



ALL PHOTOS BY DON VACHINI

Hilton Lakes and Creek, CA

Summer in the High Sierra: Part 2

By Don Vachini

Long before actors Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman popularized the term “bucket list,” I had been building my own roster of waters to explore. Always willing to backpack when trout are at the end of the trail, I customized my preference for high altitude drainages, creating my Backcountry Bucket List.

Although I now seek less arduous treks, I’m still driven to add fishable waters to my plans as I peruse topo maps of mountain ranges both near and far. My meandering finger most recently led to a collection of lakes along the jagged eastern escarpment of the Sierra Nevada crest, midway between Bishop and Mammoth Lakes. While requiring a moderate hike and some cross-country negotiating, the lakes’ four species of trout sealed the deal.

Ranging in size from 3 acres to more than 40 acres, the 10 Hilton Lakes nestle in the huge John Muir Wilderness, where snow melt spills over depressions creating creeks that cascade down a stepped valley and a canyon between Mount Morgan and Red Mountain.

The drainage was named after Richard Hilton, a blacksmith from Michigan, who settled in nearby Round

Valley. Here, he operated a milk farm supplying butter to local mining companies from 1874 through 1900. Though historically vague, it’s likely that some milk cans from Hilton’s dairy assisted California Fish and Wildlife agencies in carrying trout transplants via mule train to their new homes.

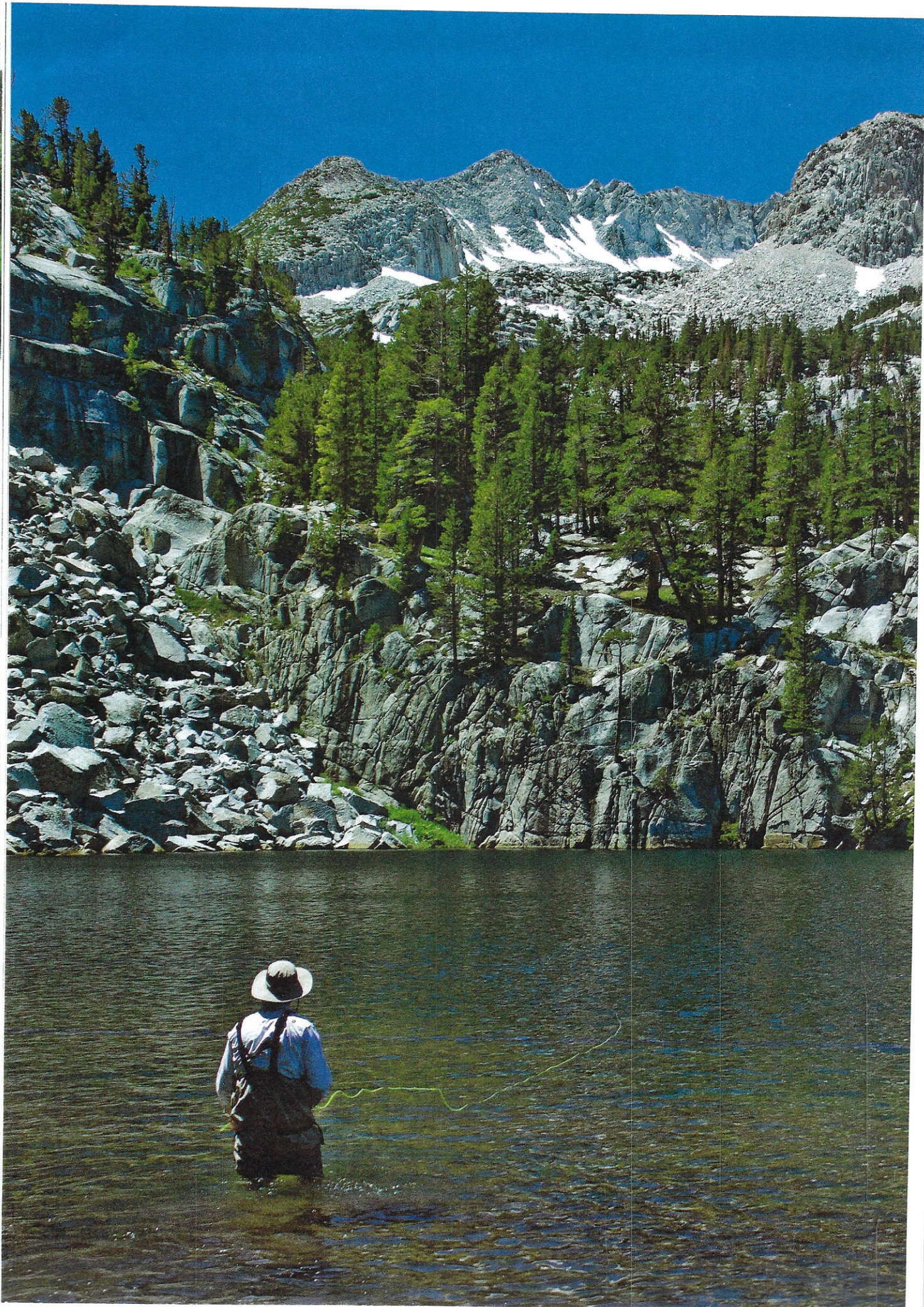
A century later, this rugged drainage, which continues to maintain vibrant, self-sustaining populations of rainbow, brook, brown, and golden trout, is still only reachable on foot or by horseback.

A Bucket Assist

For more than a decade, Bishop resident, friend, and local fly-angling expert, Brandon Parker, has researched these little-mentioned waters, fishing them regularly and often with great success. When I asked for information, he suggested that we make a mid-July day trip to his most productive pair.

Driving north from Bishop on US Highway 395, we turned left at the Toms Place road and proceeded 10 miles to the signed parking area below the Rock Creek Pack Station. There, we began a 6-mile trudge, traversing the dry and dusty trail that overlooks Rock Creek Lake before climbing steeply 500 feet and passing over the divide separating Rock from Hilton Creek. After two-plus hours of hiking through white bark and lodgepole pine forest, we reached a fork. The signed left branch led

The gaudily emblazoned golden trout adds color to the dull granitic landscape (above). Much of Hilton 2’s shoreline necessitates the use of waders to get close to productive drop-offs (left).



to a steep switchback ascent toward Lakes 3 through 10.

"This is the junction to the upper lakes," Parker said, then gestured opposite, toward the well-trodden downhill route to the first two Hiltons—and their bigger residents.

The Dynamic Duo

Known for producing trout trifectas, both lakes house brook trout, browns, and rainbows. Although higher-elevation trout are usually not big, this lower duo, enshrouded by a protective canopy of conifers and hardwoods, tends to surprise. Blessed by terrestrial activity, a moderate forage base, and adequate spawning habitat, the lakes provide a well-balanced environment for growing healthy backcountry fish.

"Here, you can realistically expect 13- to 17-inch trout of more than 2 pounds, with some around 5 pounds," Parker said. "So, you can see why I head here more often than not."

The lakes are bordered by lush grasses and dense scrub willows, with bountiful water entering from seeps and springs. At 26-acre Hilton Lake 2, I got my first view of Mount Huntington, which would serve as a beacon for travel to the higher elevations. Steep shorelines forced us to wade a short distance to have space for our backcasts. We caught a brace of rotund, 13-inch rainbows while probing deep water, but most of our casts went unanswered until we coursed the scattered boulder fields near shore. There, in the pleasantly pungent aroma of pines, active, healthy rainbows and brookies from 6 to 9 inches aggressively attacked Woolly Buggers intended for far bigger prey.

A few hundred yards downstream, the lowest lake in the chain, 41-acre Hilton Lake 1, at 9,800 feet—also known as Davis Lake—proved a bit more open, with a long, sandy inlet channel and more pronounced drop-offs. Wading was still necessary because aquatic growth rimmed much of the marshy shore.

As he approached a small bay lined in weeds, Parker's eyes grew noticeably wider. I was content tangling with hyper browns, 'bows, and char up to 10 inches near shore, but he slowly waded deeper, repeatedly flicking his trademark Parker's Olive Matuka over a deep ebony shelf. After a 20-second count, he began jerkily stripping it. I admired his mastery of the sinking line as his rod arched under the pull of what appeared to be a 2-plus-pound brown.

"Just a baby," he winked as he slipped it back into the water.

All three species dine collectively on each other's juvenile offspring. Parker firmly believes that Davis's browns attain their mass by taking this inherent cannibalistic behavior to a higher level, focusing largely on abundant, young salmonids. Indeed, his preference at Davis is to target those that prowl the depths like submarines ready to torpedo any unsuspecting, defenseless meal.

Through the past decade, Parker and his brother, Todd, have paid their dues here, making countless trips and spending numerous days observing and locating the fish, their preferred structure, and their habits. This effort certainly manifested, as they have released several approaching the 5-pound mark. One, just over 10 pounds, remains Brandon's best.

During a break for lunch, Parker shared a few of his hard-earned secrets. While he allows each

of his long presentations to reach the proper depth before retrieving line in foot-long strips, he believes a key element is triangulating between transition zones, submerged points, and weedbeds. From such points, he fan casts so the different angles expose the sides of his streamer to deeper water, thus showing a bigger target.

He told me that Davis's smaller residents survive by frequenting the shallows and using the maze of weeds for sanctuary. "The big boys tend to lurk in deep water along the edges of bays or points of land and will eat any small trout foolish enough to venture there," he said.



“But they also seem aware of the smaller guys’ hiding places and will sometimes work in pairs to corner smaller fish in the shallows or against the weeds.”

On some occasions, he witnessed them thrashing through the reedy growth to scare immature trout into open water and then devouring the frenzied mouthfuls.

Later, while I was working along a weedbed, a frisky, 5-inch rainbow became impaled on my fly. I leaned over to release it, an ominous V-wake instantly appeared, and I came eyeball to eyeball with about 4 pounds of *Salmo trutta*. With its huge mouth agape, it rolled on its side, barely missed the tiny ’bow—and my finger.

A simple “Wow!” was all I could muster.

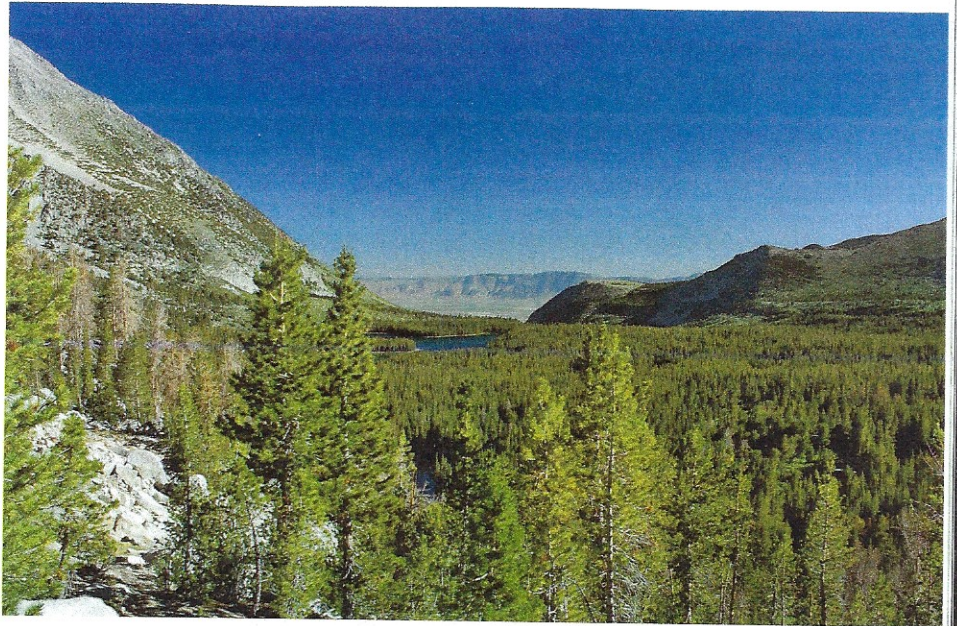
“I told you they grow big and aggressive here,” Parker crowed.

“No need to tell me. I just looked into the eye of the beast,” I answered. “Two inches higher and I would have been accused of using live trout for bait.”

A sinking line is perfect for presenting size 8 to 12, olive or yellow Matukas, conehead Woolly Buggers, Mudler Minnows, and leeches. Parker also hinted that loudly splashing an adult damselfly or dragonfly imitation on the surface can draw the attention of a trout searching for a meaningful mouthful. “It’s sort of my big-fly-equals-big-fish philosophy,” he laughed.

Although *Callibaetis* mayfly hatches can be almost as thick as fog at times, larger fish at Lakes 1 and 2 instinctively patrol the interconnecting creek’s inlet or outlet to seek unsuspecting fry. During a recent fall trip to Lake 2’s outlet channel, I noticed a dark shape outlined along its light, sandy bottom, obviously spying on some unsuspecting baitfish. A timely-placed Parker’s Matuka seduced a 14-inch char, demonstrating that browns aren’t the only well-fed carnivores in these lakes.

On a later trip, I left the trailhead well before the sun touched the eastern horizon, cut left at the trail split, and zigzagged up the thigh-burning staircase to Lake 3 at 10,125 feet. I plied the northern shoreline with long casts. Lake 3’s fish densities were noticeably thinner. On that morning, sleek rainbows preferred black-bodied nymphs twitched slowly through deeper water; brook-



Hilton 1 and 2 sit in thick timber, which provides a surprising terrestrial table.

ies ambushed offerings along the boulder-strewn shoreline. The largest fish barely reached 11 inches.

A 15-minute stroll took me across meadowy Hilton Creek to a brief ascent to Lake 4. Heavily rimmed with conifers and shoreline willows, the 11-acre lake is an ideal base camp. Lake 4 is home to numerous small brookies. Competition for food is intense, so keeping them off the hook was difficult.

The Head of the Drainage

Above Lake 4, real backcountry beckoned. A demanding scramble over a rocky saddle delivered me to the valley’s third level—and a dramatic change in high-elevation landscape. There, half a dozen 3- to 5-acre tarns sat in tandem, each slightly above the other like stepping stones to the drainage’s centerpiece mountain.

The sole inhabitants of Lakes 5, 6, and 7 are brook trout, while goldens coexist in Lake 8. Fishing this quartet of windy, exposed still waters depended more on locating structure and making presentations than on selecting patterns. Resident char congregated near the moving inlet and outlet channels, methodically waiting for the slow current to deliver their groceries.

Rockbound punchbowls resting on the granite lap of Mount Huntington, Lakes 9 and 10 housed the basin’s true glamour species—golden trout, whose palette of living colors and determined fight belied their small size and made them as reward-

Parker’s Olive Matuka



PHOTO BY NORTHWEST FLY FISHING

Hook: 4X long streamer, sizes 8–12

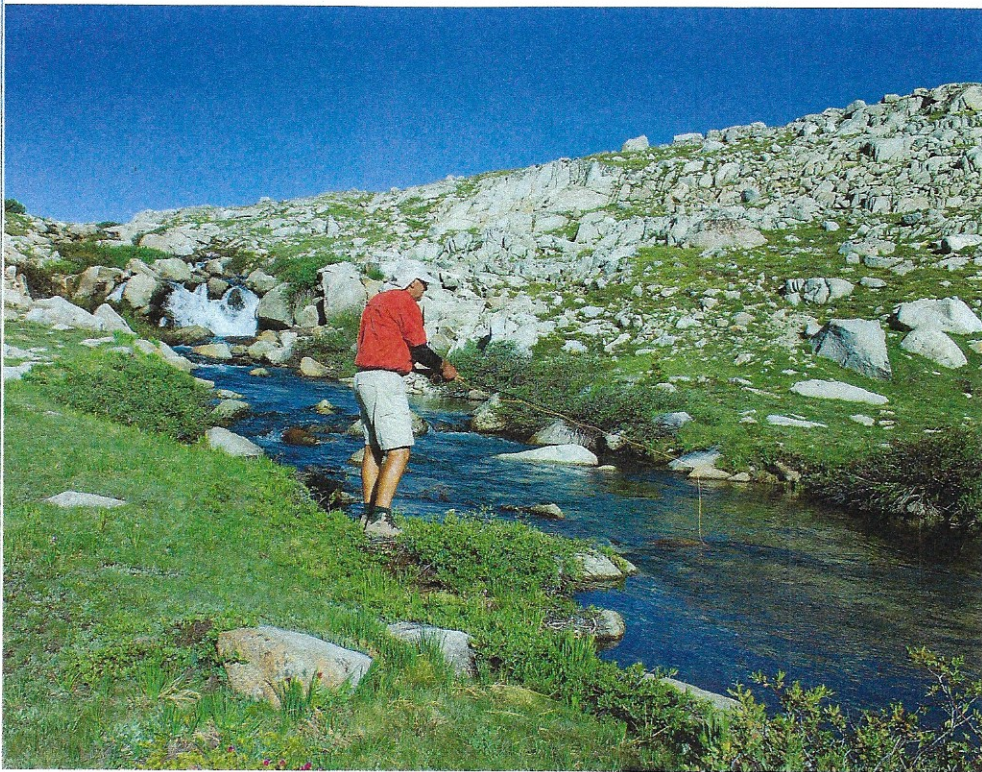
Thread: Olive or black 6/0

Ribbing: Fine silver wire

Body: Olive chenille

Wing: Four olive grizzly saddle hackles

Hackle: Olive grizzly hackles



Hilton Creek offers high-elevation trout at its simplest level. Brookies and goldens are found in its upper courses (above). Brookies gain heft at Hilton 1 and 2. This well-fed fish was taken at Hilton 2's outlet (below).

ing to catch as the larger trout in the lakes below.

Despite their modest acreages, these desolate waters above 11,000 feet are deep enough to prevent winter-kill. Maintaining thin but healthy densities, goldens here are in touch with their harsh living conditions of small food forms and short growing seasons. Relying heavily on insects blown up-canyon and ample benthic foods, they gravitate toward food and cover. Though they can be finicky, I dredged the depths or located them cruising along littoral zones.

Creek Tactics

Draining and feeding most of the still waters, Hilton Creek begins as a trickle from Lake 9 and swells as it courses this series of productive tarns. Although you can hop over its rocks in most places, a good population of 6- to 9-inch brookies and a scattering of goldens dwells in its enchanting mixture of riffles, seams, pockets, and diminutive pools.

Instinctively wary of shadows, these residents remain opportunistic feeders, aggressively snatching meals from the fast current. Using shoreline willows for cover and stealthily placing offerings through chutes and short eddies behind boulders let me admire some trout close

up. Before releasing them, I took time to appreciate their vivid orange and flaming red coloration, a stark contrast to the dull igneous backdrop.

Freefalling sharply into Hilton 2, the stream gains additional volume before flowing into Davis Lake along a thickly-wooded course. Most inhabitants there are pan-size browns, 'bows, and brookies, although bigger trout use the jumble of fallen trees and limbs to hide their redds (rainbows are spring spawners; brookies and browns lay their eggs during the fall).

One More for the List

Parker had also given me a heads up on remote Stanford Lake, which reportedly holds goldens up to 12 inches—mighty big for them. Tucked along the wind-polished eastern slope of Mount Stanford, the lake is reached from Lake 4 via a sketchy, 2-mile trail negotiating a small ridge.

However, on the morning I planned to visit Stanford, powerful, swirling gusts were coming from every direction. Looking up the drainage showed even worse conditions as menacing black clouds had already enveloped the ridge-line and were snaking around both peaks. I'd already elected to retreat down the canyon when a succession of deafening claps rang out, seemingly signaling the onset of Armageddon.

My last glimpse revealed brilliant lightning strikes precisely over the very location where I would have been standing, turning my backcountry bucket list quest into a "kicked the bucket" event. I mentally added Stanford Lake to my list as I hustled down the trail.



Reaching the Lakes

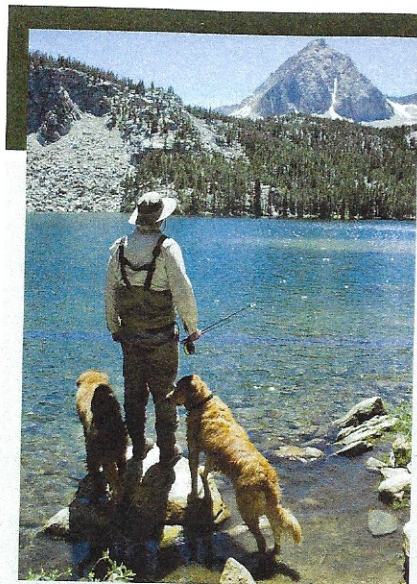
Hiking into the drainage is common. Lakes 1 and 2 or 3 and 4 entail a roughly 12-mile (5-hour) round trip, which is doable in a long day. If you're trekking beyond Lake 5, a base camp allows time to fish and then savor a warm beverage and freeze-dried meal while enjoying the alpenglow before a good night's rest. Rough campsites are available at Lakes 1 through 4, and partly protected sites for minimalist campers are found higher in the drainage. For any trip, expect unpredictable daytime weather and cold nights, and definitely plan for mosquitos.

If hiking doesn't suit you, the Rock Creek Pack Station accommodates individual requests, from packing your gear (and float tube) to full-blown ride-in/ride-out trips. Horse travel past 4 is not feasible.

I checked Hilton Lakes from my backcountry bucket list with a steep scramble to 11,295 feet because I enjoy the freedom and expending the energy to roam across talus fields, through thick timber, and over polished granite. At Lake 9, as a flash of carmine lit up the crystalline water, I coaxed a scrappy battler toward me. But while reaching for the wriggling 7-incher, my hand momentarily hesitated, as if expecting a big-mawed brown to erupt on the surface and snatch my golden prize, along with a few fingers. Though imagined, that moment illustrates the basin's varied offerings. Whether you're plying Davis Lake for its trophy browns, tempting the middle lakes' respectable brookies and 'bows, or mining for the brilliant nuggets found in the upper still waters, fish in the Hilton Lakes run the gamut from leviathans to Lilliputians.

I may have crossed the lakes from my list, but I plan to return for some unfinished business. Remember, I added Stanford Lake to my still-expanding backcountry list.

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



Hilton Lakes NOTEBOOK

When: Depending on snowpack, late June–late October. Best at 1 and 2 in early summer for rainbows and in late summer/early fall for browns. Early/midsummer best for 3 and 4; 5 through 10 good from just after ice-out through summer.

Where: Rock Creek drainage north of Bishop; Hilton trailhead is located off Rock Creek Road 9 mi. from US Hwy. 395.

Headquarters: Toms Place (resort, store, and restaurant), (760) 935-4239, www.tomsplaceresort.com; Rock Creek Lakes Resort, (760) 935-4311, www.rockcreeklake.com. Forest Service campgrounds located along Rock Creek Road between Toms Place and Mosquito Flats. **Information:** Inyo National Forest, (760) 873-2400, www.fs.usda.gov/inyo; Rock Creek Pack Station, (760) 872-8331, www.rockcreekpackstation.com; Bishop Area Chamber of Commerce & Visitors Center, (760) 873-8405, www.bishopvisitor.com; Mammoth Lakes, (760) 934-2712, www.visitmammoth.com.

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

Useful fly patterns: Yellow Humpy, Parachute Adams, Green Mosquito, Sierra Bright Dot, Stimulator, Elk Hair Caddis, Outrigger Caddis, Ginger Paradun, Chernobyl Ant, Madam X, terrestrial patterns, conehead Matuka, Parker's Olive Matuka, Woolly Bugger, Muddler Minnow, leech patterns, Pheasant Tail Nymph, Golden Stonefly nymphs, Bird's Nest, Prince Nymph, Flashback Emerger, Zebra Midge, Fox's Poopah, Copper John, beadhead Copper John.

Necessary accessories: Rain gear, wide-brimmed hat, water bottles, sunscreen, bug spray, polarized sunglasses, lightweight waders, water filtration system or halogen tablets.

Nonresident license: \$14.30/1 day; \$22.42/2 days; \$44.85/10 days, \$120.14/ annual. A wilderness permit is required for overnight stay in the John Muir Wilderness.

Fly shops: *Bishop:* Brock's Flyfishing Specialists & Tackle Experts, (760) 872-3581, www.brocksflyfish.com. *Mammoth Lakes:* The Trout Fitter, (760) 924-3676, www.thetroutfitter.com; Rick's Sport Center, (760) 934-3416.

Books/maps/resources: *Sierra Trout Guide* by Ralph Cutter. Mount Abbott USGS topographical quadrangle; *Southern California Atlas & Gazetteer* by DeLorme Mapping. California Department of Fish and Wildlife, Inland Deserts Region, Eastern Sierra Back Country Fishing Guide, www.dfg.ca.gov/regions/6/.

