in a Backcountry Basin

By Don Vachini

Displaying vivid arrays of lemon yellow, vermilion, and flaming orange as it pulsed like neon in Bear Creek's crystalline flows, my first golden trout truly left an indelible impression. Indeed, this 8-inch shaft of light, which I caught in 1975, afflicted me with a piscatorial form of gold fever, launching me on numerous high-altitude pilgrimages in pursuit of this gaudily emblazoned treasure.

Unlike the bearded forty-niners who came west to dig, mine, or pan for their gold, I satisfy my obsession in the higher elevations of the Sierra Nevada Range, negotiating jumbled talus fields, gin-clear streams, and glacier-polished granite. A recent "mining" excursion found my friend, Terry Donahoe, and me resting atop 10,850-foot Selden Pass, surrounded by vistas of Mount Senger, Mount Hooper, and the Mono Divide, their serrated sentinels a reminder of this escarpment's harsh formation. With "gold-mining tools" in hand, we were about to descend into the Sally Keyes drainage.

The life story of the remarkable golden trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss aguabonita*), and how it came to be, is fascinating. With its roots most likely tied to a prehistoric strain of redband rainbow trout inhabiting west-slope Sierra waters, scientists believe that as the last Ice Age receded, it created a hanging valley, isolating a population of rainbows in a few upper South Fork Kern River tribu-

taries. Here, and no other place on earth, this product of what biologists refer to as variation by isolation, gradually adapted and flourished over the centuries in the shadows of 14,495-foot Mount Whitney.

The first Americans to discover golden trout were Basque shepherders grazing their flocks in the high-elevation meadows of the Kern Plateau around 1865; these trout were spread by coffee-can transplants to the nearby Cottonwood lakes drainage in 1876. In an ambitious piece of fisheries management, California Department of Fish and Game (DFG) personnel began transplanting fish from here in milk cans via mule train at the turn of the century. By 1915, a 150-mile swath of previously barren waters up and down the Sierra Crest contained golden trout populations, many self-sustaining. Air plants augmented many of these waters beginning in the 1950s.

During late July, 1985, I joined a nonfishing friend on a grueling 60-mile, weeklong, backpack loop across the largest concentration of golden trout waters in the world. Falling a bit behind schedule, we needed to complete a 14-mile forced march in one day. Our fatiguing route took us alongside the Sally Keyes lakes, which were absolutely adorned with concentric rings left by rising trout as we skirted the shores of these beautiful alpine waters. While I had to forgo this fantastic opportunity, I could not forget it!

For years after, I still endured dreams (more accurately nightmares) of having to pass up the temptation of these actively feeding "bonita" virtually next to the trail. In fact, during one such dream, my wife, Pat, roused me from sleep, incredulously asking, "Just who is this Sally Keyes you were mumbling about and how do you know her?"

After the black ant passed over the front of the school, individuals near the tail often smashed the offering, probably from territorial aggression. Here, the author hooks up on a "back of the classroom" specimen (left). Gaudily-attired goldens between 7 to 12 inches abound in the Sally Keyes drainage. Prospectors mining here will find more than enough "gold" to go around. (above)



The Return

Finally, last summer, after receiving good-natured permission from my wife to visit her old nemesis, I planned a rendezvous with the Sally Keyes of my dreams. From Fresno, Terry and I followed California Highway 168 eastward for 95 miles to Vermilion Valley Resort. The last 15 miles (aka Kaiser Pass Road) was single lane and curvy, with a scarcity of turnouts. It required diligence and caution for opposing traffic.

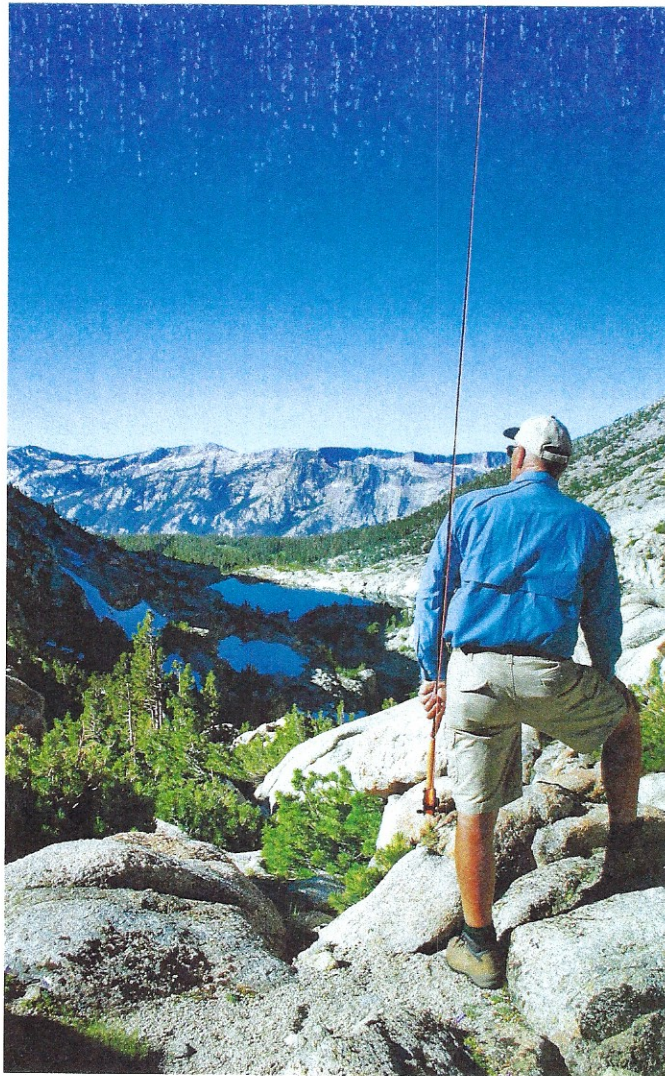
Sitting on the shores of Lake Thomas A. Edison, Vermilion Valley Resort is a backpacker friendly gathering spot for campers, day hikers, or through-backpackers taking a brief trail respite. Offering a ferryboat shuttle, this rustic gateway has a well-deserved reputation for hearty meals, excellent service, and comfortable rooms.

Approaching 70, my days of 14-mile hikes with a heavily-loaded pack were over. Now I depend on horses to get me there—or close. With a good night's sleep and a solid breakfast under our belts, we met John and Janise Cunningham, owners of the High Sierra Pack Station, which sat a stone's throw from the resort. Our hosts for this particular trip, they would take us to a drop-off point and return for us six days later. We'd hike an additional 5 miles with our packs to our final base camp.

Firmly secured on the backs of our sturdy mounts, we left the corral at 8:30 a.m. and began a steady, uphill traverse of Bear Ridge for 5.5 miles before reaching the John Muir Trail (JMT) junction. Along the steeply-inclined, switchback descent toward Bear Creek, I caught my first glimpses of the dominating, snow-capped, backcountry crags while my sure-footed steed deftly stepped along edges of precipitous cliffs or granitic trails. All the while, I tested different muscle groups, shifting weight forward or backward to remain close to my horse's specific center of gravity.

The Jeffrey and lodgepole pine forest canopy thickened overhead as we neared the creek and the trail bisected

groves of quaking aspen, their wafer-thin leaves whispering an unofficial welcome to a truly splendid golden trout stream. At Hilgard Creek, we stretched and limbered muscles stiff from five hours in the saddle and enjoyed a welcome trail lunch washed down with cold creek water. From here, we parted ways with our outfitters, shouldered packs, carefully forded Hilgard's high, funneled flows, and continued on foot along the JMT.



Sally Keyes Creek flows down the southern slope of Mt. Hooper. This view of Heart Lake is from Selden Pass.

Although each bend in the azure stream beckoned us to wet a line, we steadfastly pressed on. A mile later, the intimidating main stem of Bear Creek, carrying three times the volume of Hilard, greeted us. We opted for a series of braided channels, which were wider, more spread out, and less intense. The invigorating, up-current ford over a moving, cobble bottom and icy, challenging flows while we wore cumbersome packs claimed a lot of stamina. Of course, hordes of mosquitoes, sensing our vulnerability, chose this time to descend and dine on us as well. We prudently chose to depart rather than risk being eaten alive by the incessantly droning hordes of mini-vampires.

A moderate ascent brought us to idyllic Rosemarie Meadow and Bear Creek's West Fork, where we rested briefly. From here, we dutifully tackled the staircase trail for 2 miles, which necessitated a stride adjustment and much slower pace. Catching our

breath on a tiny bench overlooking Marshall Lake 100 yards below, we observed countless rise forms. Note for tomorrow!

We set up base camp next to 92-acre Marie Lake (10,595 feet) in semidarkness. Our tent kept us bug free and we slept well.

Stiff but refreshed, I hastily assembled my fly rod and scrambled down to Marshall Lake the following morning. Actually a series of interconnected, marshy ponds, this little-known, 5-acre lake was off-trail and virtually unnoticed by through trekkers. It was also very lightly pressured. Whether daintily presenting or carelessly slap-

ping a dry, size-16 Mosquito on its surface, healthy, 10- to 11-inch brook trout showed a willingness to engulf either. Unfortunately, a few insect advance scouts must have rung the breakfast bell and soon, clouds of these real life pests ended my foray despite heavily administered repellent.

The remainder of the day was spent nursing tired muscles, leisurely fishing Marie's nearby outlet for pleasantly-sized goldens and brookies, and planning the strategy for the next few days. Nestled beneath a windy pass, the lake's gentle breezes offered a welcome respite from the mosquito clouds. In plain view of our tent was Selden Pass, an omnipresent reminder on the skyline beckoning toward our intended Sally Keyes agenda on its opposite slope.

Early the next morning, we donned light daypacks and completed the 40-minute jaunt astride the well-trodden JMT. Deep from within the bowels of towering, 12,349-foot Mount Hooper, icy subterranean water bounced forth briskly from an aquifer, collected additional surface snowmelt to form the scaled-down headwaters of Sally Keyes Creek, then entered 4-acre Heart Lake, a deep, heart-shaped jewel set in a ring of white polished granite. Exiting from here with nearly doubled flow, it tumbled steeply through stunted willow growth and sparse, grassy turf for a half mile to the in-tandem Upper and Lower Sally Keyes lakes. Throughout, various-sized boulders provided evidence of prior glacial history.

Each of these vibrant, 5-acre, 10,350-foot-elevation lakes is partially encircled by lodgepole pine forest, chaparral, and glacier-hewn granite fields. A creek briefly courses another meadow before eventually dropping to meet the South Fork of the San Joaquin River above Florence Lake. California Department of Fish and Game accounts reveal that the Sally Keyes Lakes (along with Heart) were initially stocked with goldens in 1914 and again in 1918. With the most recent stocks taking place in 1985, their populations are currently deemed healthy and self-sustaining. Most fish range between 7 and 10 inches, with individuals up to 12 inches not uncommon.

Consisting of the three lakes and 5-plus miles of creek, this intimate mini-basin is nestled deep in the half-million-acre John Muir Wilderness between Bishop and Fresno. Basically right on the JMT, it is certainly no secret, but reaching this chain of waters demands effort, whether you approach from the Edison or Florence lake trailhead. Many travelers, either preparing to cross or just completing the steep pass, use the primitive campsites as a one-night stand. However, very few take the time to seriously fish.

Dreams Fulfilled

My first few offerings with a size-14 Parachute Adams along Upper Sally Keyes' open inlet went unanswered, adding to my quarter century of angst. However, after taking a few deep breaths, adding a size-14 Prince Nymph dropper, and conducting a more relaxed presentation, a welcome sub-surface take broke the ice. Sally Keyes had finally said hello!

High stepping through the shoreline willows, I noticed individual risers softly gulping close to the bank. Obviously utilizing the brushy shore for both cover and food, they were most receptive to a quartering, 2 o'clock cast followed by a few twitches. I released a dozen 8- to 9-inches before meeting Terry, who had also enjoyed similar success working the opposite bank.

The lakes are joined by about 45 yards of tumbling stream, which also bisects the JMT.





Surrounded by timber, a solid insect food base, and adequate spawning habitat, the Upper and Lower Sally Keyes lakes are the drainage's feature still waters. Both contain healthy populations of goldens to 12 inches.

Although thick stands of timber touch half of each lake's shoreline, Lower Sally Keyes maintains a slight contrast. Its inlet forms a widening channel with a sloping shelf and fish routinely patrol parallel to a noticeable transition zone along the western side, with the safety of deeper water only a fin flip away.

As per our three-day observations, the lower lake contained a slightly less dense trout population than the upper lake. Although residents averaged closer to 10 inches, and were a tad more finicky and needed lengthier casts to reach them, they still showed a preference for the subsurface offering. At one point, as I attempted to lift my combo rig from the outlet's moving channel after a lengthy retrieve, the Prince Nymph was savagely vanquished from below in a carmine flash. Several spirited runs toward deeper water attested to the fish's pugnacity, but I was finally able to parry its thrusts. Shortly after hook removal, 12 inches of streamlined muscle haughtily shot back into its domain like a gilded arrow.

All bets were off when the sun left the water. During our late-day session, the evening feeders totally let down their guards, providing an incredible, action-packed dry-fly fest. We hiked back to camp by flashlight.

enjoyed most about this high-elevation drainage was its simplicity. Benefiting from near ideal backcountry habitat conditions, the lakes offered adequate depth and structure—drop-offs, littoral zones, and moving inlets/outlets—that supported and protected residents while the creek not only supplied well-oxygenated and cold flows but also ample spawning habitat. A suitable insect base—including caddisflies, mosquitoes, flying ants, beetles, grasshoppers, and midges—provided a protein-rich food source for fish, and coniferous trees offered shade, cover, and habitat for

insects. Afternoon zephyrs carried and deposited a mixed variety of lower-elevation flying insects.

Usually, only the soft background twitter of rosy finches and mountain chickadees or a Clarke's nutcracker's occasional harsh squawk broke the peaceful wilderness silence. However, on this particular trip, a rather brash Calliope hummingbird magically appeared, then made several buzzing inspections of my orange fly line before disappearing down canyon. A unique sighting indeed!

Stream Gold

Gaining significant flow as it leaves Heart Lake, Sally Keyes Creek reflects a similar dynamic through-

Beadhead Psycho Prince Nymph



PHOTO BY NORTHWEST FLY FISHING

- Hook:** TMC 3769, sizes 10–16
- Bead:** Brass
- Tail:** Dark brown turkey biot
- Rib:** Copper wire
- Body:** UV brown Ice Dubbing
- Wing:** White turkey biots
- Thread:** Camel UNI-Thread

out most of its course. Thickly guarded by scrub willow, gnarled pine, and woody chaparral, it gnashes over a moderately steep gradient while forming a series of small, well-aerated plunge pools no larger than a kitchen sink. Slow, demanding crawls and dapping techniques helped me reach productive water without spooking too many fish.

Moving-water residents didn't take too much prompting. More often than not, a cast to every feasible pocket and pool under overhanging foliage was met with an enthusiastic take. On one occasion, an energetic missile launched completely out of the water in an unsuccessful attempt to ravage my fly, which was dangling from a twig a foot above the surface.

A hundred yards before reaching the first lake, the creek completely altered its structure as it tumbled over a small waterfall then serpented across a treeless meadow. What I had initially surmised were sticks as I peered from atop a small berm, turned out to be copious numbers of fish stacked in small schools, glowing like red-hot embers on the stream's sandy bottom. Much more wary of shadows, these exposed goldens required a completely different strategy.

Kneeling well off the bank, I extended my 6X tippet to 12 feet and began a downstream feed over a gathering of perhaps 20 trout in the 9-inch category. As the submerged black ant pattern began to swing in the current, the trailing fish in the school would hastily jostle for position. In more than one instance, as

one or two made a beeline for the offering, another darted in and struck, most likely from territorial aggression. Once a fish was hooked, it set the ethereal water on fire, providing a valid testament to its scientific name—*aguabonita*—which accurately translates to “pretty in the water.”

Below the lower lake, the main JMT moved away from the lightly visited, pristine meadow creek where residents remained truncated, ravenously hungry, and highly colorful.

Dapping, deceiving, and dredging the Sally Keyes drainage not only eased my long-standing dreams but also accounted for a cache of brilliantly-attired “nuggets.” Although this “mining claim” is not noted as a trophy trout mother lode, I am quite certain that future prospectors will find plenty of “ore” to quell their gold fever. ➤

Sally Keyes Lakes/Creek NOTEBOOK

When: Mid- to late July (after ice-out)–September. Early- and late-season visitors may encounter snow.

Where: John Muir Wilderness/Sierra National Forest in Fresno County northeast of Fresno along the JMT. Preferred west-slope starting points include either the Florence or Edison lakes trailheads, accessible from SR 168.



Headquarters: Mono Hot Springs Resort, (559) 325-1710, www.monohotsprings.com, and Vermilion Valley Resort, (559) 259-4000, www.edisonlake.com, offer the nearest trailhead amenities. Numerous campgrounds around Lakeshore at Huntington Lake, www.fs.fed.us/r5/sierra/recreation/camping/campsbyarea.shtml.

Appropriate gear: 3- to 4-wt. rods, floating lines, 5X and 6X tippets.

Useful fly patterns: Humpies, Stimulator, Trude, Madam-X, Parachute Adams, hopper patterns, ant and beetle patterns. Mosquito, Elk Hair Caddis, midge patterns, beadhead Flash-Back Pheasant Tail, Prince Nymph, Psycho Prince Nymph, Bird's Nest, Sparkle Caddis.

Necessary accessories: Rain gear, insect repellent, sunscreen, hat, Polarized sunglasses, tent with rain fly, water purification tablets or water filtration system, backpacking gear.

Nonresident license: \$43.46/10 days, \$ 116.90/annual.

Fly shops/guides: Shaver Lake Sports, (559) 841-2740; Jimmie Morales, Sierra Fly Fisher, (559) 683-7664, www.sierraflyfisher.com; High Sierra Pack Stations, (559) 299-8297 (10/16–6/14) and (559) 285-7225 (6/15–10/15), www.highsierrapackstations.com.

Maps/information: High Sierra Pack Station (see above); High Sierra Ranger District, (559) 855-5360, www.fs.usda.gov/sierra. USGS 7.5-min. Mt. Hilgard quadrant; *John Muir Trail Map Pack #7* by Harrison Cartographer maps, www.tomharrison-maps.com; *Southern California Atlas & Gazetteer* by Delorme Mapping.

Don Vachini is a freelance writer and photographer who lives in Petaluma, California.