

Twenty Lakes Basin, CA

A Taxi Ride to Backcountry Trout

By Don Vachini

Approaching a remote trio of headwater lakes nestled near massive Conness Glacier east of the Sierra Nevada crest, my youngest son, Jason, and I paused to catch our breath in the thin air. Despite the previous winter's heavy snowpack, we managed to scramble cross-country and traverse an ex-

of 21 still waters just outside Yosemite National Park's northeastern boundary.

Tucked near 11,000 feet amid stark granite and stunted, subalpine timber, these Hoover Wilderness waters provide both the basin's moniker and varying angling options. A half dozen lakes drain through Saddlebag and Ellery Lakes to Lee Vining Creek, while 15 feed Mill Creek, which cascades down Lundy Canyon to Lundy Lake. Both creeks eventually terminate in Mono Lake.

Brook trout remain the dominant species throughout this high-altitude drainage. While goldens are the sole inhabitants in a quintet of lakes, rainbow and Lahontan cutthroat reside in others. Not a part of the lake chain, nearby Saddlebag houses large numbers of California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) rainbows plus a scattering of native brookies that wash down from lakes above. An occasional brown enables the possibility of a five-species grand slam.

For the most part, basin trout remain self-sustaining, the progeny of initial stockings from the turn of the 20th century. However, golden and cutthroat numbers are occasionally augmented by fingerling air plants, with the CDFG managing both species under a put-and-grow philosophy. The normal range of

the basin's residents varies from 7 to 12 inches; individual specimens approaching 14 inches are also fairly common. Not surprisingly, rumors of fish attaining 16 to 18 inches are sometimes substantiated.

Just Take the Taxi

To reach the Twenty Lakes Basin from Lee Vining, turn west off US Highway 395 onto State Route 120, go 11 miles to Saddlebag Lake Road, and continue 3 miles to the lake. The gateway to the trailhead is 339-acre Saddlebag Lake, which presents two avenues of backcountry entry. One is an hour-long hike along either the eastern or western shoreline; the other is a 15-minute water-taxi ride courtesy of Saddlebag Lake Resort. Either way, visitors reach the north end of the lake where a 5.5-mile loop trail begins. The easily negotiated pathway with minimal altitude gain connects most lakes, which range between



ALL PHOTOS BY DON VACHINI

The water taxi at Saddlebag Lake allows anglers to make day trips into Twenty Lakes Basin—hike and fish all day and then return by taxi (above). An angler picks his way down the loose talus slope above Helen Lake. These lakes all feed the Mill Creek drainage, eventually flowing into Mono Lake (right).

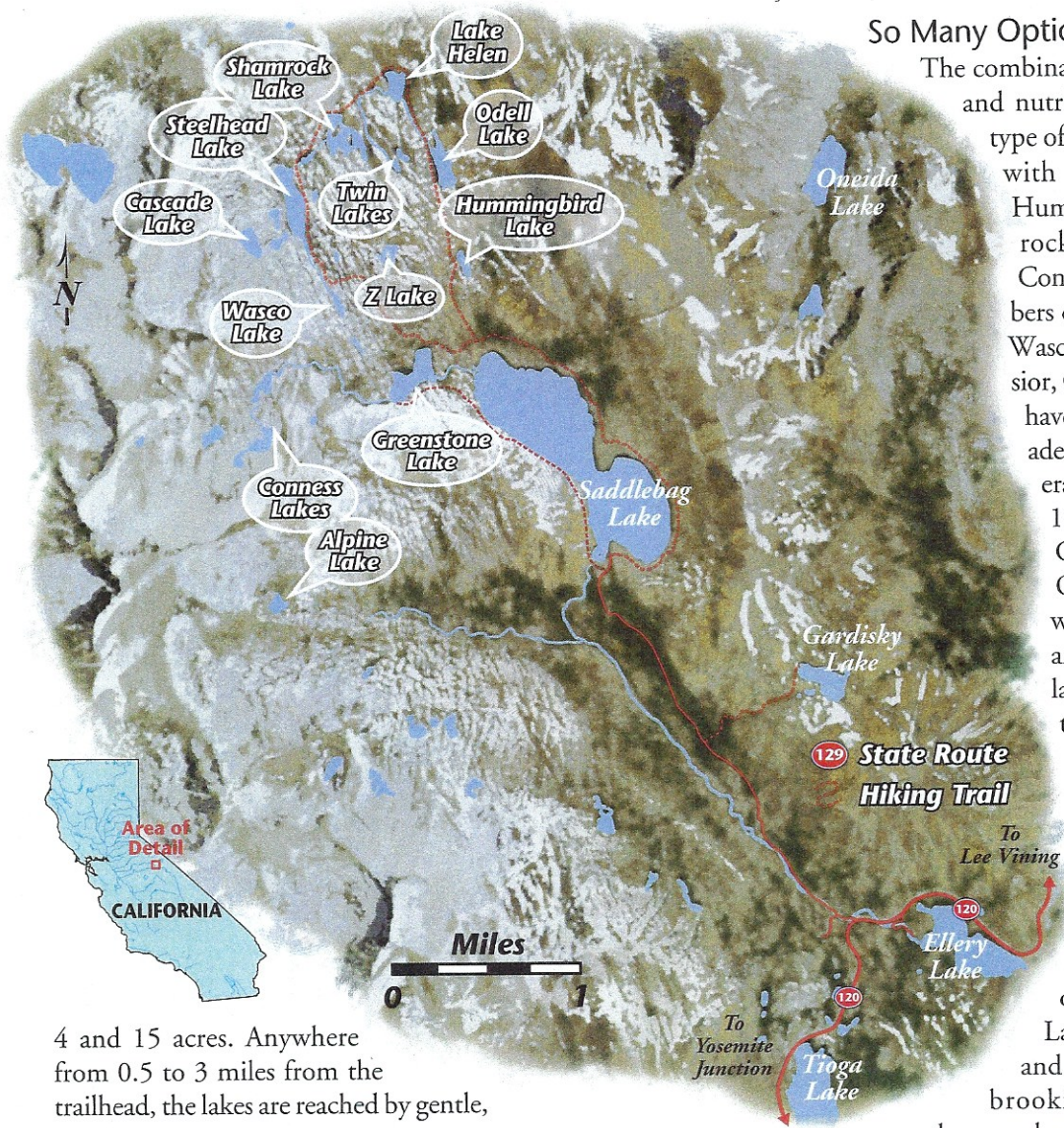
posed ridgeline to approach these lofty lakes and a chance at their glamorous prize—golden trout. As we gazed down at the first lake, set like an azure jewel amid white polished granite, a few rise forms kept our hearts racing.

During our two-hour session, we stealthily danced tiny dry flies over lake and creek structure, releasing close to a dozen cookie-cutter 6- to 8-inchers. Nattily attired in lemon yellows and vivid vermilion, each set the crystalline water ablaze after they eagerly snatched our offerings.

What made this jaunt truly amazing was that we were a mere 40-minute climb from the trailhead, an exceptionally short walk for pursuing this glittering prize.

This particular mid-July morning found us on a boulder-strewn bench between Mount Conness (12,556 feet) and North Peak (12,256 feet), fishing the Conness Lakes, which comprise waters collectively known as the Twenty Lakes Basin. Snow and ice melt create a series





So Many Options

The combination of spawning habitat and nutrients usually dictates the type of fishery to expect. Blessed with ample spawning room, Hummingbird, Helen, Shamrock, Little Steelhead, and Conness 1 produce good numbers of 6- to 9-inch specimens. Wasco, Cascade, Towser, Excelsior, Greenstone, and Steelhead have spawning that matches an adequate food supply and generally contain slightly larger 10- to 11-inches. Potter, Conness 2 and 3, along with O'Dell, are rockbound, with minuscule recruitment and house thin densities of larger fish often reaching 12 to 14 inches.

While brook trout are the sole inhabitants of Hummingbird, Twin, Shamrock, Z, Wasco, and Little Steelhead, they coexist with goldens at Helen, Excelsior, Potter, and Cascade Lakes. Expansive Steelhead and Greenstone Lakes house brookies, rainbows, and cutthroat, whereas Conness 1 to 3, tiny

Hidden Golden, and O'Dell are solid choices for goldens.

Thirteen-acre O'Dell grows trophy-size specimens but gives them up grudgingly. An extremely steep shoreline, depths of up to 80 feet, inaccessible structure, and the goldens' reclusive nature allow the fish to grow. Despite numerous pilgrimages, I have managed only a 16-inch granddaddy, which inhaled an olive Matuka probed along a formidable drop-off. A float tube allows efficient exploration of deep structure.

Saddlebag provides some of the most consistent action for larger fish, as schooling planters gravitate to the incoming water located a hundred yards from the water-taxi dock. On a previous trip, I repeatedly zigzagged a Woolly Bugger through the gouged-out channel where Greenstone Creek enters. A nearly 2-pound 'bow put several significant bends in my 3-weight, topping the day's backcountry success.

Happy Trails to You

Some hikers prefer to follow the trail clockwise, climbing steadily uphill along the well-defined mining road past Wasco to arrive at Steelhead Lake, which is fed by Cascade,

4 and 15 acres. Anywhere from 0.5 to 3 miles from the trailhead, the lakes are reached by gentle, cross-country routes.

Following a lighter-than-normal snowfall during the 2012 winter, my friend, John Dolinsek, and I scheduled a mid-June visit to the Conness Basin. Because this would be my earliest visit in 15 years, I sought the advice of Scott Flint, a guide with The Troutfitter, a fishing store and guide service in Mammoth Lakes. A backcountry angling specialist with a wealth of experience in this area, Flint agreed that our early season timetable might present a challenge.

"Glacial melt will make for lethargic goldens in the high, cold, and cloudy flows," he said. "However, they will still feed on dark-bodied nymphs led patiently through the incoming or outgoing creek."

He told us the lakes were ice-free, that ground snow wouldn't be an issue, and that the water-taxi service was just commencing operations.

Not everyone comes here to fish. Dolinsek and I shared the boat with a trio of snowboarders. While we plied helmsman J.T. Vanderveen for last-minute angling information—"a dry Black Gnat with red and beadhead nymphs are killers"—the snowboarders mulled over slope strategies.

Towser, and Potter Lakes. Slightly above Steelhead, mine dumps on the slopes below Shepherd's Crest Peak are reminders of the World War II-era Hess Tungsten Mine, whose abandoned roadway now serves as a trail.

I prefer the counterclockwise route, which climbs past Hummingbird, over Lundy Pass, then drops sharply past O'Dell. After crossing Mill Creek and skirting Helen, Shamrock, and Excelsior Lakes, the trail ascends to Steelhead and the wide downhill road/trail.

While the main circuit skirts several lakes, better results are often achieved on less-visited waters where hungry pan-size brook trout pervade. A faint pathway near Wasco leads past Hidden Golden to Z, ending at Hummingbird. Another noteworthy side trail from Steelhead climbs briefly to Little Steelhead, passing Shamrock and Twin before culminating above O'Dell.

One of my favorite sweat-equity loops involves trudging above Greenstone to the Conness Lakes. After indicator fishing there, I descend North Peak's steep southeasterly ridgeline to Cascade, Potter, and Towser Lakes before connecting to the main roadway to Greenstone, where on previous visits I'd landed rainbows and cutthroat to round out a pair of four-species slams.

On our most recent trip, we were bottom-dredging streamers at Steelhead in hopes of seducing some deep-dwelling cutts, when distant shouts and whoops broke the silence. Focusing on the east corridor of North Peak, we saw our boat mates, now tiny specks enjoying superb snowboarding conditions.



At O'Dell Lake, the author works a deep shelf in anticipation of intercepting a cruising golden trout (above). Though they are difficult to reach from shore, an occasional lunker golden trout can be fooled, primarily along deep drop-offs (below).

That moment reminded me of Flint's recollections of prior trips to the Conness Lakes at ice-out. With Saddlebag still unavailable, he'd ascended Sawmill Canyon, skirted the Yosemite boundary arête, and snowboarded down to ice-free lakes. After landing and releasing some hefty *Oncorhynchus aguabonita*, which were stacked up in moving inlets, he'd scrambled upslope and snowboarded out, putting two of his talents to use.

Still-water Success

Flint believes in finding locations based on the fish's basic needs—oxygen, protective cover, and nutrition. When

ice-out commences and the water temperature rises slightly, the oxygen content climbs and fish eat ravenously as their metabolism increases. "Fishing the ice edges can often be a worthwhile effort."

Scouting from a higher elevation helps to locate in-





With North Peak looming above, John Dolinsek probes Greenstone Creek for colorful brookies just below Conness Falls.

lets, outlets, points of land, submerged boulder fields, shoals, and shelf lines that provide fish with their primary needs. Polarized glasses assist in pinpointing individual fish beneath the surface and reveal their cruising patterns.

Although terrestrials reside in the sparsely wooded slopes around most of the lakes, caddisflies, mayflies, damselflies, and midges are the main food, especially when afternoon upslope breezes carry winged insects from lower elevations. On the first day Dolinsek and I visited, winds were shifting like politicians in an election year. First trying Cascade and Greenstone, we positioned ourselves to work their windward sides where the breezes pushed struggling bugs toward the shore. Opportunistic brookies responded to Madam X's and Rubberlegs stripped across frothy foam lines and lapping waves.

A 9-foot, 3- to 5-weight rod with floating or sinking line and a 9- to 12-foot leader remains my top choice, and the fly box I carry in most High Sierra drainages works here. A Black Gnat with red can be deadly; other Sierra standard dries include Elk Hair Caddis, Humpy,

Stimulator, and Light Cahill. A beadhead Hare's Ear, Pheasant Tail, Zug Bug, Serendipity, or Bird's Nest will cover nymphs (use brown, olive, and black). Good terrestrials include beetles, Joe's Hoppers, spider and flying ant patterns. Brassies, Copper Johns, or Disco Midges tied under a large Carey Special, Wulff, or Sofa Pillow are popular dry/dropper tandems.

In deeper water, I use a sinking line and slowly strip a Woolly Bugger, Baby Bugger, Matuka, or Crystal Bugger through money zones.

Resident fish usually let their guard down a bit during morning and evening shadows or immediately after thunderstorms, making those prime times to fish.

Connecting Streams

The lively streams between the lakes provide vibrant, action-packed venues. Tiny Greenstone Creek is loaded with goldens above and below Conness 1. Here, crawling stalks and dainty presentations from behind boulders often reward you with nimble 7- to 9-inchers, which battle like fish twice their size.

Griffith's Black Gnat with Red



PHOTO BY NORTHWEST FLY FISHING

Hook:	TMC 100BL, sizes 14–18
Thread:	Black 8/0
Body:	Black dubbing
Tail:	Scarlet-red hackle fibers
Hackle:	Black
Wing:	Light gray duck quill segments

Below Conness Falls, Greenstone tumbles briskly before meandering through braids and entering Greenstone Lake. Brookies are the main fare, but cutthroat or rainbow are possible. Stocked rainbows from Saddlebag have found their way upstream to Greenstone and, after a few generations of spawning, now exhibit the free spirit of wild fish.

Plenty of willing brookies and an occasional golden/rainbow hybrid can be found in Mill Creek, which tumbles through an open, brush-lined course below Shamrock Lake. Short-lining flies through its small pools and pockets routinely provokes an ambush.

On the effervescent creeks, an 8-foot fly rod and floating line with a 6-foot leader facilitate flicking short, accurate casts. Willing trout are often duped by dapping a high-riding size 16 Mosquito, Sierra Bright Dot, or Parachute Adams along eddies, seams, and brush lines.

Be Prepared

Although the area is close to civilization, moderate hiking and some high-altitude exertion are still needed to complete the basin's 5-plus-mile loop and accompanying spur trails. Try to acclimate for a day or so before setting out, and carry plenty of food and water because dehydration and hunger can be crippling.

Although the lakes are clustered, I don't attempt to fish them all in one day but instead, divide them into three manageable day-hike destinations. If using a base camp, you need a wilderness permit (no overnight camping or fires are allowed in Conness Basin, which is part of the Hall Natural Area).

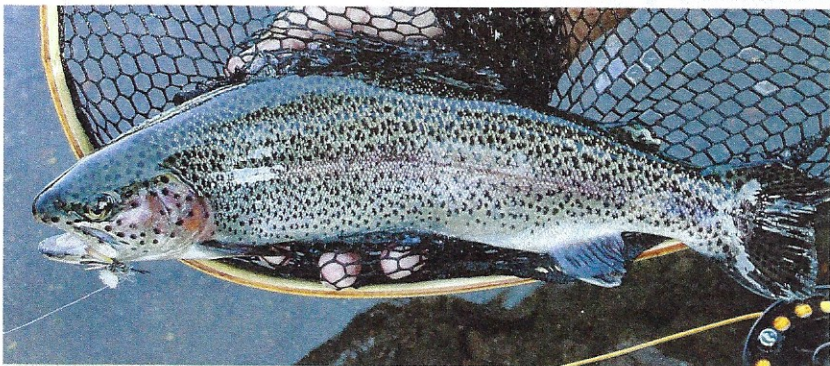
Severe weather can occur at a moment's notice. Keep an eye on the sky and always be prepared for rapid changes in temperature, wind, and developing cloud cover. Be sure to carry wet-weather gear and use layers of clothing for warmth.

Unless you're backpacking for an extended stay, a small daypack generally fits most needs, while adjustable walking sticks make hiking easier on the knees.

For timely trail and backcountry angling advice prior to going, contact Saddlebag Lake Resort owner Richard Ernst at staff@saddlebaglakeresort.com.

The refreshing Golden Trout Pilsner that Dolinsek and I enjoyed with our evening meal at Nicely's Restaurant in

Twenty Lakes Basin NOTEBOOK



When: Mid-June–October, depending on weather.

Where: Just east of the northeastern boundary of Yosemite National Park.

Headquarters: Saddlebag Lake Resort, (209) 545-0946, www.saddlebaglakeresort.com. **Information:** Lee Vining Chamber of Commerce, (760) 647-6629, www.leevining.com.

Appropriate gear: 3- or 4- wt. rod, floating and sinking lines.

Necessary accessories: Sunscreen, wide-brimmed hat, rain gear, polarized sunglasses, insect repellent, water bottles, hiking boots.

Useful fly patterns: Elk Hair Caddis, Griffith's Gnat, Parachute Adams, Bivisible, Sierra Bright Dot, Humpy, E/C Caddis, Tent Caddis, beadhead Baby Bugger (olive), Bird's Nest, Pheasant Tail in beadhead or flashback, Callibaetis Mayfly, Prince Nymph, Zebra Midge, Disco Midge, beadhead Copper John, Hare's Ear, ant and flying ant patterns, beetles, Joe's Hopper, Chernobyl Ant, Woolly Bugger (black, olive, yellow).

Nonresident license: \$ 14.30/1 day, \$22.42/2 days, \$44.85/10 days, \$120.14/annual.

Fly shops/guides: *Mammoth Lakes:* The Troutfitter, (760) 924-3676, www.thetroutfitter.com.

Books/maps: *Eastern Sierra Fishing Guide for Day Hikers* by John Barbier. *California Atlas & Gazetteer* by DeLorme Mapping.

Lee Vining helped conjure pleasant images of the treasures we'd landed earlier. While the tasty brew soothed our tired bodies, visualizing the trout provided the real high. Indeed, if you don't mind a bit of hiking, aren't invested in huge fish, and enjoy overwhelming scenery, Twenty Lakes Basin is truly a special place to visit. It is also one of those rare places you can find reliable "taxi" service. ➤

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