

Humphreys Basin, CA

Summer in the High Sierra: Part 1

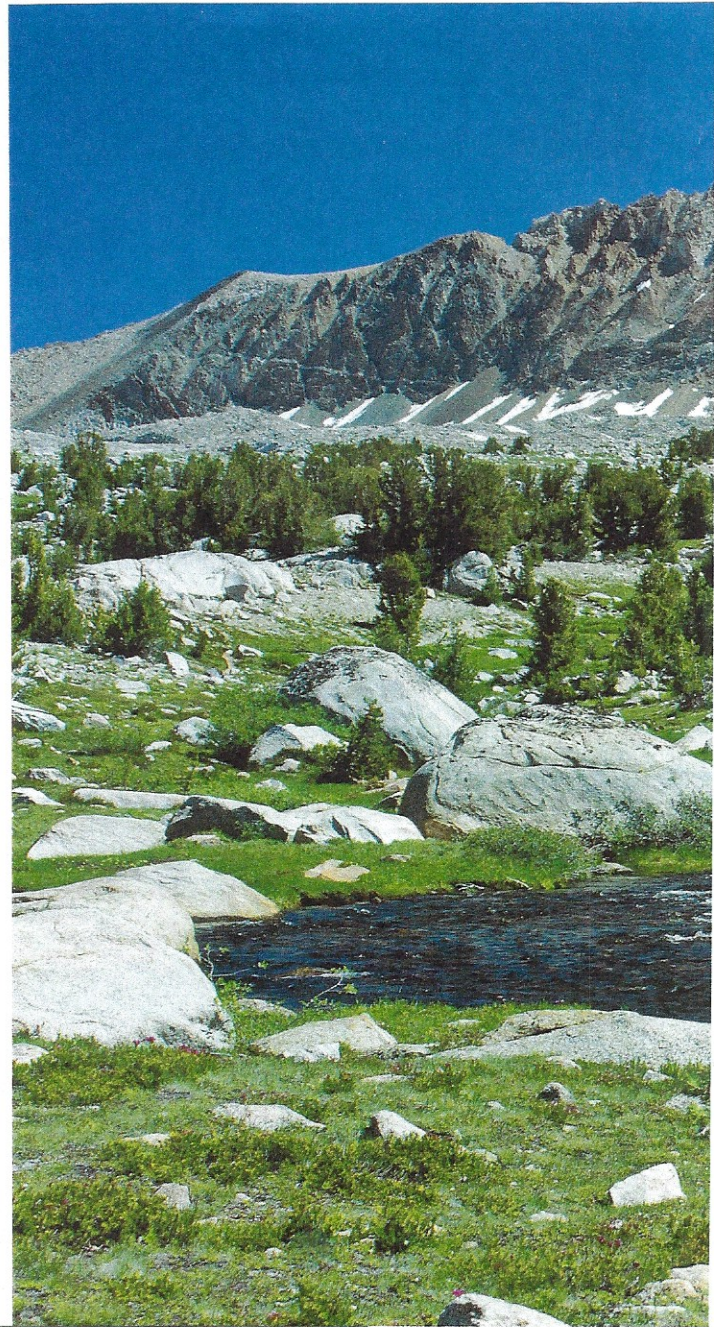
By Don Vachini

After releasing the bejeweled golden trout back into the crystalline flow, I glanced upward at the southern flanks of 13,986-foot Mount Humphreys and waxed nostalgic about the first time I had laid eyes on this ice-carved monolith. Indeed, my first glimpse, occurring more than 35 years ago, offered a much different, and unforgettable, perspective.

Growing up on a small dairy farm 40 miles north of San Francisco during the 1950s, I had the good fortune to have a neighboring rancher and friend, Elmer Mazza, who owned a Cessna 180. He'd become a pilot in 1927 during the barnstorming era of aviation and was a knowledgeable, meticulous, and well-prepared aviator, and also an avid outdoorsman.

Elmer literally took me under his wing. From the time I turned 10 until I entered college, I grew accustomed to his bush-pilot style, for he routinely landed on coastal beaches, barely-discernable dirt strips, or, at 11,000 feet, on a gently-sloping Sierra Nevada field south of Bishop.

When I was in my late 20s, Mazza helped light the fire in me for backpacking to reach wilderness trout, often suggesting that we explore little-known areas he'd previously flown over. After buzzing and scouting my intended hiking destination, he would let me know the snow levels, whether the lakes had thawed, and if the passes were open—vital information that was hard to get in the days before cell phones, personal computers, and internet access.



Staring at the flank of Mt. Humphreys, the author recalls flying over the small notch to his right in 1976 (spread). This well-fed golden from Summit Lake fell for a yellow beadhead Woolly Bugger (left).



ALL PHOTOS BY DON VACHINI

One summer day in 1976, we set out to investigate the next backcountry drainage on my list. Flying westward from Bishop toward 11,423-foot Paiute Pass, we began experiencing severe downdrafts. With the canyon steadily narrowing, the altimeter holding at 11,200 feet (223 feet lower than the summit), and with less than 2 miles to go, trout fishing was the furthest thing from my mind.

A timely, last-second updraft provided sufficient lift and we crested the saddle of the pass, so low that I actually saw the startled expressions of a pair of backpackers gazing up from the trail. Suddenly, I was back in trout mode and hastily scanned the panoramic moonscape through the Plexiglas window, forging a mental map of the broad, glaciated Humphreys Basin in hopes of planning a more down-to-earth exploration.

Off our right wingtip, Mount Humphreys proudly stood guard over Desolation, Lower Desolation, Mesa, and Tomahawk Lakes, azure gems set in a vast boulder field. Swiveling my head to look southward, I saw a similar number of rockbound pothole lakes, including Muriel, Upper and Lower Goethe, Paine, and Ramona, which were tucked tightly against the near-vertical finger ridges, jumbled talus slabs, and steep couloirs of the serrated glacier divide. These lakes and others had been sculpted by the hand of glaciers from the most recent ice age.

Immediately north of Kings Canyon National Park in northeastern Fresno County, the 42-square-mile Humphreys Basin drainage lies in the John Muir Wilderness, entirely within the Sierra National Forest. A half dozen streams relieve the 32 lakes

of water gathered in this expansive catch basin, eventually forming Paiute Creek, a major tributary of the South Fork of the San Joaquin River, 9 miles farther down the canyon.

To reach this area, follow US Highway 395 to Bishop and take State Route 168 (aka West Line Street) west for 18 miles to the trailhead at North Lake (Bishop Pack Outfitters is also headquartered here). The well-maintained Piute Pass Trail follows the east slope's North Fork of Bishop Creek to its origin, ascending steadily for 4.8 miles before crossing the pass. From here, the pathway bisects the heart of the basin, descending the canyon to intersect the John Muir Trail near the Kings Canyon National Park boundary.

The eastern entrance—like the trail, lake, pass, and west-flowing creek—is named to honor the Paiute Indian tribe. For more than 1,000 years, these hunter/gatherers called the Owens Valley home but used the game trail over the Sierra Nevada backbone during summer months to gather piñon nuts, hunt deer, and transport woven baskets, salt, obsidian, and furs for trade.

Deemed too steep for trans-Sierra wagon trails during the westward movement, the southern Sierra became a classroom for geological study and scientific exploration. It was here that Andrew Atkinson Humphreys, a Union general during the American Civil War, was commissioned as a civil engineer to conduct hydrological and topographical surveys during 1876 and 1877. Because these reports were instrumental in the mapping of the entire range, the United States Geological Survey fittingly attached his name to the massive mountain and resultant drainage.

According to Curtis Milliron, a senior fisheries biologist with the Department of Fish and Game (DFG) office in Bishop, "Histori-

cally, waters along the entire Sierra Nevada crest were devoid of trout." However, by 1902, mule trains began transporting golden trout into the barren drainages, including this basin, and by the early 1920s, populations were firmly established in most of Humphreys' lakes and streams. Milliron adds that "In 1932, a one-time experimental plant introduced brook trout into a dozen basin lakes as well."

Today, getting on intimate terms with a golden trout—the California state fish—still remains a solid bet. Except for the three Wahoo lakes, which hold only brook trout, all Humphreys Basin waters contain goldens, which commingle with brook trout in Muriel, Tomahawk, and upper and lower Golden Trout Lakes: Wedge, Square, Knob, Forsaken, Cony, Marmot, Humphreys 1, 2, and 3. The trio of Lost Lakes has been designated as habitat for the mountain yellow-legged frog and is currently devoid of fish. Paiute Creek and its tributaries hold both goldens and brookies in abundance.

Since my flyover adventure, I've made numerous visits into the basin, my latest being a weeklong trip that paired me with Brandon Parker, a Bishop resident and local fly-fishing expert. For that early August adventure, we intended to sample a half-dozen lofty lakes at the top of the drainage, where goldens grow just a click bigger. We contracted Mike and Tess Anne Morgan, owners of Bishop Pack Outfitters, to haul our gear to a predetermined location while I hiked in ahead. Brandon joined me two days later.

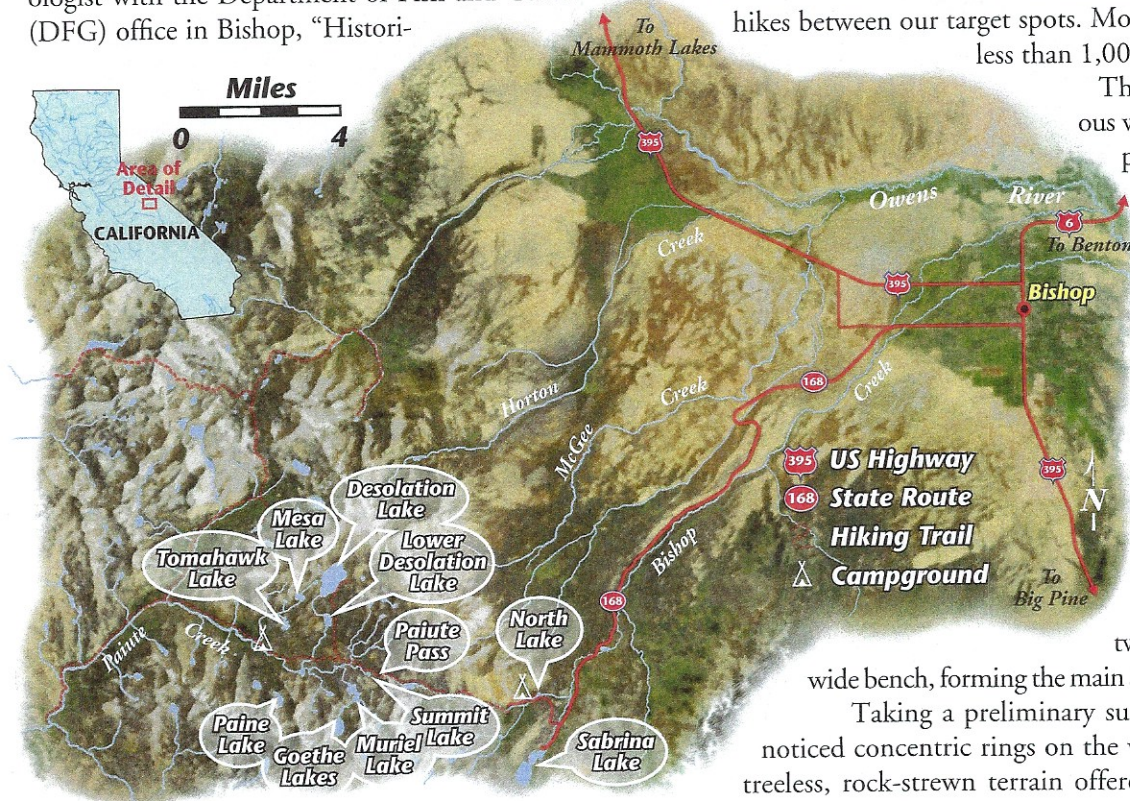
Solo Venture

The Morgans chose a cozy site below 10,500-foot Cony Lake that allowed lateral movement rather than steep hikes between our target spots. Most of the lakes were less than 1,000 feet higher.

Thanks to the previous winter's heavy snowpack, ice fields still adorned most of the surrounding peaks, their late-season seepage trickling into lakes below. A few hundred yards downslope from my camp's vista, spillage from Humphreys, Cony, Summit, and Muriel Lakes converged in two long ponds on a

wide bench, forming the main stem of Paiute Creek.

Taking a preliminary survey, I immediately noticed concentric rings on the water's surface. The treeless, rock-strewn terrain offered no surprise hin-



drances to casting, and aggressive little goldens and brookies constantly hammered my size 14 Green Mosquito. This improvised oldie with a hint of green remains one of my favorite backcountry dry-fly patterns because it imitates several different emerging insects. Casting from shadows until twilight, I followed the outline of Mount Humphreys back to camp and dozed off to visions of endlessly rising trout.

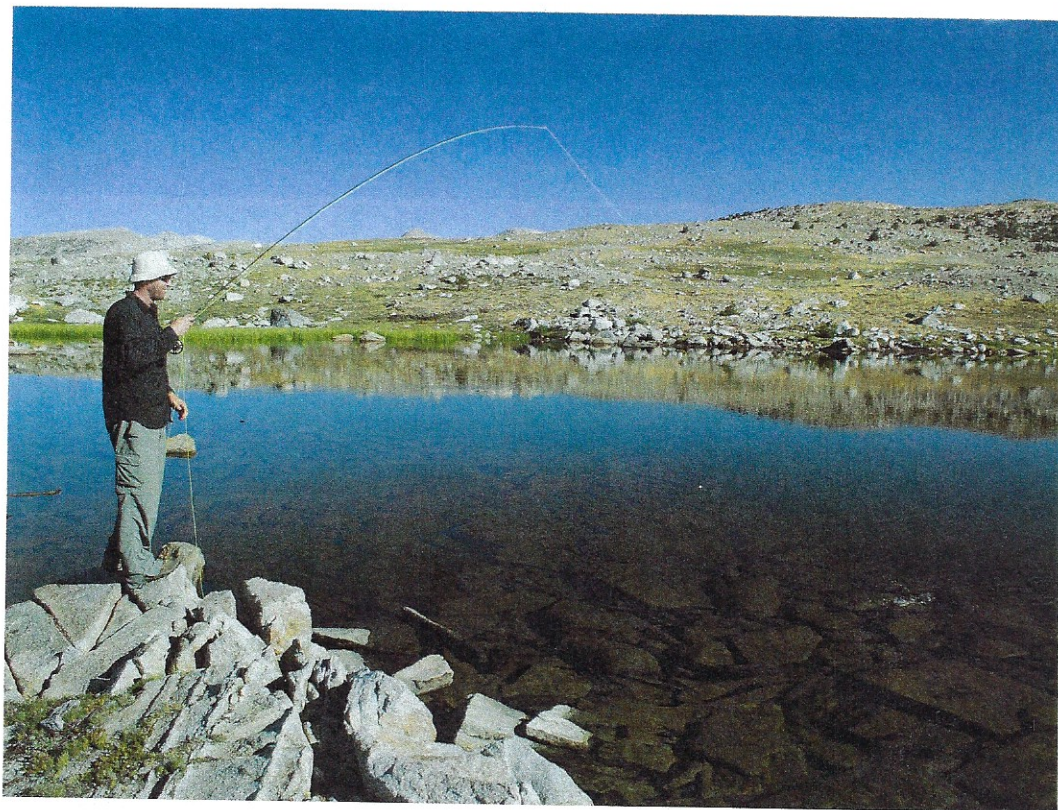
In the morning, I settled into my lengthy stride before sun up, traversing a granite maze while eying my reference point—a notch between Pilot Knob and Star Peak. A marmot's lone whistle, plus my own rhythmic heartbeat, was the only disturbance to the eerie silence.

Massive, 220-acre Desolation Lake is the site where packer Walt Schober took an undocumented 9-pound golden during the early 1950s. Although unlikely, fish of that stature may be finning through the depths today and more recent tales of other hefty specimens always justify giving Desolation a try.

With more than half its shoreline still gripped in a huge snowfield, the widely-funneled outlet forming the headwaters of Desolation Creek became my focus. Tediously, on hands and knees, I worked my way toward a school of cavorting goldens, whose dorsal fins regularly broke the surface of the moving channel. Flaring like red-hot coals, the trout were out in the open and easy to pinpoint. But so was I.

Bouncing a red egg pattern downstream from a sitting position, I watched a white mouth clamp around it on its initial drift. Amid frantic figure eights, the remaining dozen or so fish made V-shaped wakes back into the lake, and, when my fly and the remaining fish abruptly parted, no others were left to try for. It was the true definition of one-and-done.

From this location, adventure-some hikers can continue scaling



Desolation Creek briefly follows the bench, then descends to Lower Desolation Lake. Glacier Divide in the background is across the canyon.

the steeper ridgeline to cross into neighboring French Canyon via Puppet Pass (aka Carol Col) or Steelhead Pass, or they can walk a short distance over the gentle berm to Mesa Lake. Situated on an exposed, turf-lined bench, and housing some hefty goldens, the 45-acre lake was, of course, my next option. One hyper, 11-incher answered my casts, but swirling breezes prevented me from reaching offshore structure, so I moved a half mile below to

40-acre Tomahawk Lake, which sits in a protected, bowl-shaped depression. Although shielded from the wind, I struck out on its sizable residents and called it quits around one o'clock.

After returning to camp and taking a refreshing siesta, I made a late-afternoon jaunt up to 25-acre Summit Lake, which is tucked just below the pass in an open, windswept hollow. My target was the deeply-gouged, dark blue depression where the lake's outlet stream washes over its lip. Almost immediately, my Psycho Pheasant Tail was vanquished by a massive strike, followed by a series of spirited runs and un-

Green Mosquito



PHOTO BY SOUTHWEST FLY FISHING

- Hook:** TMC 3761, sizes 12–16
- Thread:** Black 8/0
- Tail:** Grizzly hackle fibers
- Body:** Green thread ribbed with fine silver wire
- Wings:** Two grizzly hackle tips
- Hackle:** Grizzly dry fly



The author works the littoral zone at Lower Golden Trout Lake for gaudily-attired goldens.

relenting head shakes, embodying the pugnacity common to this rainbow subspecies. On this occasion, the fly remained imbedded through the tug-of-war, and I capped the day's calorie-burning, cross-country travels by landing my muscular, 13-inch prize in the shallows.

That evening, I savored a cup of raspberry tea while losing count of rise forms and watching the alpenglow on nearby spires fade to darkness. Images of a trophy-size golden that, ounce-for-ounce, battled like a fish twice its size, lulled me to sleep.

Dynamic Duo

Late the next morning, Parker arrived and we headed south, skirting 11,336-foot Muriel Lake's outlet and then scrambling up the steep draw to reach the tandem Goethe Lakes, a pair of foreboding punchbowls nestled in a narrow notch up against Mount Goethe. These rockbound lakes are home to some truly magnificent specimens. When visiting here in 1992 with my 11-year-old daughter, Angela, and again in 1997 with my son, Matt, I was fortunate to coax nearly-identical 2 pounders from each lake's outlet. Today, they remained hunkered in the depths for more than two hours, and, when an odd weather pattern began to develop, we climbed back down to Summit Lake.

There, the steady chop not only provided cover but added additional action as we maneuvered our beadhead Woolly Buggers through the lapping waves. We enjoyed one of those "sweet sessions," collectively landing 15

goldens, including Parker's exceptional 14-inch specimen sporting a strikingly vivid, crimson underside. Then swirling cobalt clouds obstructed several peaks, the sun ducked behind cover, and rumblings intensified, so we prudently put aside our graphite lightning rods and returned to camp. There, over a freeze-dried chicken and rice supper, we planned our strategy for granddaddy goldens.

Elusive Gold

The next morning, Parker and I revisited Desolation's outlet, confident in our plan to stalk the fish and make low-profile presentations. Our high hopes quickly faded, however, as it was apparent the school had totally disbanded. We'd missed our window of opportunity.

Although Milliron had told us that Desolation, Mesa, Goethe, Paine, and Ramona Lakes hold a few 17- to 18-inch goldens, he'd also pointed out that they can be virtually unattainable much of the time. They're slightly vulnerable when they gather to spawn after ice-out, but the biggies tend to scatter and become reclusive, holding to the deepest sections of these nutrient-poor waters, where they forage on freshwater Gammarus, near-microscopic zooplankton blooms, and other benthic forms. While it's impossible to imitate plankton with a fly, I have suspended a size 14 or 16 tan or olive Chironomid or scud pattern over deep water as an occasional solution.

Lone feeders will nosh opportunistically on the collection of flying insects and terrestrials swept up-canyon by midafternoon anabatic zephyrs; they are also highly piscivorous when the opportunity presents itself. Less wary, bite-size prey in the form of fingerlings can be imitated with size 8 or 10 conehead Woolly Buggers or Matukas in olive, yellow, or white. Once hooked, goldens are high-octane, 24-karat missiles and must be heavily pressured away from their rocky sanctuaries.

Standing for everything wild, the gargantuan goldens remained extremely adept at maintaining their freedom, and Parker and I found them to be worthy and respected adversaries. Repeatedly spurning our tactical advances, they managed to serve us multiple dishes of humility on this trip.

In stark contrast to the treeless still waters, Upper and Lower Golden Trout, Packsaddle, Upper and Lower Honeymoon, and the pair of Lobe Lakes sit lower in the

canyon adjacent to timber and possess decent spawning access, more basic fertility, and adequate food. During early morning or twilight, when feeding sprees are triggered, I religiously ply the shallows with a size 14 dry Adams or Sierra Bright Dot with a size 16 Copper John or Serendipity dropper. Willing residents nearing 9 inches will often rise to the occasion.

Hiking Preferences

Available only with a wilderness permit, secluded, primitive campsites exist throughout Humphreys Basin. Although the weather above 10,000 feet can be unpredictable, with afternoon thunderstorms occurring with little warning, July, August, and September usually reward visitors with cool nights and warm days.

Off-trail routes are the rule in this land, bringing a sense of freedom but also necessitating caution. Due to the terrain's up and down nature, waters alongside the more vertical Glacier Divide should be portioned into manageable sections and sampled a bit at a time. By establishing a base camp near the wooded Packsaddle or Lower Honeymoon Lakes, day-hike excursions allow a reasonable sampling of Ramona and Paine Lakes.

It's a good idea to take a day to acclimate to the elevation and thinner air before undertaking strenuous, mountain-goat climbs. Filter your water and hydrate often, use sunscreen, wear a hat, and be in good shape to negotiate climbs to the upper lakes.

Whether you're accepting the humbling challenge from lakes near the clouds or enjoying the reassurance of emblazoned nuggets from the streams, the deeply-wrinkled face of Mt. Humphreys is always peering over your shoulder or staring you in the eye. If this stony edifice could speak, imagine what stories it could tell. Besides describing Schober's leviathan golden from Desolation Lake, it would undoubtedly recall the legions of Paiutes, geologists, rock climbers, backpackers, anglers, as well as mules and horses that have crossed its gaze through the centuries. One of its most unique memories, however, would probably be that of a small light plane barreling over its notched left shoulder and disturbing a pair of backpackers.

Regrettably, I never got to share my numerous Humphreys Basin adventures with Elmer, as his energetic life was cut short in an automobile accident not

Humphreys Basin NOTEBOOK

When: July-late September (start of season depends on snowpack).

Where: John Muir Wilderness (Sierra National Forest), northern Fresno County; 18 mi. west of Bishop, then a 6-mi. hike/horseback ride from trailhead.



Headquarters: Bishop. **Information:** White Mountain Ranger Station, (760) 873-2500, www.fs.usda.gov/detail/inyo/home; Bishop Chamber of Commerce, (760) 873-8405, www.bishopvisitor.com; Bishop Pack Outfitters, (760) 873-4785, www.bishoppackoutfitters.com.

Appropriate gear: *Lakes:* 9- to 10-ft., 4- to 6-wt. rods; floating, sinking-tip, and fast-sinking lines. *Streams:* 8- to 9-ft., 2- to 4-wt. rods, floating line.

Useful fly patterns: Mosquito, Elk Hair Caddis, Humpty, Sierra Bright Dot, Parachute Adams, E/C Caddis, hopper, ant, and beetle patterns, midge patterns, Micro Leech, Psycho Prince Nymph, Bird's Nest, beadhead nymphs, Marabou Leech, beadhead Woolly Bugger.

Necessary accessories: Backpacking gear, polarized sunglasses, sunscreen, insect repellent, wide-brimmed hat.

Nonresident license: \$22.94/2 days, \$45.93/10 days, \$123.38/annual.

Fly shops: *Bishop:* Brock's Flyfishing Specialists, (760) 872-3581, www.brocksflyfish.com.

Books/maps: *Sierra Trout Guide* by Ralph Cutter. USGS Mount Tom Quad (www.store.usgs.gov); *Bishop Pass Trail Map* by Tom Harrison Maps, www.tomharrisonmaps.com.

long after our 1976 flight. However, every time I cross Paiute Pass, I pause to look up and salute him, envisioning his silver Cessna tipping its wings in recognition. After all, I now know what it's like to be on the trail looking up. ➤

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