

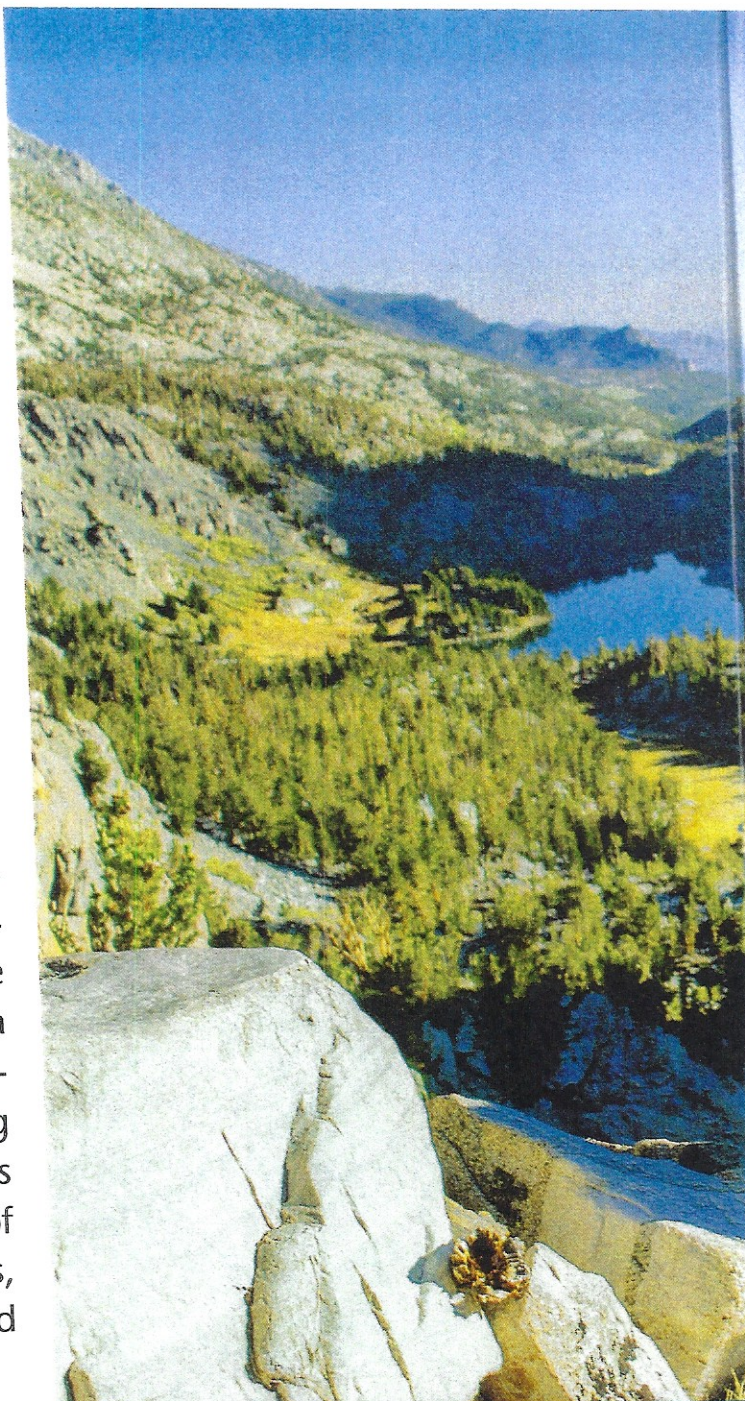
Little Lakes Valley, CA

Golden Trout, Golden Memories,
and Golden Years

By Don Vachini

Thigs burning and lungs searing, I crested the bench to a pair of shimmering lakes set like sapphire jewels in white granite and guarded by jagged sentinels. Brandon Parker and I looked ahead, scouting our route—a low saddle along a desolate moonscape scattered with rocks from bowling ball to Volkswagen size.

Roughly another 2 gut-busting miles stood between us and a secluded, off-the-radar lake reputedly holding trophy-size golden trout. While the distance to attain this trout nirvana wasn't a problem, treacherous topographical obstacles entailing physically demanding and precarious cross-country scrambles were going to be part of the price of admission. Slipping off our backpacks, we once again gazed up at the intended course, then at each other.





ALL PHOTOS BY DON VACHIN

Surrounded by timber, Little Lakes Valley offers a variety of easy-access trailside lakes, which are connected by Rock Creek. Demanding spur trails provide access to higher-elevation headwater lakes (above). Healthy, vibrant, and feisty golden trout up to 14 inches reside in the four Treasure Lakes. Both dry and subsurface offerings are effective here (left).

“What did we get ourselves into?” I wondered out loud.

However, before getting an answer, I noticed concentric circles on the nearest lake’s outlet—rising trout!

We had arrived at the Treasures, a quartet of lakes tucked above 11,200 feet elevation in the half-million-acre John Muir Wilderness between Mammoth Lakes and Bishop. Snowmelt from the flanks of surrounding peaks—13,704-foot Mount Abbot, 13,640-foot Mount Dade, and 13,713-foot Bear Creek Spire—gathers in these lakes and the three neighboring Gem Lakes to form the icy headwaters of Rock Creek. From here, escaping flows tumble down through the Little Lakes Valley, filtering

in and out of several tiny still waters before emptying into Rock Creek Lake. Below there, lower Rock Creek continues carving through a narrowing canyon another 18 miles to terminate in Pleasant Valley Reservoir in the Owens River Gorge.

Actually composed of three distinct sectors—the upper-tier feeder lakes, Little Lakes Valley, and lower Rock Creek—this popular eastern Sierra Nevada drainage is reached by driving 14 miles south of Mammoth Lakes on US Highway 395, then taking the Tom’s Place exit. Snow is usually removed by early June from the paved Rock Creek Road, which climbs for 9.5 miles to its termination

past Rock Creek Lake. The majority of visitors, by far, concentrate on the creek below the lake, where numerous Inyo National Forest campgrounds provide lodging, and where stocked rainbow trout provide sport.

The 10,300-foot Mosquito Flat trailhead/parking area serves as the gateway to the Little Lakes Valley and marks the highest point in the Sierra Nevada accessible to vehicles. Historically used as a trade passageway to westslope exchanges by Native Americans, the route is now a well-maintained trail serving day hikers, campers, backpackers, and horse packers.

The Valley Lakes

Fifteen natural lakes, ranging in size from 4 to 25 acres, make up the epicenter of Little Lakes Valley. While Mack, Marsh, Heart, Box, and Long Lakes sit alongside the trail,

at us through breaks in the forest cover as we skirted the lower quintet of still waters and their alternating meadows sprinkled with violet-colored lupine. Continuing uphill past Long Lake, we arrived at 25-acre Chickenfoot Lake (10,761 feet) with a mere 460-foot elevation gain over 3 miles. The biggest lake in the drainage, it is noted for producing slightly larger trout than the other lakes, so we were happy to make it our first stop.

Taking up a station where bouncy Gem Creek fans into the lake, I repeatedly aired out a high-riding Mr. Rapidian pattern over a ledge, where hues shifted from turquoise to deep cobalt. Squinting to keep my offering in sight, I twice noticed its trademark yellow posts suddenly disappear in swirls. Indeed, Chickenfoot's reputation was soon validated with the two biggest fish of the day, a sleek, 12-inch rainbow and slightly smaller, orange-bellied brook trout. A great start to our foray.

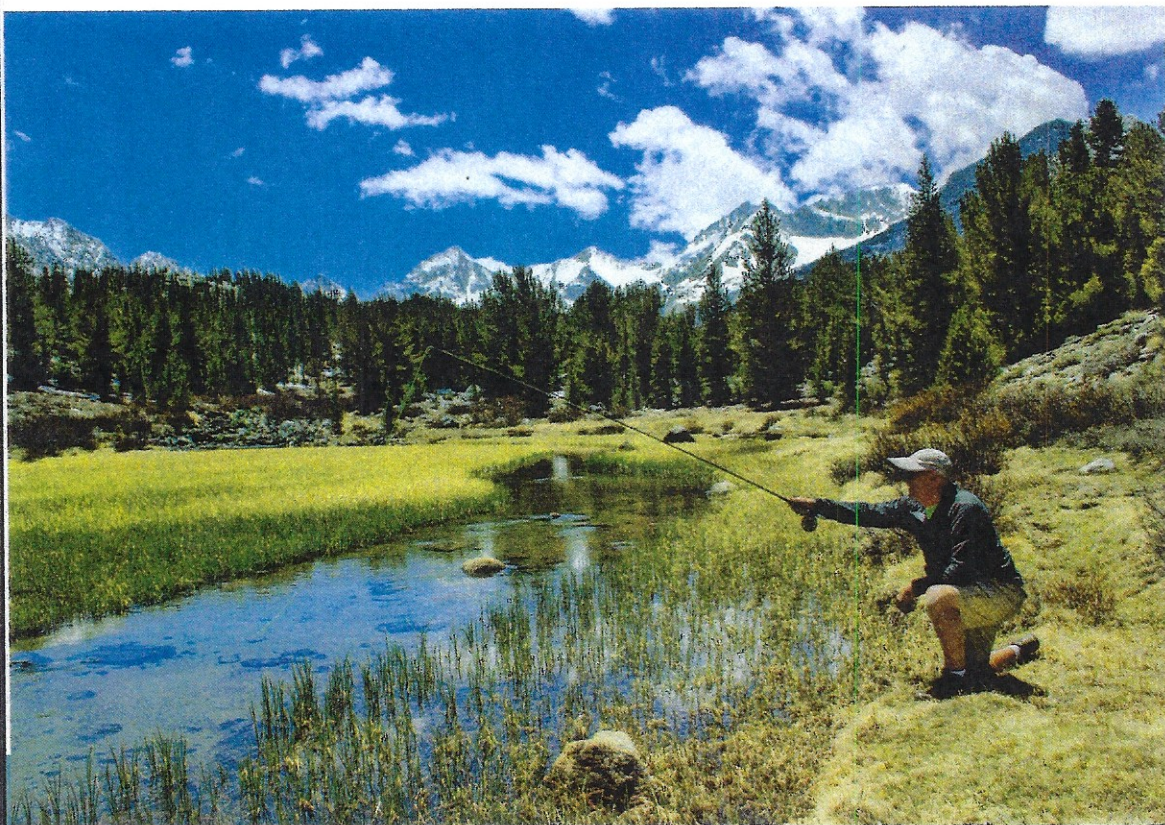
A great start to our foray.

During the remainder of our outing, we backtracked downhill, applying the mental notes gathered on the trailside still waters we'd skirted on the way up. Despite their small sizes, the lakes' inlet channels offer trout easy access to deeper sanctuary, while the perimeters are rimmed by protruding weed growth. Trout feed on caddisflies, mayflies, midges, and a variety of other aquatic foods, and reliable upslope breezes routinely waft a supplemental terrestrial training table into the lakes.

Beneficiaries of

cold water, cover, and ample productivity, all lakes—with the exception of barren Serene and Eastern Brook Lakes—are densely populated with self-sustaining brook trout. Most also have rainbows and even brown trout. Adapting well to their habitat, the solidly-built residents generally range from 7 to 10 inches with a few topping out near 12 inches.

During morning and evening—low light periods—fish feel comfortable foraging in the shallows, and they



Gathering muscle on its downward journey through Little Lakes Valley, Rock Creek switches between swift, steep flows and meandering meadow sections. Here, between Marsh and Heart Lakes, the author daps a fly on a slow stretch (above). Brookies thrive in Little Lakes Valley thanks to snowfed water, a forest canopy that provides cooling shade, and ample food. This resident fell for a Mr. Rapidian dry fly, a local favorite (right).

Chickenfoot, Big Fish, Little Fish, Lost, and Ruby Lakes, as well as the three Hidden Lakes, require short jaunts off the main path.

On a recent late-May day hike, Parker and I sampled a half-dozen of the more accessible waters. Leaving Mosquito Flat at first light, we crossed the wilderness boundary, then gently ascended the glacially-carved, U-shaped valley shielded under a mixed lodgepole and white pine canopy. Thirteen-thousand-foot peaks periodically peered

let down their guard as evidenced by the abundant rings left on the surface as they feed. But even during the day, we spotted fish cruising back and forth along lake edges and the margins of marshy bulrush stands. These shallows produce the highest density and variety of aquatic invertebrates. Although wading some of these areas is a bit tricky because of the silty bottom, the fishing is simple and straightforward. Dry flies work well, and basic patterns—Renegade, Elk Hair Caddis, Humpy, Mosquito—are suitable choices. Tiny nymphs probed parallel to underwater ledges are also frequently intercepted. When afternoon breezes disrupt lake surfaces, a Copper John, Flashback Pheasant Tail, or Zebra Midge dropper suspended under a Parachute Adams or Mr. Rapidian help persuade indecisive feeders.

On our May expedition, Parker and I confirmed that, like in most high lakes, solid numbers of fish were never too far from the moving-water inlets and outlets. While seeking a spot to eat lunch at 8-acre Heart Lake (10,500 feet), I happened upon eager squaretails daintily slashing at mayflies in the incoming riffles. Temporarily forgetting my own hunger pangs, I took advantage of theirs by hooking numerous fish on an emerger pattern.

Not all the finned denizens of Little Lakes Valley are diminutive. A small number of bruiser browns, from 2 to 5 pounds, lurk among the jutting ledges and sunken timber of spacious and deep Box Lake and Long Lake. Approaching a steeply sloping shoreline at Long Lake, Parker's eyes widened, and he wistfully told me about battling a hook-jawed leviathan from this exact spot almost a decade prior. After a tenacious scrap, he was finally able to ease the big brown to within reach, but one final, power-

ful flick of the tail and the fish broke Parker's tippet and disappeared into the dark, brooding depths.

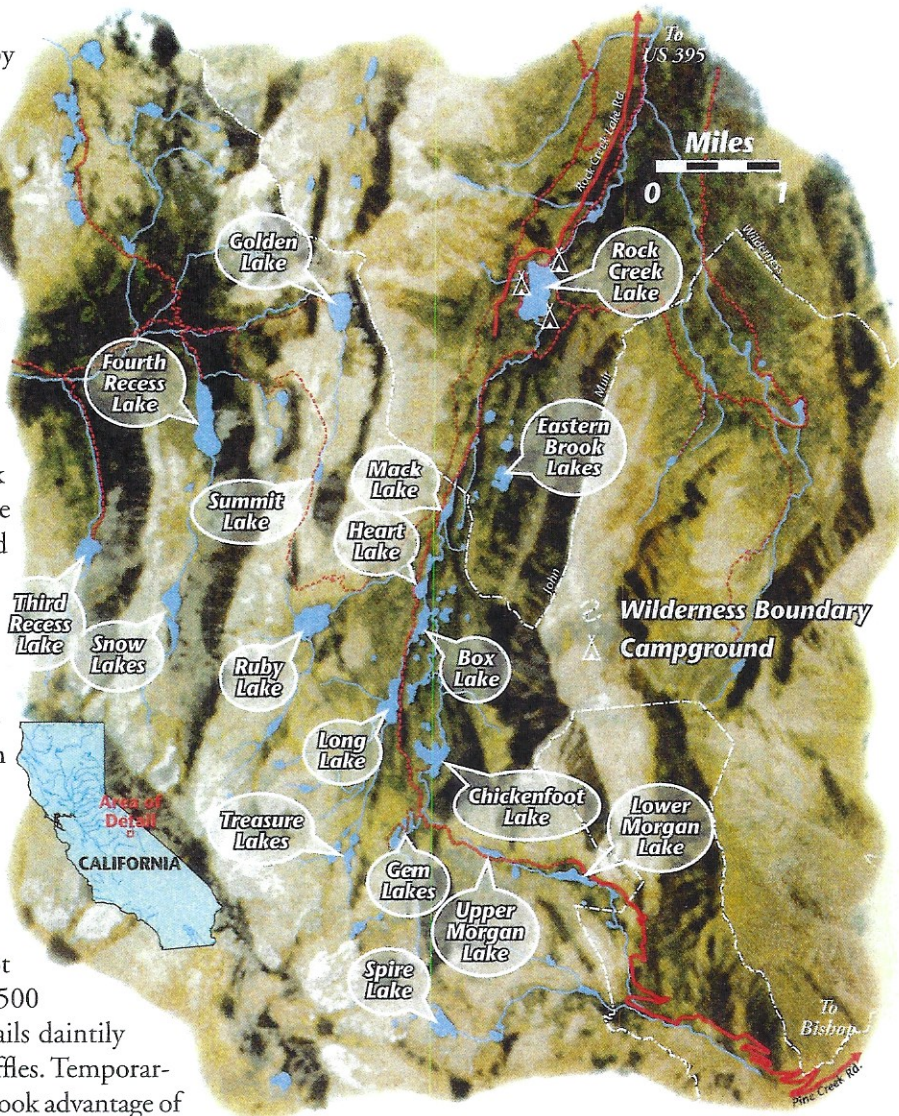
"It was easily over 4 pounds, maybe approaching 5," he told me.

Rarely observed during daylight, these massive fish generally feed after dark on other fish—namely smaller trout. In an effort to tempt them, Parker fishes streamers in tandem—Matukas or conehead Krystal Buggers—retrieving them erratically throughout the water column at dusk and thereafter.

"No tiny dry flies for these heavy marauders!" he exclaims.

Creek Strategies

Creating a pleasant mountain symphony as it enters and leaves the chain of five stepladder lakes, upper Rock Creek is the key ingredient to the Little Lakes fishery. Flowing through





The author's grandson, Domenico, keeps a low profile as he works a tumbling section of Rock Creek, with Mount Dade in the background. The creek's swift flows are a key ingredient for the Little Lakes Valley fishery, providing nutrients, oxygen, and spawning habitat for trout (above). Sitting above 11,200 feet, Treasure Lakes 1 and 2 contain both brook and golden trout, while Treasure Lakes 3 and 4 are home only to goldens. With Bear Creek Spire looming above, Brandon Parker studies Treasure Lake 1 from a sparsely timbered ridge below camp (right).

glacial moraines, it delivers food, nutrients, and oxygen, and provides abundant spawning habitat for lake-run fish. Rainbows and browns fin these waters, but as in the lakes, this is primarily brook trout country.

Gathering muscle as it moves downhill, Rock Creek's varying gradient creates a stream with myriad personalities. Throughout, anglers will do well by keeping low and casting gently with a 7.5-foot 3-weight rod matched with floating line and 6-foot leader. The gin-clear meadow sections—especially—demand stealth and finesse. Dap a dry fly, ever so carefully so as not to spook the fish by your approach, along undercut banks or edges of weeds for the creek's shy residents. Where the creek steepens and tumbles through timber stands, high-sticking short,

well-placed casts through deeper pools, swirling seams, and frothy pocket water helps you avoid overhanging, snag-happy branches in these tighter confines. Rises are often as fast paced as the current.

While ravens and Clark's nutcrackers raucously announce their presence, an occasional bald eagle will silently soar above. Coyote, deer, marmot, pika, cottontail rabbits, and black bears are among the species making a living in this biome, so between the scenery and the wild denizens afoot and aloft, expect plenty to compete with the trout for your attention.

Mid-May to early-June and September through mid-November are prime, off-season times to visit since summer months can get crowded. Always expect unpredictable weather and plan for mosquitoes.

Alpine Ore

For more than 40 years, the kaleidoscopic golden trout has mesmerized me, consistently drawing me to its lairs among ethereal air and crystalline water.

During the late-1980s, I zeroed in on a handful of stark, forlorn lakes, approaching 12,000 feet elevation; they held world-class specimens ranging from 1 to 3 pounds—huge for golden trout! Using sturdy legs to mountain-goat over seldom-trodden cols, notches, and couloirs connecting adjacent Pine Creek, French Canyon, and Bear Creek drainages, I was fortunate to fill four International Game Fish Association (IGFA) tippet class vacancies over three separate pilgrimages (all my global standards were between 1 and 2 pounds, and long since eclipsed by much larger fish caught in Wyoming).

Spire Lake was also on my original 1987 hit list as a potential big-fish producer. However, the vertical wall from my Granite Park base camp below Italy Pass offered only the most treacherous approach, so I placed that destination on the back burner.

Fast forward to 2009, when I received word that then 31-year-old Parker landed an IGFA line-class record from a nearby drainage. After making contact and congratulating him, we became bonded by our passion for this high-altitude trout, the willingness to climb challenging paths to reach them, and our combined records. Kindred spirits for the past six years, we've meticulously perused topo maps, compared notes on techniques, shared tactics, and entrusted the names and locations of specific "secret" golden trout waters to each other.

Above and Beyond

Seven secluded lakes approaching 11,000 feet elevation sit at the top of the drainage. Just below Morgan Pass, a sign points to the easily reached Gem Lakes and their interconnecting, namesake creek. All hold lots of ravenous *Salvelinus fontinalis*, which have a hard time passing up anything buggy.

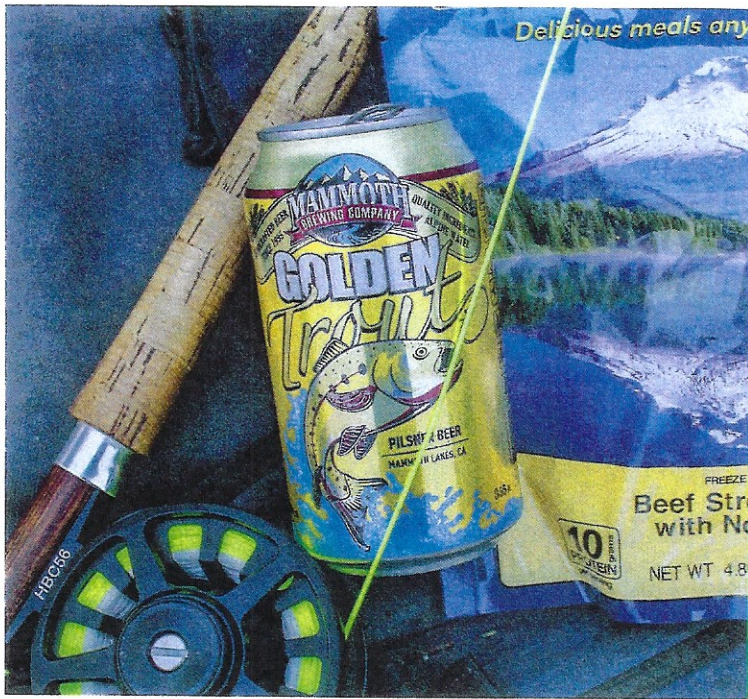
Separated from Gem Lakes by a towering headwall along the northeastern slope of Mount Dade, the isolated Treasure Lakes and their bejeweled golden trout were our targets for a visit later in the season. During a planning session, we realized that Spire Lake could possibly be reached from this quartet of lakes with a more concentrated effort. Turns out it was on Parker's radar too, and we excitedly circled it on the map.

Like forty-niners suffering from gold fever, when our early September expedition came, we eagerly strapped on backpacks and headed toward higher elevations. Unlike our predecessors,

however, we eschewed picks and shovels for fly rods, as our obsession was living gold. Moving methodically for nearly two hours, we headed off trail just past Long Lake, where the path became as faint as the thin air. A puzzle of basalt jumbles, choked with an entanglement of scrub willows, necessitated time-consuming decisions regarding safe footing and handholds. Our arrival at the first two Treasure Lakes left us duly fatigued from balancing heavy packs on the final, uphill pull.

A protected site between two large boulders and a clump of gnarled pines slightly above Lake 1 became our temporary home. In tandem, Lakes 3 and 4 sit in a small cirque about 25 feet higher in elevation (for purposes of quick identification, we labeled them T-1, T-2, T-3, and T-4). Our aggressive agenda called for us to base camp and ply these rockbound punchbowls, then devote the following day hiking to Spire Lake and back. The day after that would be spent relaxing before marching out on the fifth day.





Chilled in icy snowmelt, Mammoth Brewing Company's Golden Trout pilsner makes a fitting toast at the end of a day fishing for the California state fish. It also helps wash down freeze-dried meals, which restore calories burned in climbing into the golden trout's high-altitude domain.

Scrap the Plan

Weather is always a wild card in the Sierra. A day prior to our scheduled trip, we watched ebony clouds and their accompanying thunder, lightning, and rain lash at obscured peaks. By delaying our start two days, we were left with only one day to perform our intended Spire rendezvous quickly. Parker figured it would take us roughly four hours to navigate the maze of boulder fields and jumbled talus slopes once over the pass, then uphill over smooth granite slopes, then descending again just to reach the target lake.

"We'll have maybe two hours to fish before completing another four-hour hoof back to base camp," he said.

A forced march out the next day, without allowing for recovery, would be quite a rigorous undertaking for weary legs. Complicating matters, the recent hailstorms had left verglas (glaze ice) on the granite slabs and Parker's right meniscus began acting up on the trail. Factoring in the time frame and my creaky, 71-year-old knees, Spire would again be shelved for another day.

Relieved of our grueling burden, our focus shifted to mining the

treasures within the Treasures. According to Jim Erdman, a fisheries biologist with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, Bishop office, this chain contains self-sustaining golden trout, with T-1 and T-2 also holding brookies.

His information was accurate, and these lakes provided just the tonic we needed after the rugged climb. Exploring like kids in a candy shop, we placed dry flies next to visible rocks and other likely structure to bag both species. All the fish were vibrant, healthy specimens from 7 to 8 inches and extremely active. In fact, our presentations often found multiple fish seeking the same tidbit. On one particular occasion, I accidentally dropped a sunflower seed into T-1's slow-flowing outlet and as it fluttered beneath the surface, several inquisitive juvenile trout took turns nudging it.

A small, lightly timbered finger ridge separates the lower pair of lakes from above, creating an impassable trout barrier, which maintains the state fish, golden trout, as the sole inhabitants of T-3 and T-4. Fifteen-acre T-3's southern edge abuts a sheer granite wall and is inaccessible; along the lake's sloping north shore, we heard

snowmelt percolating under a massive rockslide. Although huge boulders garnished the shoreline and made access tricky in places, Parker would effortlessly bounce on top of them to gain better vantages. In some instances, he directed my casts toward fish I couldn't see.

A 4-weight fly rod with a floating line was perfect for flicking small Mosquito and Stimulator patterns to

small fish hugging near-shore structure. However, fishing sub-surface, with size 12 through 14 Hydropsyche Caddis, Hare's Ear Nymphs, sinking ants, and shiny beadhead offerings proved highly effective on T-3's more cautious fish, which cruised in predictable patterns beyond the littoral zone. No matter their size, I remained in awe of both their pugnacity and perfectly-blended palettes of vermilion and lemon yellow.

Every so often, I'd gaze up at foreboding Peppermint Pass, hoping for a simpler angle of approach to Spire. But none appeared.

Scouting 6-acre T-4 from 20 feet above, we saw a number of deep-dwelling shadowy torpedoes—12- to 16-inch trout hunkered down deep in this pothole-

Hydropsyche Caddis



PHOTO BY SOUTHWEST FLY FISHING

- Hook:** TMC 2488H, sizes 10–14
- Thread:** Black, size 8/0 UNI-Thread
- Tail:** White CDC
- Body:** Veniard adhesive lead foil; black and green dubbing
- Gills:** Ostrich herl
- Back:** Olive Body Stretch
- Rib:** Monoline
- Legs:** Six pheasant tail fibers
- Varnish:** Black Veniard's

type lake. Here, armed with 9-foot 5-weight rods, intermediate lines, and size 8 to 10, black/yellow conehead Woolly Buggers, we traded numbers for the admittedly low probability of enticing a few of these finicky granddaddies.

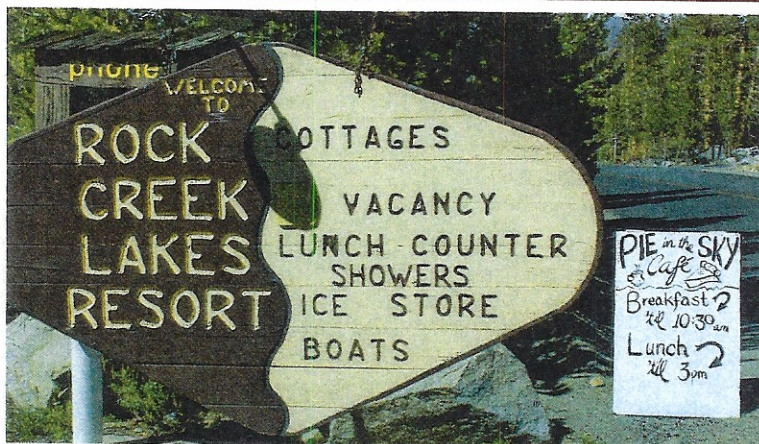
A pair of takers eventually responded to our streamers repeatedly dredged within inches of their faces. Although most of our myriad casts went unanswered, one agonizingly close call did serve to jump-start my heart rate. Late on our last afternoon, I managed to observe the biggest fish of the trip unexpectedly emerging from a shadowy outcropping and taking dead aim at my Bugger. Closing rapidly, it confidently exposed its white maw—then haughtily flared away at the last possible moment!

To get our golden fix on this two-day lay-over, we had taken full advantage of 14 hours of daylight to accumulate a sizable cache of 24-karat nuggets. Now, with fly rods stowed, a soothing cup of raspberry tea in hand, and alpenglow painting nearby Bear Creek Spire, I nostalgically recalled my prior excursions on this monolith's opposite flank: bold scrambles over snowfields and trailless routes to explore higher drainages near the clouds. Often these attempts were tempered by exhaustion and frustration with extreme exhilaration—and sometimes terror. Indeed, as Father Time begins tracking me down, I am forced to reassess some of my climbing capabilities. The golden trout's lofty domain is a harsh, unforgiving country, and I grudgingly admit that I should probably lean toward less arduous destinations. Or maybe not. Those golden trout are alluring to be sure and Little Lakes Valley is one of the easier alpine locations to reach them.

Gentle climbs, scenic lakes, and four trout species, including golden trout—yes, the Little Lakes Valley certainly fits into this less-demanding category. Whether it be a low-impact day hike for feisty wilderness brookies and 'bows, holding out hope for an elusive big brown, or a vertically challenging trek for the crown jewel of the trout family, this watershed continues to provide notable options from top to bottom.

And despite that cantankerous Father Time nipping at my heels, Spire Lake still remains circled on my map! ➡

Little Lakes Valley NOTEBOOK



When: June–October, depending on snowpack.

Where: Rock Creek drainage, above Mosquito Flat Trailhead.

Headquarters: Numerous Inyo National Forest campgrounds, (760) 873-2400 (Bishop), www.forestcamping.com/dow/pacificsw/inyoinfo.htm; Rock Creek Lakes Resort, (760) 935-4311, www.rockcreeklakesresort.com; Tom's Place, (760) 935-4239, www.tomsplaceresort.com; Crowley Lake RV Park, (760) 935-4221, www.crowleylakerv.com; Rock Creek Pack Station, (760) 872-8331, www.rockcreekpackstation.com. Wilderness permits available at the USFS offices in Mammoth Lakes, (760) 924-5500, and Bishop, (760) 873-2400, www.fs.fed.us/r5/inyo.

Access: A well-maintained trail offers some of the easiest walk-in access to the lower 3 miles of the valley. Reach Chickenfoot, Ruby, and the Gem Lakes via moderate ascents while more strenuous, off-trail efforts are required for Treasure Lakes.

Appropriate gear: 3- to 5-wt. rods, floating and sinking lines, 9- to 12-ft. leaders, 4X–6X tippets.

Useful fly patterns: Elk Hair Caddis, Parachute Adams, Green Mosquito, Trude, Sierra Bright Dot, Mr. Rapidian, BWO, Renegade, Madam X, Stimulator, E/C Caddis, BH Psycho Prince Nymph, BH Flashback Pheasant Tail, BH Caddis Nymph, red Copper John, Zebra Midge, Hydropsyche Caddis, Sparkle Caddis; ant, hopper, and beetle patterns; Matuka, Krystal Bugger.

Necessary accessories: Hiking or multiday backpacking gear, insect repellent, sunscreen, polarized sunglasses, wading shoes, wide-brimmed hat, water filtration system.

Nonresident license: \$14.86/1 day, \$23.25/2 days, \$124.77/annual.

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

Books/maps: *Eastern Sierra Back Country Fishing Guide* by California Department of Fish and Game, downloadable at www.wildlife.ca.gov/Regions/6; *Sierra Trout Guide* by Ralph Cutter. Mount Abbott USGS topographical quadrangle.