

Hilton Lakes Drainage

Don Vachini

As father time begins tracking me down, I have customized my penchant for fishing high-altitude drainages near and far into my personal “backcountry bucket list.” While still perusing topo maps for fishable destinations, I simply seek less arduous treks to trout.

Most recently, my meandering finger settled on a collection of lakes along the jagged Eastern escarpment of the Sierra Nevada Range, midway between Mammoth Lakes and Bishop. According to Jim Erdman, a Department of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) fisheries biologist with the Bishop office, the lesser-known and lightly-visited 10 Hilton Lakes range in dimensions from three-acre tarns to over 40 acres. Their still waters originate amid glacial cirques nestled in the shadows of Mt. Huntington (12,405') and Mt. Stanford (12,857') 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 stature as it passes through lakes from 11,300' down to 9,800'. 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.

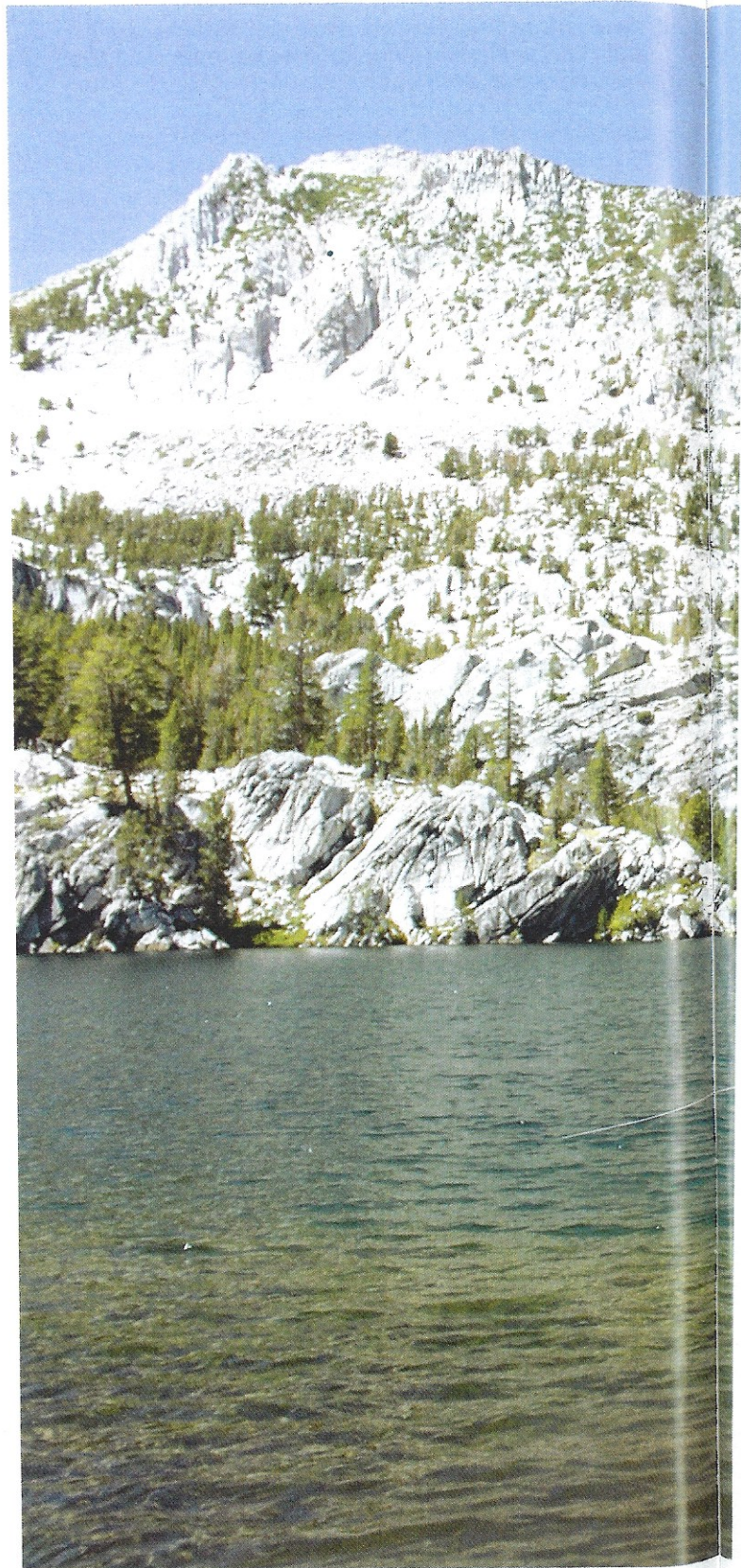
The drainage was collectively named after Richard Hilton, a former Michigan blacksmith who settled in nearby Round Valley. Here, he operated a milk farm, supplying butter to local mining companies from 1874 through 1900. Though historically vague, Erdman hints that it is quite likely some milk cans from Hilton's dairy assisted DFW 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.

Recently, I accompanied friend and local fly-fishing guru, Brandon Parker, on a day trip. A frequent Hilton's visitor, he served as my “unofficial guide.” We turned off Highway 395 at Tom's Place, drove 10 miles up canyon, passed Rock Creek Lake and arrived at the signed parking area 1/4 mile below the Rock Creek Pack Station. We commenced a six-mile trudge, traversing the dry, dusty trail as it steadily ascended the divide separating Rock Creek Canyon from the Hilton Creek drainage.

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 reached a fork. The left-branch signpost arrowed to a steep switchback ascent toward lakes #3-#10. Parker gestured toward the well-trodden, downhill route which led to the first two Hiltons and their big-fish appeal.

A Trout Trifecta

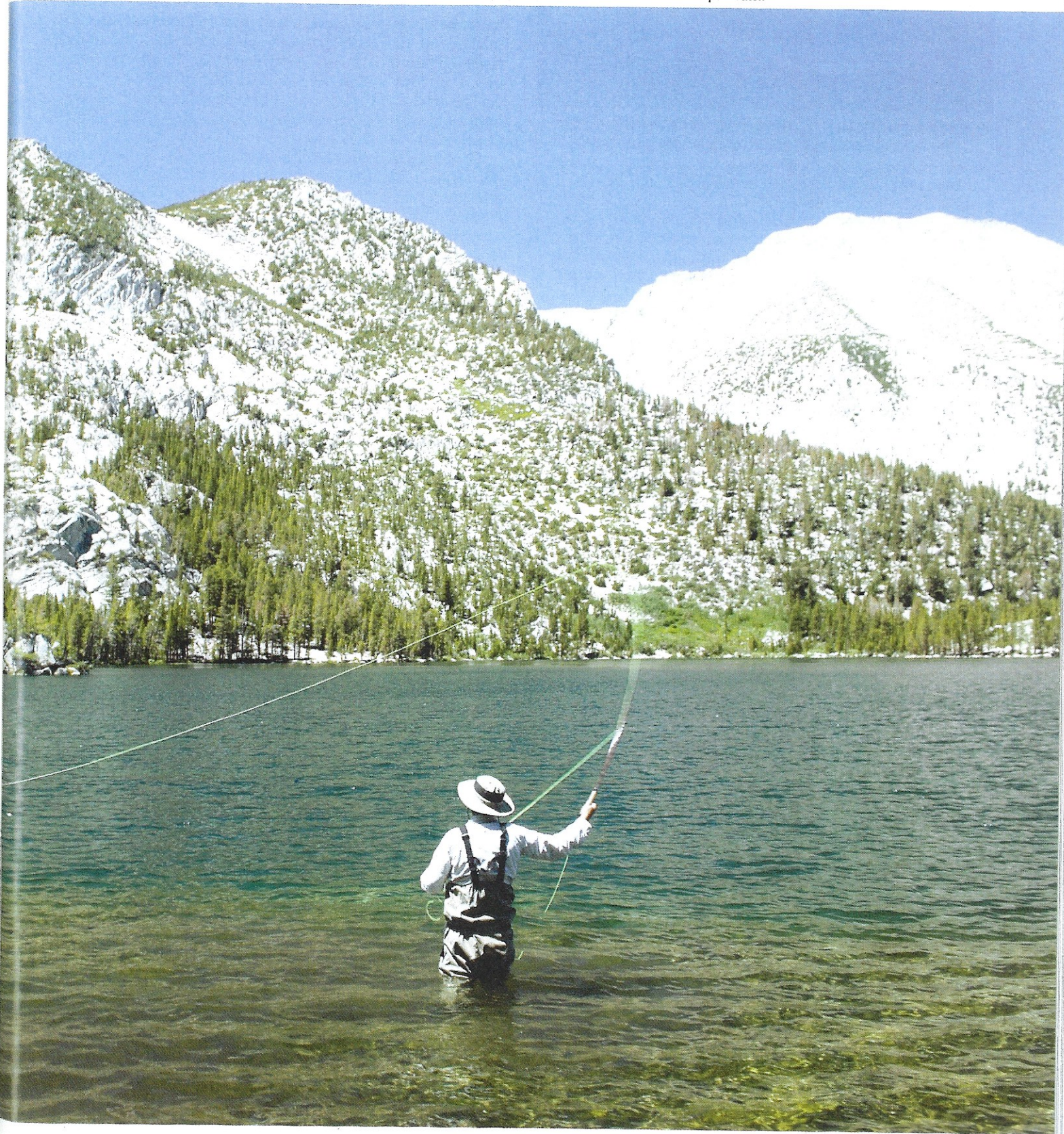
Both lakes #1 and #2 house impressive brook, browns and rainbows. Although higher elevation, backcountry trout usually don't grow big, Erdman confided that this lower duo, enshrouded under a protective canopy of conifers and hardwoods, is gifted by a surprising amount of terrestrial activity, a moderate forage base and adequate spawning (all species share the interconnecting Hilton Creek for recruitment). Indeed, his data revealed that this pair consistently produces 12- to 16-inch trout that run up to two pounds, with some well over five.

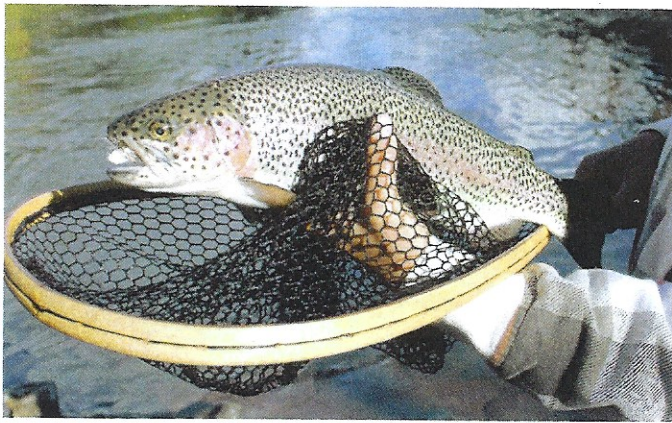


Bucket-List Trout in the John Muir Wilderness

C · A · L · I · F · O · R · N · I · A

Brandon Parker hooks up at Hilton #2, where one must wade to achieve deeper water.





Blessed with shading timber, good structure and abundant food sources, the residents at Hilton #1 and #2 grow to hefty proportions.

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'), we were forced to wade a brief distance to probe deeper water which harbors the larger, wilier specimens. However, active and healthy rainbows and brookies between six to nine inches aggressively attacked our offerings along its shallows.

A few hundred yards downstream, the lowest lake in the chain at 9,800', 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.

Although 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 utilize 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, Parker has witnessed them working co-operatively in two's and three's, cornering smaller fish in the shallows. On occasion, they aggressively thrash through the reedy growth to scare immature trout out into open water and devour the frenzied mouthfuls.

Working along a shallow weed bed, a frisky, five-inch rainbow became impaled on my fly. Reaching down to free it, I suddenly came eyeball to eyeball with about four pounds of *Salmo trutta*, which also had its sights on the frantic 'bow. Huge mouth agape, it haughtily rolled to one side and was gone in a split second. Still shaking, I felt as though I had stared into the soul of the beast!

While lengthy presentations need to reach the proper depth before retrieving, Parker also believes a key component is triangulating between transition zones, submerged points and weed lines. While fan casting allows coverage of likely structure, he prefers retrieving a pair of in-tandem flies three feet apart, which frequently piques a marauding brown's interest.

On these lower lakes, a float tube enables 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 over the edges of shoals, the outer reaches of the inlet channel and parallel to weed beds.

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, conehead Woolly Bugger, Mudler Minnow, Leech and other light-shaded, minnow-imitating streamers through the water column.

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. Here, 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

On a solo trip later in the year, I opted for the left-fork trail a half-mile above #2, zig-zagging up the thigh-burning staircase to arrive at 15-acre Lake #3, which was perched on a lightly-timbered bench at 10,125'. Positioned along the northern shoreline, I pitched and retrieved black-bodied nymphs through deeper water. This tactic 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' 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 eight 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, three- to five-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, rockbound punchbowls resting on the granitic lap of Mt. Huntington, only house *Oncorhynchus aquabonita*.

Despite their small acreage, these desolate waters above 11,000 feet are deep enough to prevent winter kill yet maintain thin but healthy densities. Rarely passing nine 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 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.

When residents become finicky, I prefer a 9-foot, 3- or 4-weight rod paired with a floating line, a nine- to 12-foot leader and 6X tippet to dredge the depths or locate them cruising along littoral zones. Productive top-water flies include size 14-16 Parachute Adams, Green Mosquito, Goddard Caddis and adult Damsel fly. Ranging from olive, tan, brown and black shades, subsurface patterns include size 16-20 bead-head 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 six- to nine-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 up close. 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 sizable lake-dwellers often establish residency here too.

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 which allows time to visit nearby waters yet return in time to savor a freeze-dried meal, enjoy the alpenglow and achieve a good night's rest. While rough campsites are available up to #4, semi-protected sites exist for the minimalist camper higher up in the drainage. Expect unpredictable daytime weather, cold nights and definitely plan for mosquitoes.

As the Hiltons segue a trio of stepladder benches along the harsh escarpment, they incorporate a diversity of landscapes, multiple species and tactics, definitely making them worthy of my bucket list inclusion. Indeed, for those willing to put in the necessary sweat equity, these rugged waters truly offer varied backcountry trout choices, ranging from Lilliputian to leviathan!

LET'S GO!

Season: Late May through late October, depending on snowpack.

Non-resident license: \$14.86/1 day, \$23.25/2 days, \$124.77/annual.

Resources: Inyo National Forest Service campsites, (760) 873-2400, www.fs.usda.gov/inyo.

Wilderness permits can be obtained from the White Mountain Ranger District in Bishop (760) 873-2500, www.fs.usda.gov/inyo.

Tom's Place (760) 935-4239, www.tomsplaceresort.com; **Rock Creek Lakes Resort** (760) 935-4311, www.rockcreeklake.com; **Crowley Lake RV Camp** (760) 935-4221, www.crowleylakerv.com, provide lodging, general stores and bountiful meals.

The Rock Creek Pack Station (760) 872-8331, www.rockcreekpackstation.com, accommodates individual requests ranging from packing angler's float tubes to full-blown ride-in and ride-out trips.

The TroutFitter (760) 924-3676, www.TheTroutFitter.com located in Mammoth Lakes, provides up-to-date angling advice.

Books, Maps, etc.: *Sierra Trout Guide* by Ralph Cutter; *Eastern Sierra Back Country Fishing Guide*, www.dfg.ca.gov/regions/6/; Mount Abbott USGS topographical quadrangle.

A freelance outdoor writer/photographer based in Petaluma, California, Don Vachini continues to spend plenty of time hiking the Sierra Nevada backcountry as long as trout are at the end of the trail.



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