

California: Spearhead and Margaret Lakes/By Don Vachini

With early-morning chill caressing our faces and our heart rates elevated from the high-elevation exertion, Brandon Parker and I methodically ascended the steep trail toward Bishop Pass, gaining 1,000 feet in 2 miles. As we approached Spearhead and Margaret Lakes, a pair of tiny, high-altitude tarns nestled near 11,000 feet in the John Muir Wilderness, our anticipation grew with each step. Both lakes hold small brook trout, but we sought larger prizes.

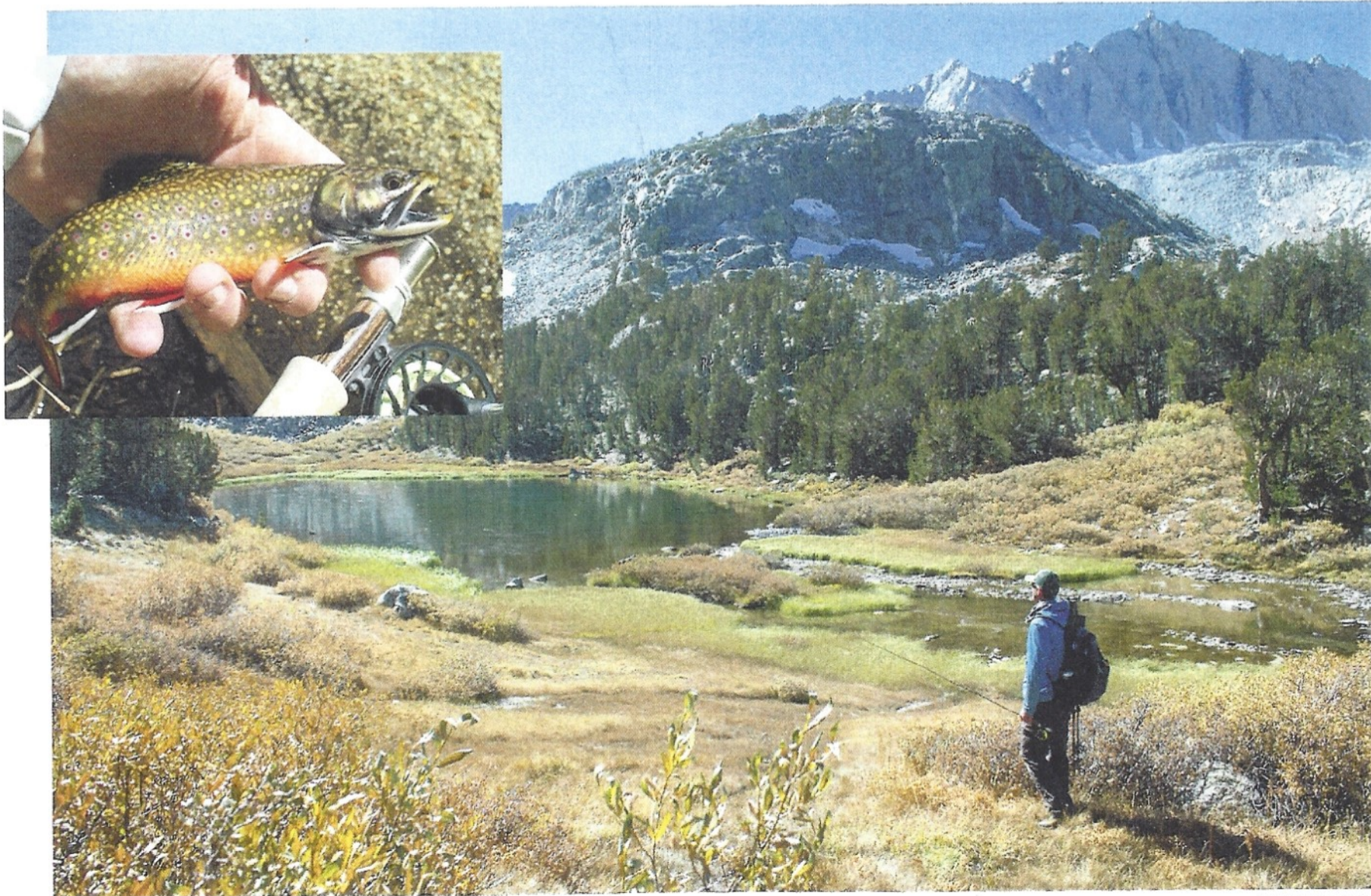
Along with 16 other lakes straddling the pathway over Bishop Pass, this duo forms part of the headwaters of South Fork Bishop Creek. Runoff captured in Margaret Lake and the Timberline Tarns trickles into Spearhead and from there filters into 29-acre Long

Lake before escaping downhill into South Lake. Below there, South Fork joins North and Middle Forks to form main Bishop Creek, which descends 18 miles down a canyon to enter the Owens River past the town of Bishop.

Encircled by sparse timber and fed by icy snowmelt from 12,237-foot Hurd Peak and 11,682-foot Chocolate Peak, Spearhead and Margaret Lakes support a variety of aquatic insects, and anabatic winds frequently deposit terrestrial insects on the water, providing forage for self-sustaining trout. The lakes differ in some respects. Spearhead, measuring 2.1 acres (and sitting at 10,780 feet), occupies a small meadow adjacent to the main trail; it is shallow, with open shorelines, and its modest population of 6- to 9-inch brookies finds ample spawn-

ing habitat in the inlet and outlet creeks. Tucked in a rocky bowl, 2.6-acre Margaret (10,940 feet) is surrounded by timber, reaches depths of over 40 feet, and has minimal spawning habitat that supports a sparser population of fish up to 12 inches.

During our mid-October trek, Parker and I continued past Long Lake, bypassed Spearhead, then scrambled off-trail along a faint path while negotiating talus and waist-high brush for nearly 200 yards to reach a lofty vantage point above Margaret. From there, we studied its steeply sloping shoreline, which drops off rapidly to ebony depths. Once lakeside, we pinpointed individual fish in deeper water, but the proximity of trees dictated challenging roll casts. We caught a few fish by working size 12 and 14 beadhead



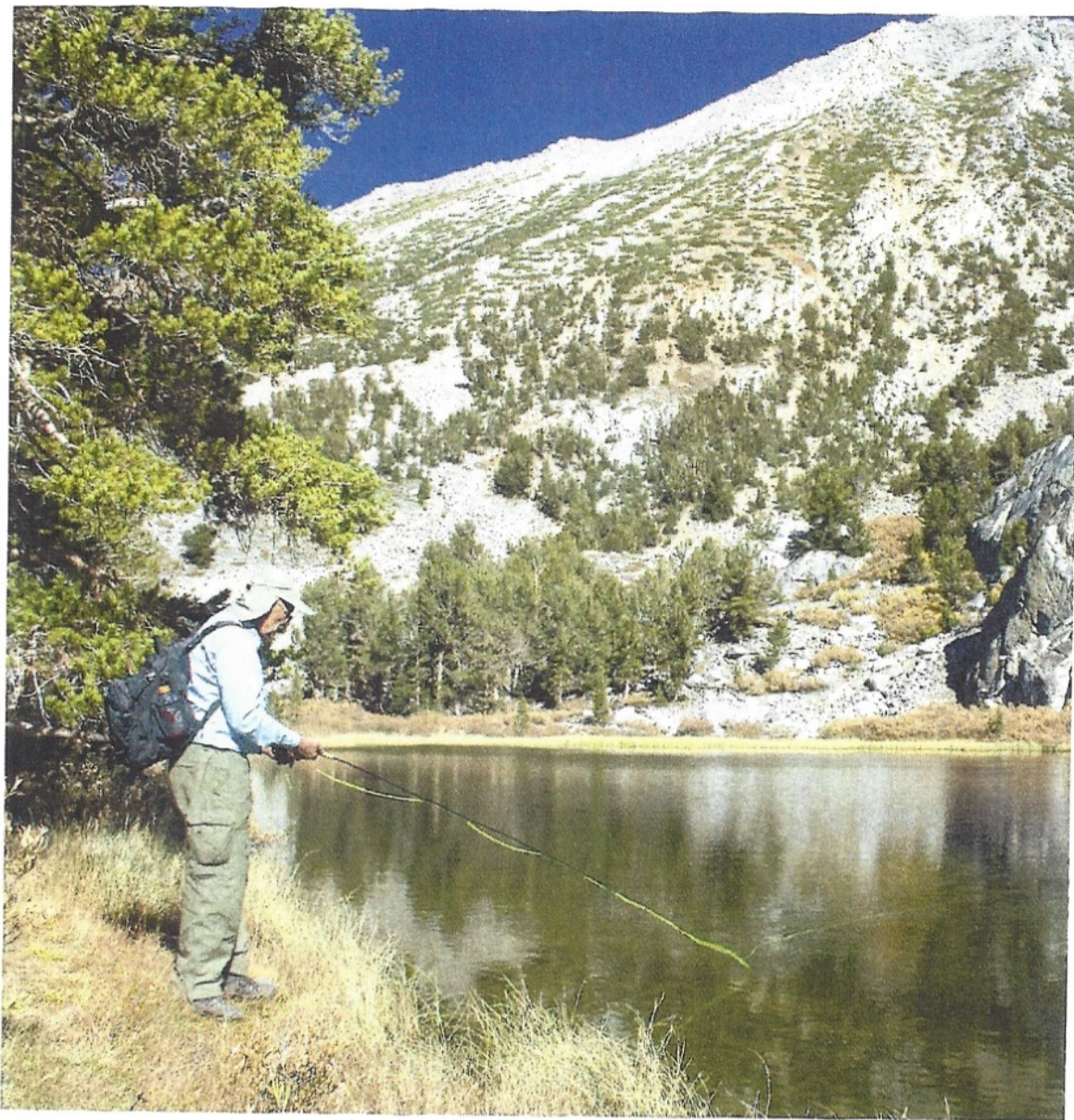
PHOTOS BY DON VACHINI

nymphs along the shallower shoreline margins, but slowly twitching green conehead Woolly Buggers over drop-offs in deeper water delivered several foot-long brookies.

Spearhead serves as a permanent abode for adult *Salvelinus fontinalis* and a refugium for juveniles. But much larger visitors also haunt the lake: reclusive brown trout residing in Long Lake ascend South Fork Bishop Creek to spawn during mid-to late October. A few continue upstream to Spearhead, temporarily mingling with, and dining on, some of its less-fortunate, bite-size inhabitants. These aggressive transients can reach 3 pounds—mighty impressive for high-elevation back-country waters.

We preferred not to target amorous browns cavorting throughout the narrow outlet creek, and instead focused on those within the lake, which was alive with orange-flanked squaretails repeatedly breaking the surface near the inlet and outlet. I must admit, the thought of a hook-jawed leviathan snatching one of my hooked char resonated in my mind with each cast. Distractions aside, the seemingly hyperactive browns responded swiftly to small dry flies—the highlight of our visit, and ample reward for tired legs and lungs. Energetic brook trout are reason enough for reaching these scenic tarns, but the chance at voracious, piscivorous browns is icing on the alpine cake.

To reach these lakes from US Highway 395 in Bishop, turn west onto West Line Street (State Route 168) and drive 15 miles to a left turn onto South Lake Road, which leads 6 miles to the Bishop Pass Trailhead parking lot. Spearhead Lake is 3 miles from the trailhead and about 0.25 mile past the south end of Long Lake; Margaret Lake is a little more than 0.25 mile west of Spearhead. The season is open from the last Saturday in April through November 15. Parchers Resort, (760) 873-4177, www.parchersresort.net, offers supplies, cabins, and reliable angling advice.



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