

Yosemite National Park, CA

Of Reverence, Respect, and Birthdays

By Don Vachini

Perched on a large, midstream boulder while scanning the swift water gliding down the canyon, I made a calculated presentation. My fly line caught the edge of a fast chute and after I made a corrective mend, the leader got pulled into an eddy underneath an overlying slab of granite. The fly rode high as it circled the ebony swirl—a perfect drift!

On this June morning, I was boulder-hopping a canyon section of the lower Merced River in Yosemite National Park under the watchful eyes of guide David Furry, owner and operator of Yosemite Family Adventures/Yosemite Fly Fishing Guide. For me, this excursion was a belated 70th birthday gift.

Coincidentally, I was also in the process of helping the park celebrate its 150th anniversary.

With altitudes up to 13,000 feet, Yosemite sprawls over a whopping 758,123 acres. On June 30, 1864, Abraham Lincoln signed a two-paragraph bill, turning Yosemite Valley over to the state of California, protecting land that would eventually become the famous national park. Lincoln's idea of preserving wilderness instead of exploiting it was radical in the 19th century and viewed by many as the birth of America's national park system. In 1890, conservationist John Muir successfully urged Congress to establish a national park made up of the high country and surrounding lands and, in 1906, President Teddy Roosevelt incorporated the valley and Mariposa Grove into the new national park.

The recession of Ice Age glaciers approximately 10,000 years ago gouged out thousands of lakes along the west slope of the Sierra Nevada crest. More than 400 of these tarns drain into the Tuolumne and Merced Rivers. Al-

though rainbow trout occur naturally in these free-flowing rivers and their tributaries, the glacier-carved topography prevented their colonization in the loftier waters. Thus, the majority of water bodies in what is now Yosemite National Park were naturally fishless.

Beginning in 1877, the California Department of Fish and Game (DFG) started introducing additional trout species in valley streams. Soon, an ambitious stocking program expanded to many of the barren, high-elevation creeks and lakes. Cutthroat, Dolly Varden, golden, and mackinaw joined brook, brown, and rainbow on a 1917 list of trout deposits in the park.

Signifying the winds of change, the 1969 Leopold Report initiated a plan to phase out and eventually end fish stocking in all national parks. During 1972, the policy was set in motion and by 1991, the National Park System and DFG abruptly ceased infusions in Yosemite. Although many waters eventually became fishless over ensuing decades, a 2000 survey revealed that 245 still waters contained self-sustaining populations of fish. While rainbows and browns persist, brook trout continue to be the most numerous species throughout.

Devising a Plan

After arranging a three-day trip in June, I hooked up with Furry in Groveland. While dining on pizza during trip preliminaries, he covered some park-specific ground rules, telling me, "Regulations stipulate only artificial lures or flies with no more than two barbless hooks. Bait is prohibited and catch-and-release is encouraged."

While he was excited to be celebrating the park's 150th anniversary, too, passion for his trade also became evident. Eagerly opening his maps, he revealed a sampling of some

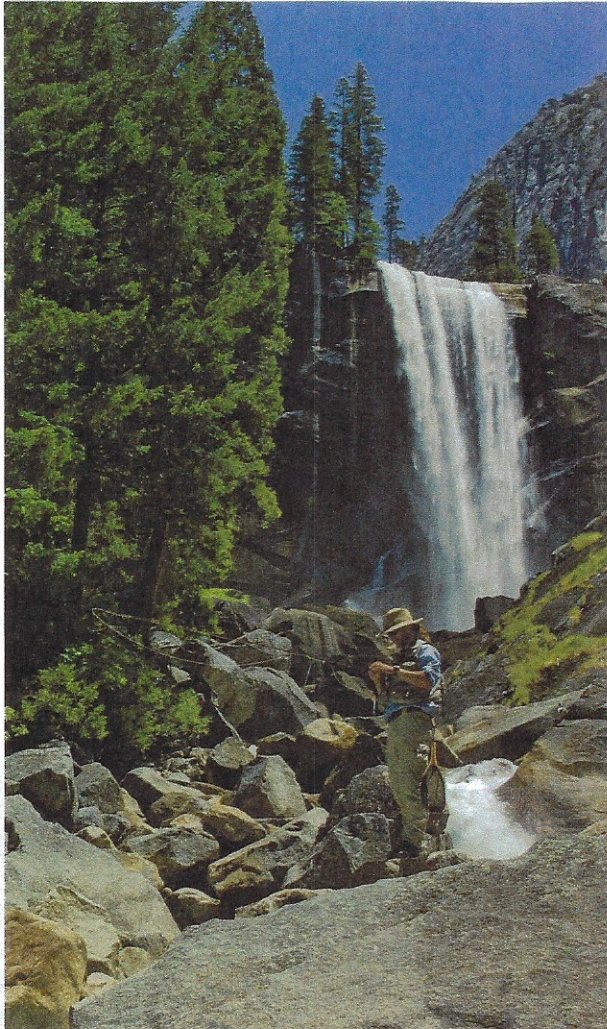
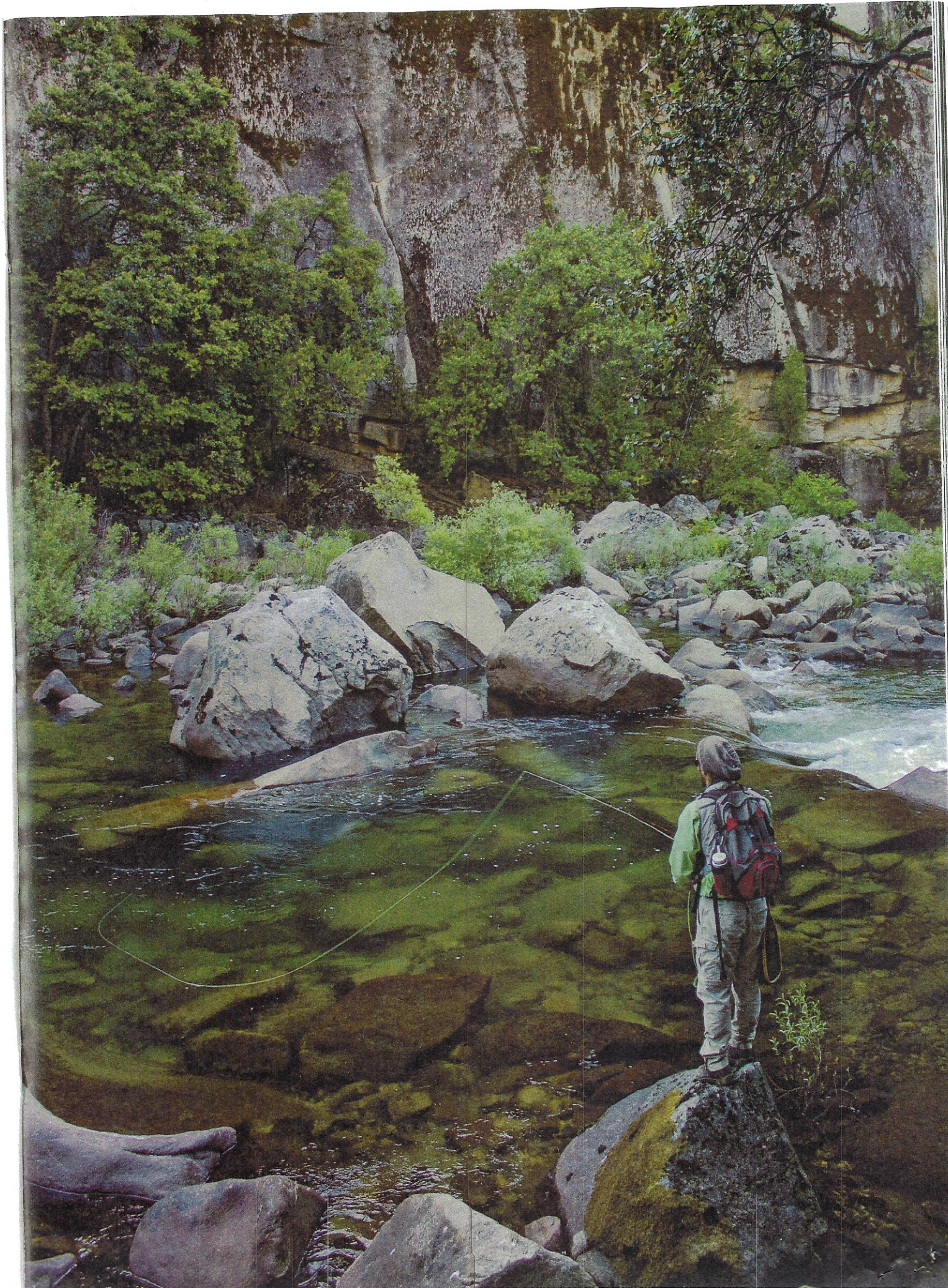


PHOTO BY DON VACHINI

Some of the best fishing occurs beneath Merced River's Vernal and Nevada Falls. Here, boulder-hopping David Furry checks on his leader while framed by Nevada Falls (above). The Merced River is the centerpiece water of Yosemite. Here, David Furry works the canyon section, where lengthy casts and drag-free drifts are often necessary (right). Photo by Don Vachini



of Yosemite's more accessible lakes, rivers, and creeks, all of which hold wild and wily rainbow, brook, and brown trout. During the course of our meal, he pinpointed one particularly sensitive lake housing exceptional specimens that he didn't want mentioned. With a penchant for speaking with my hands, à la college basketball analyst, Dick Vitale, I gestured too vigorously during conversation and a chunk of greasy sausage unceremoniously plopped onto his map. From this moment on, his secret water good-naturedly became "Pizza Lake."

Indeed, poring over a map of the entire park proves mind boggling in the extreme, with so much territory to cover. To provide more manageable itineraries, Furry divides the park into north and south halves bisected by State Route 120 and each of these into east/west sections.

Roadways to Trout

Without question, the centerpiece water of Yosemite is the Merced River. Heading in the vast backcountry between 12,561-foot Mount Florence and 11,726-foot Merced Peak, it filters through Washburn and Merced Lakes, then courses through Little Yosemite Valley before dropping over both Nevada and Vernal Falls. Its stair-step morphology, characterized by dramatic waterfalls, lengthy glides, and deep pools, forms three distinct sections. Here, all rainbows must be released but five browns per day may be retained.

Although reclusive and shy, some of the park's largest trout dwell in the heavily-congested sector of the river meandering through Yosemite Valley.

For the first morning, Furry chose the steeper gradient of the boulder-laden gorge, a largely unpressured section below Yosemite Valley. Coursing downhill through El Portal, it is closely paralleled by State Route 140, but guarded by steep access and poison oak. Nearby foliage requires roll casts and other tight-quarters skills. Mesmerized, I

watched Furry perform lengthy, 40- to 50-foot backcasts, releasing the backward trailing loop over the length of the stream rather than in shoreline trees.

Our boulder-hopping, knee-jarring session yielded a few hard-earned 12-inch rainbows before we moved upstream to explore the slow-moving meadow section. Its crystal-clear water in the presence of the El Capitan monolith towering above not only command awe and reverence but also tiny flies, technical presentations on long, gossamer tippets, and, ideally, low-light conditions.

Continuing farther upriver, we enjoyed a delicious streamside meal prepared by Furry's wife, Anna. Between bites, he shared some personal information. Previously serving as a guide in Yellowstone National Park, he had an adjustment to make when arriving at Yosemite.

"In a totally different landscape scenario with much higher elevations,

I had to get over expecting 18-to 20-inch trout," he said.

"Faced with tiny food forms and small feeding windows, most Yosemite residents will top out in the 8- to 10-inch range with a few attaining 12- to 16-inch status. Trophies approaching 18 inches are here, but they are rarely landed."

The takeoff (or ending) point for the John Muir Trail (JMT) is Happy Isles. Hiking upstream, Furry helped me negotiate the treacherous, mist-covered boulders and thundering water between Vernal and Nevada Falls. Here, under the noses of hundreds of steadily marching, "ambitious ant trail" hikers, we unsuccessfully sought an audience with wily brown trout.

Reaching the Merced's headwaters beyond here would involve a steady, 10-mile, uphill pull with a gain of some 6,000-feet. Instead, we opted for a pleasant change of pace, spending the remainder of the afternoon exploring Illilouette and Tenaya Creeks. Amid the melodic gurgle of water on rocks, the more gullible residents gladly accepted our dapped offerings while we saw nary a soul on these cascading tributaries.



Originating near Yosemite's eastern boundary, the "other" river starts as seepage from 13,057-foot Mount Dana and 13,114-foot Mount Lyell, the two highest points in the park. The Dana Fork leaves its namesake meadow before bouncing adjacent to SR 120 to meet the Lyell Fork, which gushes loudly alongside the JMT for 8 miles down Lyell Canyon. Their convergence forms the main Tuolumne River in Tuolumne Meadows, another populous, 5-mile-long hub of congestion. A stark contrast to Yosemite Valley's steep walls, this wide, serpentine meadow section offers pan-size brookies and rainbows plus an occasional hefty brown while remaining under heavy foot traffic. To escape, serious anglers should hike a mile or so downriver past Pothole Dome before working back toward the highway.

Below Glen Aulin Camp, the fish get larger but the river descends sharply into the Grand Canyon of the Tuolumne. After 10 miles of gaining flowage, this most isolated section enters Hetch Hetchy Reservoir.

Tributary Trout

Arranged like thin blue ribbons on a large piece of cloth, a collection of arteriole creeks eventually thread into the deep canyons of the Merced or Tuolumne Rivers. Indeed, many of these ice- and snow-fed tributaries emanating from the heads of glaciers either cross under or run near SR 120, yet remain some of the park's best-kept secrets.

In addition to the Tuolumne River's Dana, Lyell, and South Forks, Budd, Cascade, Cathedral, Ireland, Parker Pass, Porcupine, Rafferty, Sunrise, Unicorn, and Yosemite Creeks hide feisty trout amid their intimate pockets, plunge pools, seams, and eddies. These little streams necessitate various short-cast tricks, but the real challenge is getting into position to cast without spooking the inherently wary trout.

Open from the last Saturday in April through November 15, these 10- to 20-foot-wide streams are best fished during the runoff period from May through July. However, with California mired in its third year of drought, we respectfully opted to bypass the low-water creeks for those with healthier flows.

Early the next morning, we turned onto Tioga Pass Road (aka SR 120), intent on treading pathways along a trio of inconspicuous streams. Some incredible action can take place on these little-known waterways, so Furry will typically hike up to a mile or more before fishing.

"Some sections may see up to a dozen anglers in a season. Others, none at all," he confided.

A brisk, 2-mile walk from the Tamarack Campground trailhead brought us to Cascade Creek, which tumbles steeply through a canopy of thick willows and tall timber. I could hardly believe how wild the terrain appeared only a few hundred yards away from pavement. Off trail, each gravity-propelled step toward the creek bed was cushioned by a soft carpet of pine needles, leaves, and fallen limbs. Halfway down, we had to take a moment to calm escalated heart rates, created when a ruffed grouse exploded between our feet.

To avoid the thick shoreline cover, Furry pointed me toward midstream boulders. After hopscotching upstream like a child on a playground, I would crouch below a target pool. Here, watching my high-riding dry being swarmed by heavily-spotted, 6- to 9-inch rainbows proved quite invigorating. After rounding off the morning session on the nearby South Fork Tuolumne, we briefly perused Tenaya Lake's gin-clear outlet stream for diminutive brookies, then finished the late afternoon successfully using hit-and-run tactics on the deeper, gouged-out holes on Yosemite Creek.

The Backcountry Beckons

According to Furry, more than 94 percent of the park is designated wilderness with more than 750 miles of trails providing bipedal routes to numerous still waters

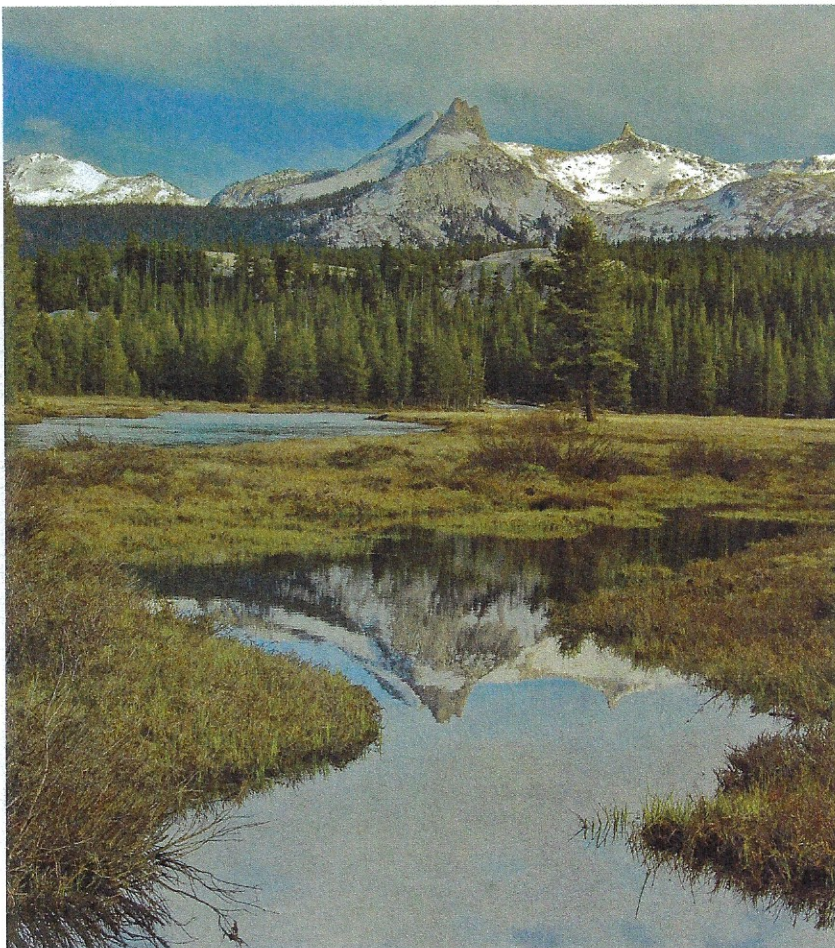


PHOTO BY DAVID FURRY

From Tuolumne Meadows, Cathedral Peak offers a beacon to its lakes.



PHOTO BY DON VACHINI

This wild Merced River rainbow fell for a Stimulator in the early morning light. All Yosemite rainbows must be released (above). Numerous snow-fed artiole creeks often hold some of Yosemite's best kept secrets. Here, the author's grandson, Domenic, works a meadow section of tiny Parker Pass Creek (below).

containing trout. Although he fashions each trip to his client's desires, Furry favors donning a daypack and hiking between 2 to 5 miles to explore lakes less affected. Since I will hike just about anywhere as long as trout are at the end of the trail, his selected day-hike destinations, both north and south of SR 120, fell right into my comfort zone.

Thus, on our third morning, we hit the Mono Pass Trail from Dana Meadows an hour before sunrise. The 4-mile, well-trodden path to the Spillway Lakes along Parker Pass Creek was a welcome relief for my knees, stiff from the prior two days of boulder bouncing. After releasing a few eager char from the creek, we crested a saddle to find Spillway and Helen Lakes, each tucked in a sub-alpine, turf-ringed bowl near scattered timber and guarded by majestic serrated sentinels along the Kuna Crest.

Here, I was able to air out casts approaching 50 feet then allow my green beadhead caddisfly pupa pattern to sink for 15 seconds. Cruising in repetitive patterns, gaudily attired, 10-to 11-inch brookies dined voraciously when my offering was twitched through the lake's littoral zone.

Returning to our car after the 8-mile round trip and regaining our second wind, we decided to make a brief jaunt to a brace of still waters (including "Pizza Lake") in the vicinity of Lembert Dome. With sundown approaching, hefty, 12-inch brookies irreverently tried their best to distract us from the alpenglow painted on nearby granite-based citadels. Headlamps lighting the darkening trail, we finished the end of a long but rewarding 14-hour day.

Before parting company, Furry narrowed down a few future hike-to possibilities, which I could attempt on my own. Some of his day-trip options from Tuolumne Meadows include the Cathedral Lakes, Dog and Skeleton Lakes plus Delany Creek, the Sunrise Lakes from Tenaya Lake, and May Lake from its trailhead north of SR 120. Gaylor and Granite Lake Basins are reached via a short climb from the Tioga Pass Entry Station.

The Young Lakes and Ten Lakes require overnight stays. Lake Merced and Vogelsang High Sierra Camps offer sites to sleep and allow day hiking to noteworthy Babcock, Bernice, Booth, Evelyn, Fletcher, Hanging

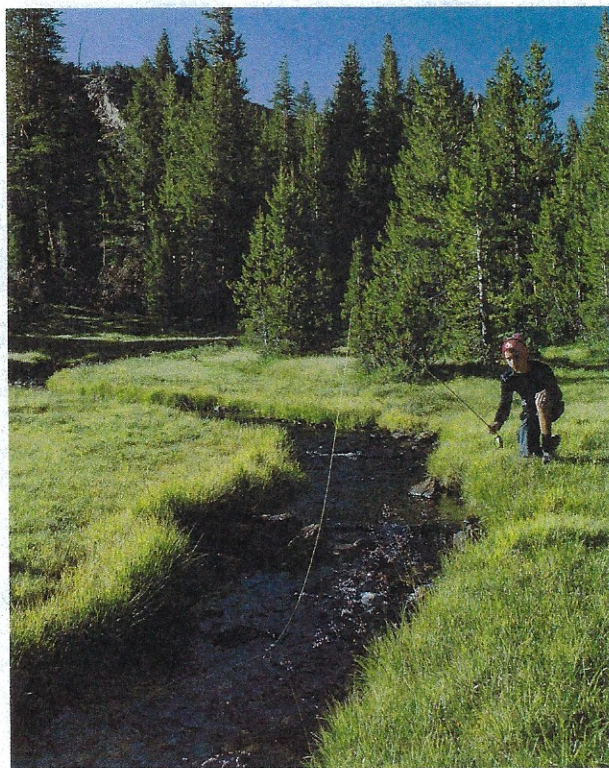


PHOTO BY DON VACHINI

Basket, and Ireland Lakes, plus Echo, Fletcher, Ireland, and Lewis Creeks. All of these lakes support a biomass conducive to maintaining moderate densities of healthy wild trout. Their inlet, outlet, and connecting streams, which provide spawning and allow movement between lakes, remain key ingredients to sustaining their fisheries.

For adventuresome anglers conducting multiple-day backpacking trips, Smedberg, Benson, Wilma, Dorothy, Tilden, Neall, Rodgers, Tallulah, and Doe Lakes can be reached by traveling north from Tuolumne Meadows on the Pacific Crest Trail. While the Happy Isles Trailhead links backpackers to a more-established backcountry trail network, only a handful of hardy souls per year visit remote Red Devil, Turner, Upper and Lower Ottoway, and the five Harriet Lakes. Demanding physical stamina, base camps at altitude, and degrees-of-difficulty-type challenges, they are tucked near the park's extreme southern boundary.

Caveat: While approximately 210 lakes still hold trout, selected waters continue to be mitigated for Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog (*Rana sierrae*) habitat and their resident trout removed. Most recent waters so treated include Budd, Virginia, Upper Mattie, Mattie Satellite, Roosevelt, Lower Hutchings, Middle and Tiny McCabe Lakes, and Bartlett Creek Lakelets.

Keep it Simple

While you do have to earn your trout, Furry prefers a simple approach. His hatch chart reveals that caddisflies and mayflies make up the primary insects on streams and higher-elevation lakes, with midges, scuds, and terrestrials present in fair quantities.

During cold, turbulent, early season flows, small nymphs work best on lethargic trout. Basic dry flies are deadly during summer and fall. Stoneflies abound in both rivers, with size 8 through 12 imitations often the preferred mouthfuls. Furry also hints that tiny beadhead nymphs dropper-rigged under a Parachute Adams, October Caddis, or Humpy will often outperform single dry flies.

Lastly, he reminds still-water enthusiasts that "A float tube is always a bonus on lakes."

Simple fishing is part of the allure even though simple often includes long walks through magnificent landscapes and expert casting in tight quarters.

Without a doubt, Yosemite's sheer cliffs, lengthy waterfalls, and majestic monoliths continue to highlight some of the best, untapped wild trout opportunities in the state. Although Furry and I maxed out our efforts in the short three days allotted, we barely scratched the surface of the park's myriad offerings.

However, despite mounting birthdays, I plan to continue circumambulating its granite-based watersheds in search of their bejeweled treasures—one day and one step at a time. 🐟

Don Vachini is a California-based freelance writer and photographer.

Yosemite National Park NOTEBOOK

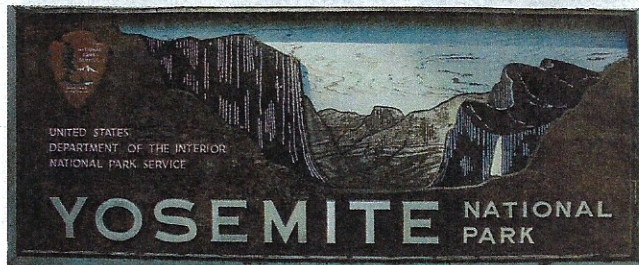


PHOTO BY DON VACHINI

When: June–late-October, depending on snowpack.

Where: Yosemite National Park, central Sierra Nevada, CA.

Headquarters: Yosemite National Park and nearby communities. **Information:** Tuolumne County Visitors Bureau (Sonora), (209) 533-4420, www.yosemitgoldcountry.com. **Lodging (outside park):** The Groveland Hotel, (209) 962-4000, ext. 301, www.groveland.com; Evergreen Lodge (209) 379-2606, www.evergreenlodge.com; Yosemite Westgate Lodge, (209) 962-5281, www.yosemitewestgate.com; Yosemite Riverside Inn, (209) 962-7408, www.yosemiteriversideinn.com; Yosemite View Lodge, (209) 379-2681, www.stayyosemiteviewlodge.com. **Lodging (inside park):** For information/reservations about lodging at White Wolf Lodge, Yosemite Lodge, Curry Village, Tuolumne Lodge, and others, visit www.yosemitepark.com/accommodations.

Appropriate gear: 2- to 4-wt. rods, floating lines, 7- to 9-ft. leaders, 4X–6X tippets.

Useful fly patterns: Parachute Adams, White Miller, Cutter's EC Caddis, Elk Hair Caddis, Timberline Emerger, Stimulator, Humpy, Bird's Nest, beadhead Pheasant Tail, caddisfly pupa patterns, stonefly patterns, terrestrials.

Nonresident license: \$14.86/1 day, \$23.25/2 days, \$124.77/annual; free wilderness permits are available at permit stations throughout the park.

Fly shops/guides: Yosemite Adventures Supplies, (209) 962-0923. Yosemite Fly Fishing Guide, (209) 985-1799 or (209) 985-1824, www.flyfishyosemite.com.



PHOTO BY DON VACHINI

Books/maps: *Yosemite Trout Fishing Guide* by Steve Beck; *Sierra Trout Guide* by Ralph Cutter. USGS 7.5-minute topo map links are available at www.nps.gov/yose/planyourvisit/trails.htm.