



STAYING AT THE HILTON

The Hilton Lakes Drainage, that is, where Golden State anglers can travel for some outstanding trout fishing.

BY DON VACHINI

Located equidistant between Bishop and Mammoth lakes, the Rock Creek Canyon is not only noted for its numerous drive-to fishing and camping destinations but entry options to well-traveled backcountry venues via Mono Pass and the Little Lakes Valley. However, with so many visitors, this area often gets crowded with camp spaces and trailhead parking lots full during the height of the season.

However, for adventuresome anglers intent on wetting a line in comparative solitude, Jim Erdman, a fisheries biologist with the Department of Fish and Wildlife's Bishop office, suggests the lesser-known and lightly-visited Hilton Lakes chain, located just over the ridge from Rock Creek Lake. Ranging in dimensions from 3-acre tarns to



Amid a scenic backdrop, anglers must wade the shallows at Hilton #1 to reach its deeper structure. ■ Photo by Don Vachini.

over 40 acres, the 10 Hilton Lakes originate amid glacial cirques nestled in the shadows of Mt. Huntington (12,405 feet) and Mt. Stanford (12,857 feet) within the half-million-acre John Muir Wilderness. Snow and ice melt from these slopes fills and spills over depressions, their linking creek cascading down a stepped valley, gaining strength as it passes through lakes from 11,300 feet to 9,800 feet. After escaping the lowest lake, it tumbles briskly down canyon between Mt. Morgan and Red Mountain, flows under Highway 395 to finally enter massive Crowley Lake in the Owens Valley.

The drainage was collectively named after Richard Hilton, a former Michigan blacksmith 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, Erdman hints it is quite likely that some milk cans from Hilton's dairy assisted California Fish and Wildlife personnel by carrying trout transplants via mule-train to their new homes further up canyon from the mines. Over a century later, this rugged drainage, which is still only attained by foot or horseback, continues to maintain vibrant, self-sustaining populations of rainbow, brook, brown and golden trout.

Turn off Highway 395 at Tom's Place and drive 10 miles to pass Rock Creek Lake. From the signed parking area 1/4-mile below the Rock Creek Pack Station, a 6-mile trudge commences by traversing the dry, dusty and steadily ascending trail over the divide separating Rock from Hilton Creek. After two-plus hours of gaining and losing altitude, crossing the wilderness boundary and undulating through a moderate white bark and lodgepole pine forest cover, the pathway reaches a fork. The signed left branch leads to a steep switchback ascent toward lakes #3-#10; the well-trodden, downhill route leads to the first two Hiltons and their big-fish appeal.

A TROUT TRIFECTA

According to Erdman, both lakes #1 and #2 house impressive brook, browns and rainbows. Although higher elevation, backcountry trout usu-

NEARBY AMENITIES

For lodging, general stores and meals, there are several choices: Nearby Tom's Place (760-935-4239, www.tomsplaceresort.com), Rock Creek Lakes Resort (760-935-4311, www.rockcreeklake.com), and Crowley Lake RV Camp (760-935-4221, www.crowleylakerv.com).

Numerous forest service campsites exist along Rock Creek Road, along with Rock Creek Pack Station (760-872-8331, www.rockcreekpackstation.com), while wilderness permits (needed for any overnight stay within the John Muir Wilderness) can be obtained from the White Mountain Ranger District in Bishop (760-873-2500, www.fs.usda.gov/inyo).

The TroutFitter (760-924-3676, www.TheTroutFitter.com), located in Mammoth Lakes, and Brock's Fly Fishing Specialists (760-872-3581, www.brockflyfish.com), in Bishop, provide up-to-date angling advice.

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ally don't grow big, he confided that this lower duo, enshrouded under a protective canopy of conifers and hardwoods, is gifted by a surprising amount of terrestrial activity, a moderate forage base and adequate spawning (all species share the interconnecting Hilton Creek for recruitment). "This duo consistently produces 12 to 16-inch trout that run up to 2 pounds, with some well over 5."

Amid the pleasantly pungent aroma of pine, bordered by lush grasses, dense scrub willows and with bountiful water entering from seeps and springs, each lake has limited places where anglers can efficiently access them from shore. At 26-acre Hilton #2 (9,855 feet), most anglers are forced to wade a brief distance to probe deeper water which harbors the larger, wilier specimens. However, active and healthy rainbows and brookies between 6 and 9 inches aggressively attack offerings along the shallows.

A few hundred yards downstream, the lowest lake in the chain at 9,800 feet, 41-acre Hilton #1 (also known as Davis Lake) is a bit more open, with

a long, sandy inlet channel and more pronounced drop-offs. Wading is still necessary as aquatic growth rims much of its marshy edges.

While all three species collectively dine on each other's juvenile offspring, Davis' browns attain their mass by taking this inherent cannibalistic behavior to a higher level, focusing largely on the abundant, young salmonids, which survive by hanging out in the shallows and utilizing the maze of shoreline weeds for sanctuary. While the noteworthy predators commonly prowl the depths like submarines, looking to torpedo an unsuspecting and defenseless meal, they will also work cooperatively in two's and three's to corner smaller fish in the shallows or against the weeds. On more than one occasion, I have witnessed pods aggressively thrash through the reedy growth to scare immature trout out into open water and then devour the frenzied mouthfuls.

On these lower lakes, a float tube enables both fly and spin anglers to stalk the apex predators' productive structure from more advantageous angles. In an attempt to figure out a brown's hunting pattern, work offerings away from shore or troll larger lures or flies over the edges of shoals, the outer reaches of the inlet channel and parallel to weedbeds.

Though a bit more challenging, bank anglers can score on hefty *Salmo trutta*, too. While lengthy presentations need to reach the proper depth before retrieving, a key component is triangulating between transition zones, submerged points and weedlines. While fan casting allows coverage of likely structure, changing flies and lures will frequently pique their interest.

For distance casting, I favor a medium-action, 8 1/2-foot spinning rod and reel loaded with thin-diameter, 6- to 8-pound fluorocarbon line plus a big-bait-equals-big-fish mentality. While minnow-patterned Kastmaster, Krocodile and Thomas Buoyant spoons plus broken-backed Rapalas, Rebels and brown and white Bingo Bugs are productive baitfish imitations, I prefer towing them 4 feet behind a clear plastic bubble. This setup not only adds additional distance to the cast and keeps it active through the water column but also helps prevent

the lure from snagging bottom.

Fly-tossers should prepare for battle with a 9-foot, 5- or 6-weight rod matched with a fast-sinking line and a 9-foot leader ending in 4X fluorocarbon. Providing enough backbone to attain lengthy casts and turn chunky browns, it is perfect for presenting size 6-10, olive or yellow Matuka, cone-head Woolly Bugger, Muddler Minnow, Leech and other light-shaded, minnow-imitating streamers.

Larger specimens at lakes #1 and #2 instinctively patrol the interconnecting creek's inlet or outlet channel during early and late-day shadows, seeking unsuspecting baitfish. During a recent fall trip to lake #2, I pinpointed a dark shape outlined along the light, sandy bottom of its outlet channel. A timely-placed Matuka seduced a thick, 14-inch *Salvelinus fontinalis*, demonstrating that browns aren't the only well-fed carnivores here!

UPPER TIER LAKES

Following the trail a half-mile above #2, I zig-zagged up the thigh-burning staircase to arrive at 15-acre Lake #3, which was perched on a lightly-timbered bench at 10,125 feet. Positioned along the northern shoreline, I pitched lengthy, fly/bubble casts. On this occasion, black-bodied nymphs retrieved through deeper water produced sleek rainbows up to 12 inches; brookies preferred ambushing offerings negotiated around shoreline boulders.

An easy, 15-minute ascent over the low finger ridge brought me to 10,353 foot Lake #4, heavily rimmed in conifers, shoreline willow clumps and fully framed by Mt. Huntington. While the 11-acre lake makes for an ideal base camp, I found huge densities of ravenous brook trout competing for food. Although most topped out near 8 inches, it was difficult to keep the brilliantly attired specimens off the hook.

Beyond here, the real backcountry beckons. A demanding scramble up and across a rocky saddle delivers one to the valley's third level and a dramatic change in high-elevation landscape. Here, a half-dozen, 3- to 5-acre tarns sit in tandem fashion, each arranged slightly above the other, like stepping stones leading to an altar of exfoliated edifices adorning the drainage's centerpiece mountain.

The sole inhabitants of lakes #5, #6 and #7 are brook trout while goldens co-exist in #8. Requiring some cross-country negotiating, lakes #9 and #10, rock-bound punchbowls resting on the granitic lap of Mt. Huntington, only house *Oncorhynchus aqua-bonita*.

Despite their small acreage, these desolate waters above 11,000 feet are deep enough to prevent winterkill yet maintain thin yet healthy densities. Rarely passing 9 inches, trout here seem in touch with their harsh living conditions, relying heavily on insects zephyred up canyon and ample benthic life forms. Since they orient primarily toward food and cover, tactics at these windy and exposed still waters seem to be more about locating structure and presentation than pattern or lure selection. Fish routinely tend to converge near the moving inlet and outlet channels as they await the moving current to deliver their groceries.

Tackle and tactics on these upper waters are pleasantly simplistic and minimalist. A light- to ultra-light-action spinning rod and reel loaded with 2- to 4-pound monofilament can efficiently present an assortment of tiny Rooster Tail, Panther Martin and Vibrax spinners or a fly/bubble setup in windy conditions.

When residents become finicky, I prefer a 9-foot, 3- or 4-weight rod paired with a floating line, a 9- to 12-foot leader and 6X tippet to dredge the depths or locate them cruising along littoral zones. Productive topwater flies include size 14-16 Parachute Adams, Green Mosquito, Goddard Caddis and adult Damselfly. Ranging from olive, tan, brown and black shades, subsurface patterns include size 16-20 beadhead Bird's Nest, Psycho Prince, Disco Midge, Zebra Midge and Scud patterns.

A dry/dropper combination can also provide an option to sway indecisive feeders.

CREEK TACTICS

Hilton Creek begins as a trickle out of #9, then becomes more voluminous while coursing through a series of azure potholes before plunging over the upper plateau. Although one can hop over its rocks in most places, it holds a good population of 6- to 9-inch brookies plus a scattering of

goldens throughout. In these extreme upper courses residents remain opportunistic feeders, aggressively snatching size 14-18 Hare's Ear, Prince or Pheasant Tail nymphs, E/C Caddis, soft hackles, ant and beetles swung seductively among its enchanting mix of riffles, seams, pockets and scaled-down pools.

By utilizing bankside brush and stealthily placing offerings through chutes and short eddies behind boulders, I often get to admire these gaudy trout close up. Prior to releasing, I never cease to marvel at their palettes of flaming orange, lemon yellow and vermilion, providing a stark contrast to the dull, igneous backdrop.

After freefalling into Hilton #2, the stream pleasantly gurgles through a thickly-wooded course before flowing into Davis Lake. While most inhabitants now include pan-sized browns and 'bows, be mindful that sizeable lake-dwellers often establish residency here.

As they segue a trio of stepladder benches along the harsh escarpment, the Hiltons incorporate a diversity of landscapes, species, gear and tactics. For those willing to put in the sweat equity, these rugged waters truly offer varied backcountry trout choices ranging from Lilliputian to leviathan!

TRAVEL OPTIONS

With a well-maintained trail system, bipedal entry into the drainage is most common. Depending on one's preference of effort, lakes #1 through #4 entail an 11- to 12-mile round trip (approximately 2 1/2 hours each way), both doable in a long day. Trekking beyond #5 definitely warrants setting up a base camp. This allows time to visit nearby waters and return in time to savor a freeze-dried meal, enjoy the alpenglow and achieve a good night's rest. Rough campsites are available up to #4 although semi-protected sites exist for the minimalist camper higher up in the drainage. Expect unpredictable daytime weather, cold nights and definitely plan for mosquitos.

The Rock Creek Pack Station accommodates individual requests ranging from packing angler's gear (and float tubes) to full-blown ride-in and ride-out trips. Horse travel past #4 is not feasible. □