

Around the Southwest

News, Views, and Piscatorial Pursuits



PHOTO BY DON VACHINI

Upper and Lower Granite Lakes, CA By Don Vachini

Guarded by the imposing presence of 12,004-foot White Mountain, I watched a trout flash to my Elk Hair Caddis in the crystalline water. Indeed, I was duly impressed with both the fighting spirit and plumpness of this brilliantly attired, high-elevation brookie, as well as several others I encountered from a pair of glacier-carved lakes.

For this early-July day hike, I had chosen Upper (10,755 feet) and Lower (10,700 feet) Granite Lake, a pair of lightly-visited waters tucked in a slot canyon along the eastern fringes of Yosemite National Park. Somewhat euphoric, I was engulfed in solitude and surrounded by willing trout.

To reach this lofty destination, I departed from the trailhead parking lot located at the Tioga Pass entrance station at 9,945 feet, just off California State Route 120. With heart rate quickly increasing, I ascended steeply while following a lightly-forested ridge for over a mile to overlook the Gaylor Lakes Basin. After dropping down to Middle Gaylor's inlet, I left the trail and began another uphill pull, hiking cross-country for another half mile to reach my in-tandem target waters, nestled up against the western slope of the Sierra Nevada crest.

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Self-sustaining brook trout populations have managed to endure and thrive at the subalpine Granite Lakes despite no fish being stocked in the park since 1972. As I pleasantly found out, these lakes feature moderate densities of hardy specimens. Although most ranged from 8 to 12 inches, one 13-incher added a tad more excitement to the fray.

Sparse populations of caddisflies, mayflies, and midges inhabit these waters, and midafternoon, upslope gusts frequently deposit various winged insects from below onto the lakes' surface, contributing to a sufficient biomass. With scattered timber above their open, turf-lined shores, these lakes offer relatively unfettered casting.

Fish were often visible as they cruised in repetitive patterns along the littoral zone and I advantageously worked the ledges that dropped off to deeper water. Brookies also congregated around the inlet's and outlet's

moving waters, locales which likewise drew plenty of my attention. Kneeling alongside Lower Granite's funneled outlet, I repeatedly swung a yellow beadhead nymph past a stunted willow sweeper and fooled a trio of pugnacious residents before the school dismissed to safer haunts.

Although *Salvelinus fontinalis* are capable of reproducing in these lakes, the spillage creek not only provides ample spawning habitat but serves as a refugium for juveniles and allows fish movement between lakes. It continues trickling westward into and through Lower Gaylor Lake before eventually entering the Tuolumne River. Hungry, scaled-down inhabitants routinely rose to my dry offerings dapped along the stream's undercut banks and under streamside growth immediately below Lower Granite.

A selection of basic size 12 through 18 wet and dry patterns match the naturals sought by these wilderness trout. During calm periods, dry attractors such as an Elk Hair Caddis, Parachute Adams, or Purple Haze are easy to see on the water; when afternoon zephyrs ruffle the surface, black, brown, or green-hued Woolly Buggers get smacked around by the brookies. Although tiny beadhead Flashback Pheasant Tails, Zebra Midges, and Copper Johns are highly effective, black ant patterns and various terrestrial imitations often outproduce everything else. Two- to 4-weight rods are effective, and, ideally, you'll want both a floating and a sinking-tip line.

Upper and Lower Granite are perfect for combining an invigorating day hike, splendid scenery, and wilderness angling. Best times to visit range from July through October. Always be prepared for sudden weather changes and carry sunscreen, water, and bug repellent. Located in nearby Lee Vining, Beaver's Sporting Goods, (760) 647-6406, is a solid source of local information. For lodging and dining options, contact the Lee Vining Chamber of Commerce, www.leevining.com.




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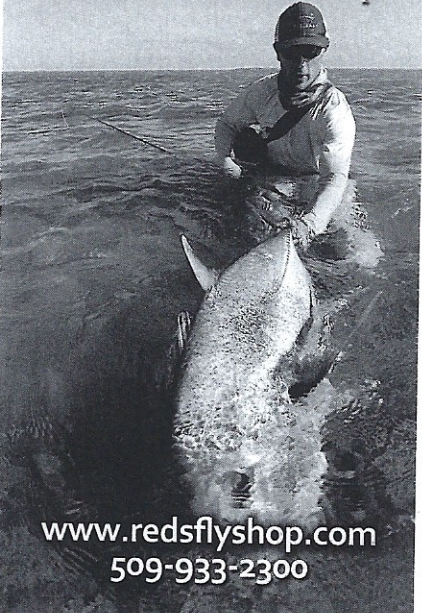
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