

## Around the West

News, Views, and Piscatorial Pursuits

**California: Granite Lake**/story and photos by Don Vachini



Previously stymied by rampant wildfires blocking backcountry access, I once again felt free. Now, with an uneven trail under my boots, ethereal pine-scented air filling my nostrils, an elevated heart rate, and a trout-filled lake as my destination, I was back. On a mid-July morning, Barb Crowley and I had chosen tiny Granite Lake for our day-hike adventure. Located in the central Sierra Nevada, within the 105,165-acre Mokelumne Wilderness near 9,846-foot Deadwood Peak, Granite Lake feeds its outlet waters to Upper Blue Lake, which forms the headwaters of the West Fork Carson River.

Perched at nearly 8,000 feet, Granite Lake offers an enticing duo for fly anglers: Lahontan cutthroat trout and golden trout. Part of a California Department of Fish and Wildlife management plan to reestablish Lahontan cutthroat in their native waters, the lake has been stocked with fingerlings of both species annually for over a decade. The fish typically range from 8 to 13 inches, with a few older denizens approaching 15 inches.

Arriving at the trailhead two hours later than we'd hoped, Crowley and

I began a gentle ascent on the maintained Grouse Lake Trail, crossing into the wilderness area after a mile. The remaining mile was steeper, and we reached our target near midday. Sitting amid sparse timber in a wide granitic bowl near the top of an open saddle, the 9-acre lake is partially enveloped by grassy meadow and subalpine turf.

The trout enjoy a menu that features caddisflies, Chironomids, mosquitoes, damselflies, and terrestrials, such as carpenter ants. Both trout species tend to hunker deep—the lake reaches a depth of 15 feet, providing ample cover, not to mention ideal water temperatures during high summer. The fish are also a bit reclusive, making them challenging for anglers. However, during prime early- and late-day feeding periods, cutthroat come to the surface, where they'll rise for size 10 and 12 dry flies. Liz Weirauch, owner of The Angler's Edge Fly Shop, (775) 781-7112, [www.theanglersedge.com](http://www.theanglersedge.com), in Gardnerville, Nevada, says, "Orange and brown-shaded Stimulators and Humpies are popular."

While Crowley cooled off after the hike by playfully plunging both hands

into a lingering snowfield, I rigged up at high noon, well between peak times. With no visible surface activity, I decided to walk the shoreline and flick a black, size 16 beadhead nymph into the shallows. On my first cast and retrieve, a bedazzling 7-inch golden trout darted from beneath an overhanging willow limb to smack my offering. Nothing else stirred until I approached a grassy undercut bank on the opposite end of the lake. Here, I duped another trout—its sparse black spots on a silvery torso and orange slash marks firmly identified it as a Lahontan cutthroat.

Switching to an intermediate sinking line as our departure time drew increasingly near, I decided to methodically fan-cast a size 10 conehead leech, laying out about 40 feet of line on each presentation and allowing the fly to sink for 15 to 20 seconds. My efforts were fruitless for more than 30 minutes, but I was glad I stuck with it when a heavy head-shaking finally signaled a hookup. Another cutthroat, 12 inches long, its reddish hue radiating from the ebony depths, materialized. However, in one desperate roll, it unbuttoned in the shallows before disappearing. Sadly, it was now time to depart, but my sampling of Granite Lake assures that I'll return—although next time I'll start hiking at dawn.

To reach the Grouse Lake Trailhead from US Highway 395 in Gardnerville, Nevada, go south and west on State Route 88 for 16 miles, then turn left onto paved Blue Lakes Road. After 11 miles, bear right onto the unpaved road to Upper Blue Lake and park at the trailhead. Granite Lake is open from the last Saturday in April through November 15, with summer and early autumn being prime. U.S. Forest Service campgrounds abound in the Blue Lakes area. Lodging and dining options are available in nearby Woodfords, Stateline, Markleeville, and Gardnerville.