

# Around the Southwest

News, Views, and Piscatorial Pursuits



PHOTO BY DON VACHINI

## Shell/Fantail Lakes and Mine Creek, CA By Don Vachini

**D**uring 1882, the Great Sierra Mining Company descended on a promising site, triangulated between Mount Conness, Tioga Peak, and Mount Dana along the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada crest. Forming the tiny town of Bennettville, miners commenced digging deep into a nearby mountainside. However, when no silver deposits were found after two years of tunneling, the company shut down. Departing with dashed hopes, they left behind a ghost town—along with a little-known trio of lakes and interconnecting creek that hold bejeweled brook trout.

Centralized just outside the northeastern boundary of Yosemite National Park, Mine Creek emanates from 10,204-foot-high Spuller Lake and tumbles downslope for half a mile before flowing gently through both Fantail (elevation 9,900 feet) and Shell (9,850 feet) Lakes. Below here, it descends steeply for 0.75 mile and meets Tioga, Saddlebag, and Lee Vining Creeks in the meadow adjacent to California State Route 120. After coursing through Ellery Lake and cascading another 15 miles, Lee Vining Creek enters Mono Lake just outside the namesake town of Lee Vining.

On a July morning, I left the Inyo National Forest trailhead from the Tioga Junction Campground. A moderate 0.75-mile ascent brought me to a pair of stark, weather-beaten buildings (the former Bennettville site), and then the remaining 0.25-mile trail proved gentle and easy, first skirting 4-acre Shell, then entering the Hoover Wilderness at 9-acre Fantail farther up the valley. Spuller and Fantail Lakes, plus the creek between, are part of a sensitive ecological study area, officially



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designated the Harvey Monroe Hall Natural Area.

I saved the longer hike to Spuller for another day. Fantail and Shell sit amid a pair of tundra-like pocket meadows in a tiny, pine-forested valley and are teeming with self-sustaining, albeit stunted, brookies. Most range from 6 to 8 inches, but a few wary char can push double-digit lengths. They are sustained by caddisflies, mayflies, midges, and various terrestrials that make occasional appearances. In addition, the moist, swampy



surroundings act as mosquito factories, making both adult and nymph imitations highly effective.

During first and last light, concentric rings intersecting near shore mark abundant nearby targets; during high-sun periods, success often depends on lengthy casts to reach the deeper channel. However, the most consistent locales by far are the lakes' inlet and outlet areas. At Shell's deeply gouged inlet, I pinpointed a large concentration of brookies, then bounced a Green Midge through the school. Setting the hook and expecting another nimble 8-incher, my fly rod suddenly bowed into a deep arc. Quite possibly the leviathan of the lake, a robust 12-incher haughtily stared me down prior to its release.

Snaking through a lush meadow with solid flows, a moderate gradient, and abundant spawning habitat, Mine Creek offers a confidence-building refresher for small-stream techniques. Shielded by sparse willows, I employed downstream drifts along undercut banks where its truncated residents responded swiftly to my presentations.

A 9-foot 4-weight rod is ideal for both medium-distance casting and delicate dapping on moving water. Size 14 and 16 Elk Hair Caddis, Parachute Caddis, Flying Ant, and Green Mosquito patterns plus beadhead Prince Nymphs, Flashback Pheasant Tails, and Zebra Midges are my go-to flies on this drainage. Don't forget to carry drinking water and insect repellent.

From the town of Lee Vining along US Route 395, drive west for 11 miles on SR 120, turn onto Saddlebag Road, then immediately park at the campground's overflow lot. Numerous Forest Service camping options exist in the area and the Tioga Pass Resort, [www.tiogapassresort.com](http://www.tiogapassresort.com), offers cabin rentals along with fishing supplies, food, and information. (Note that 2017 record snowfall closed the resort; check its website for updates.) Day visitors will find an easy hike, a ghost town, and wilderness trout fishing—all within a scenic, short mile.



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