



Bear Creek Drainage, CA Golden Trout and Lifetime Memories

By Don Vachini

My initial case of “gold fever” occurred during mid-July 1975, when I lifted my first golden trout from an emerald pool on Bear Creek. Glistening in the late afternoon sun, the 8-incher bedazzled me with its vivid arrays of lemon yellow, flaming orange, and vermilion. That fish fueled a longtime fascination with this gaudily hued species. In decades following, I made numerous ventures to this lengthy, alpine stream and its lofty headwater lakes. Not only did I proudly observe each of my four children catching their first golden trout, but those expeditions set in motion an amazing chain of familial flashbacks, including catching a world record golden trout.

Bear Creek originates among the vast glacial cirques and ice-carved spires of the Sierra Nevada crest 100 miles east of Fresno. Spillage from more than 30 lakes tucked high in the John Muir Wilderness backcountry creates the West, South, and East Forks, which converge just below idyllic Rose-Marie Meadow. Now a substantial west-slope stream, Bear Creek then stepladders briskly over a granitic bed, maneuvers through stands of Jeffrey and lodgepole pine and quaking aspen while descending from 10,300 feet to 7,300 feet elevation over a 15-mile course. Finally, at Bear Diversion Dam, small flows are portioned into the South Fork of the San Joaquin River, while most of the stream is piped to Huntington Lake for hydroelectric power generation, recreation, and drinking water.

According to data revealed by James Erdman, an environmental scientist for the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Bear Creek drainage was initially barren. In 1914, some 200 *Oncorhynchus aguabonita* were transplanted by pack train from Golden Trout Creek to the stream below Marie Lake. Finding the habitat suitable, these goldens thrived and spread

downstream into the main branch, and in 1928, their progeny were further transplanted to all the principle branches and main lakes. Self-sustaining populations were established in 35 headwater lakes ranging in size from 0.5 acre to 124 acres.

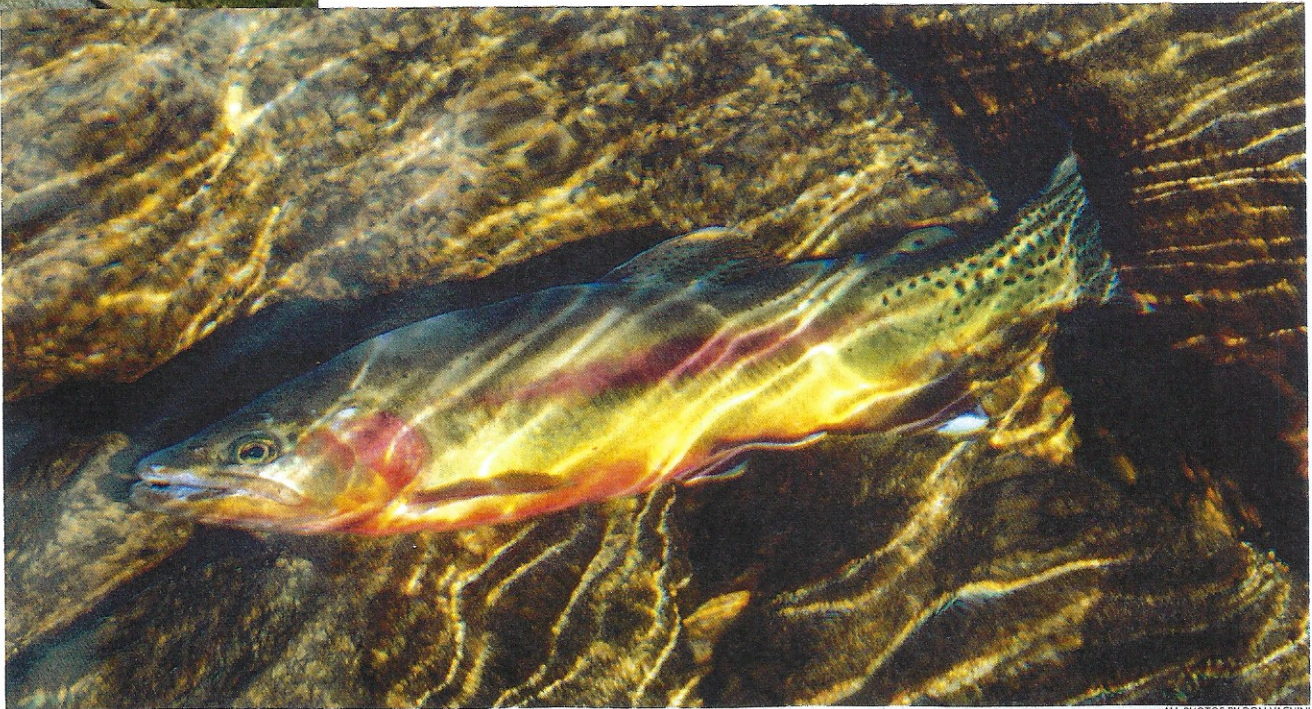
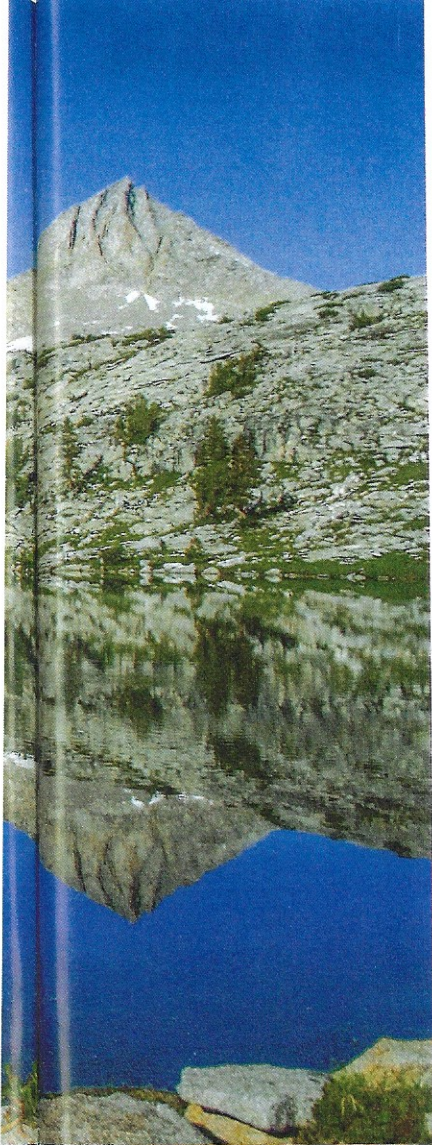
Today, the drainage remains a designated golden trout area. The South and East Forks are exclusively golden trout waters while the West Fork also contains brook trout. Thanks to adequate fish food and good spawning habitat, the upper drainage continues to be a bona fide, world-class golden trout fishery. Erdman hints that the higher lakes are lightly fished, allowing their residents to attain larger sizes.

The Return

In celebration of my 75th birthday, Brandon Parker planned to join me on a weeklong ascent into the Bear Creek drainage, where I would introduce him to three productive lakes with world-class potential. From the town of Prather, where we obtained our wilderness permit at the Sierra National Forest headquarters, we followed SR 168 for three hours, passing Shaver and Huntington Lakes before coursing over narrow and winding Kaiser Pass Road to arrive at Vermilion Valley Resort.

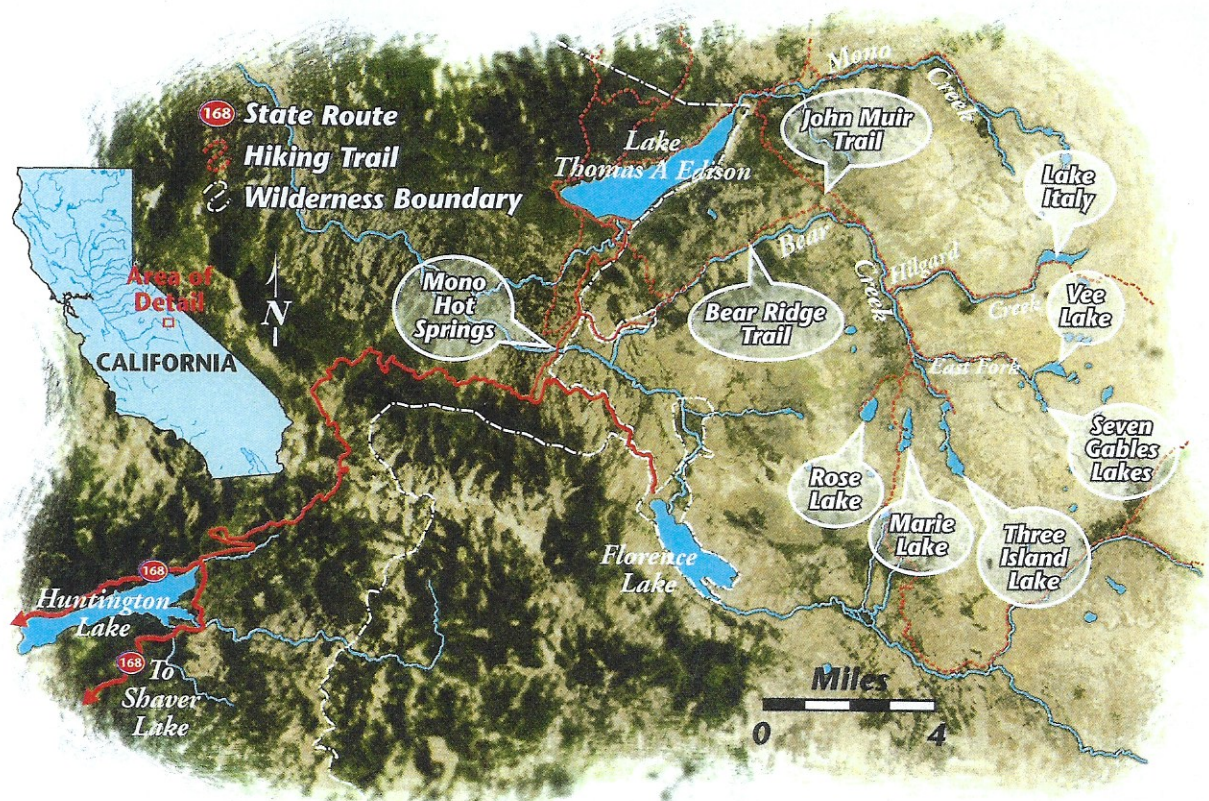
Owned and operated by Jim and Vicki Clements and operating under a use permit from the U.S. Forest Service, this rustic establishment along the shore of Thomas A. Edison Lake carries a well-founded reputation as a cozy and friendly place for backpackers, day-hikers, and campers. Offering a small, four-room motel, cabins, tent sites, a store/restaurant, and a water taxi service, it also provides various resupply and pickup services for through-hikers on the nearby Pacific Crest and John Muir Trails (JMT). Here, we enjoyed friendly conversations with other patrons, scrumptious steak dinners, and a relaxing night's sleep.

John and Jenise Cunningham, longtime operators of the High Sierra Pack Station, service the adjoining Mono and Bear Creek drainages from their base at Edison Lake. Since 1986, my family has used their reliable pack service to reach backcountry destinations. With warnings of heavy doses of mosquitoes in the forecast, gear packed, and horses assigned, we got an early start and our sturdy mounts huffed and puffed in the cool morning air as we ascended the steep Bear Ridge Trail. Vivid memories came to mind: in 1975, when, much younger and



ALL PHOTOS BY DON VACHINI

The Bear Creek drainage flows within the designated John Muir Wilderness Area, and myriad lakes and streams here support golden trout. A few remote lakes in the upper watershed contain surprisingly large specimens (above). Tucked just below Seldon Pass, Marie Lake offers both scenic vistas and impressive golden trout (left).



stronger, I labored under a loaded pack while traveling this demanding route on foot.

After crossing the John Muir Wilderness boundary and meeting the JMT on the ridge top, our sure-footed steeds negotiated numerous, hairy switchbacks while descending to the creek. Covering nearly 10 miles after four hours in the saddles, we reached the drop-off point at Hilgard Creek. Now bipedal, we hefted full packs another 1.5 miles and established base camp just above the confluence of the three Bear Creek forks. Dodging swarms of mini-vampires while tempting the willing creek residents next to camp, we anticipated exploring Vee, Three-Island, and Rose Lakes without the burden of heavy packs.

A Fleeting Acquaintance

My first look at Vee Lake (11,050 feet) occurred in August 1985, on the third day of an eight-day, 69-mile loop trip amid a trio of interconnecting, high-altitude drainages. After crossing Italy Pass, my hiking partner and I had gone off-trail, finally scrambling down between Big and Little Bear Lakes near nightfall. The following midmorning, an imposing, V-shaped body of water, set like a blue jewel in a field of white granite, appeared before me. The 55-acre lake was dwarfed by the massive, imposing 13,880-foot Seven Gables and 13,240-foot Feather Peak, rising above like oversize crowns. Their combined snowmelt sustains Vee, Black Bear, White Bear, Big Bear, Little Bear, Ursa, Bearpaw, and the 7 Seven Gables Lakes while also forming the East Fork, the longest of the Bear Creek tributaries.

Focused on attaining mileage goals and unable to fish Vee Lake, I did manage to make notes of its structural layout from above and how I would strategize to catch its reportedly outsize trout in the future. A pair of lengthy channels were lined with steep drop-offs and I figured I'd probe these prime areas with a streamer fished on a sinking line and vary my retrieve cadence; the funneled outlet looked perfect for twitching small nymphs to entice trout waiting there to intercept easy meals.

Finally, after 35-years, it appeared I would have my chance to fish Vee Lake—or so I thought. Slightly saddle-sore, we began





Brandon Parker works a flat section of the East Fork of Bear Creek below Vee Lake. Fed by snowmelt from 7 Gables and Feather Peaks, this fork provides steady action in stunning surroundings (above). This golden trout couldn't resist a California Red-Tailed Mosquito, a Sierra Nevada staple since the 1950s (left).

ascending the East Fork Trail. Dense marauding mosquitoes forced us to opt for long pants and long-sleeve shirts, conserving our insect repellent for hands, face, and necks. The terrain became more difficult to maneuver after a mile and soon the trail simply vanished, both from sight and Brandon's handheld GPS device. Scrambling up the canyon another 3 miles, we boulder-hopped, high-stepped knee-high riparian willows, and crossed the East Fork.

Twice we had to retrace our steps when sheer cliffs blocked our uphill approach. Showing signs of fatigue after nearly 4.5 hours, we arrived on the south side of Seven Gables Lake #1, sitting directly below Vee Lake. To reach the lake from here, we'd have to mountain-goat another 150-yard section of dense brush with no visible trail, then navigate over a potentially dangerous notch. We realized we had committed to a route on the wrong side of the East Fork. We managed, but the effort left us virtually drained, with no time to fish the expansive lake before returning to camp before dark.

It was gut-wrenching being so close to our intended destination, but, somewhat humbled, we chose the safer

option. Resting in shade, we ate lunch, then allotted 20 minutes to fish Gables #1. Its hyperactive, pan-size goldens cheered us up, providing needed solace, before we began the tedious return trek.

Overall, we had hiked a total of 8.6 miles. While welcoming the exhaustion, I was thankful for my diligent, daily cardiovascular/respiratory routines. Then, watching the alpenglow on Seven Gables Peak looming up canyon, we were lulled to sleep by the soothing murmur of nearby Bear Creek.

California Red-Tailed Mosquito



Hook:	TMC 100, sizes 16–18
Thread:	Black Danville Flymaster, size 6/0
Body:	Black Rayon floss
Rib:	White Rayon floss
Tail:	Red spade hackle fibers
Wing:	Grizzly saddle hackle tips
Hackle:	Grizzly hackle

A Familiar Friend

Rejuvenated after a good night's rest, we headed for 10,575-foot Three Island Lake. Another pair of monolithic peaks feed runoff to this rockbound, 77-acre tarn. Three Island Lake then births the South Fork of Bear Creek, which cascades down into Medley Lake, then courses through Sandpiper and Lou Beverly Lakes.

On a 1993 trip, my son, Jason, and I base-camped at wooded Lou Beverly. Setting out before dawn, we climbed steeply to bypass Sandpiper, skirted Medley, then



ascended frozen snowfields to reach Three Island around 8:30 a.m. It was completely iced over except for about 50 feet of exposed outlet.

Hidden, prone, and 15 feet above the open water, we were mesmerized at the sight of nearly a dozen large goldens shimmering like hot embers in the current. We took turns flipping a weighted nymph onto the ice sheet, then gently tugged it off the edge, allowing it to sink in the moving flows. Working as a team, we each netted impressive, lookalike, 17-inchers for one another other before the school of bedazzling fish retreated under the ice.

On our recent trip, Brandon and I again hiked the South Fork Trail, proceeding cross country across glacier-polished granite to our ice-free target water. Again positioned above its outlet, we were pleased to see that the moving water concentrated various-size goldens, a few of which appeared to be comparable to those beauties we had caught back in 1993, making for heart-pounding tension. Brandon meticulously probed with a tiny Copper John nymph where the current brushed it against a rock face. Multiple fish darted to assail the offering, but he hooked, battled, then long-line released a bronze-hued 16-

inch beauty. While producing an adrenaline-inducing highlight, it also scattered the remaining school back into the depths.

As in previous years, action in the pool immediately below the lake was torrid. Here, I was rewarded with a vigorous splash and grab, followed by a brilliant foot-long gilded arrow, which set the crystalline water afire in color.

Our round-trip totaled 12.2 miles and took 10 hours to complete. Though dog tired, we were totally satisfied with the fact that on this day, we had succeeded in fishing the lake we had set out for.

Bear Creek

The JMT tightly parallels the main creek for 5 miles below our camp. Donning light daypacks, we hiked 3 miles downstream, intending to leisurely recharge our batteries on this inviting creek which constantly beckoned us to wet a line. Granitic slicks, cascades and falls, swirling eddies, inviting seams, broad pools, an occasional logjam, and churning pocket water demanded constant attention to myriad currents to drift flies effectively. Ample spawning habitat and abundant insects support lots of 7- to 9-inch goldens in the creek. Mirroring my previous experiences here, the fish proved to be opportunistic feeders while attesting to their "pretty in the water" binomial nomenclature.

Not surprising given the unending density of mosquitoes, a high-floating California Red-Tailed Mosquito, teased along the edges of swift water, reigned as the most popular entrée on





The author admires a finned jewel taken from Rose Creek, which held plenty of willing takers (above). John and Jenise Cunningham operate the High Sierra Pack Station, which serves wilderness adventurers in the Mono and Bear Creek drainages (top left). Gaining an advantageous casting position by balancing on a log, Brandon Parker works a drop-off on Rose Lake. Golden trout frequently cruise along the edges where the lake bottom steepens (bottom left). Several remote headwater lakes in the Bear Creek drainage provide anglers with a chance at trophy-size golden trout, but to reach these places, you'll need to eat up some boot leather hiking off-trail (below).

this trip. Other winners were the Parachute Adams, Madam X, and Elk Hair Caddis; for subsurface fishing, the fish were keen on a beadhead Prince Nymph, Copper John, and Bird's Nest in black, brown, and orange renditions.

Further fostering nostalgia, seemingly every bend evoked cherished recollections of my children's squeals and shouts of euphoria as they landed living shafts of light. One particularly familiar section coursed over a series of small stepladder falls, where in 1979, sons, Chris, Matt, and Jason (aged 9 through 12) were stationed on streamside rocks, one above the other. Each displayed Cheshire grins, framed in freckles, as they looked at me for validation while proudly displaying their bejeweled catches. A priceless moment forever etched in my memory banks.

Then, back in the here and now, I noticed Brandon, too, was grinning as he slid yet another golden nugget back into the same stretch of water.

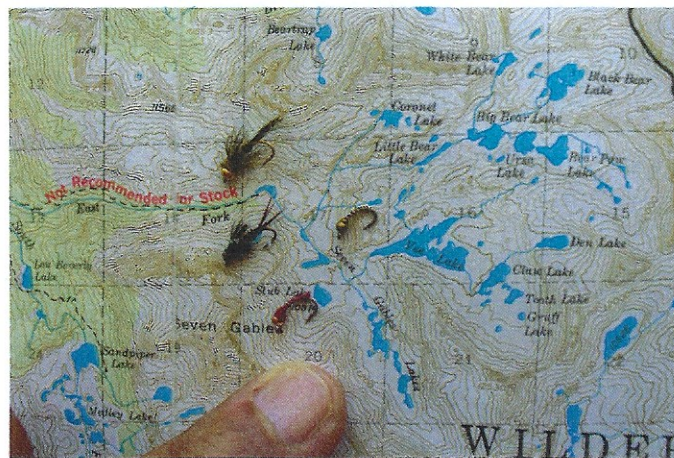
A Rose Garden

A short, 1.5-hour hike from camp brought us up the southern-facing shoul-

der of 12,149-foot Mount Rose, another of the drainage's influential peaks. The steep, thigh-burning climb over the last half mile increased heart rates as we crested the bench. A tiny ribbon of blue twisted through a lush, green meadow and stunning 82-acre Rose Lake was framed by 12,349-foot Mount Hooper's serrated sentinels. A pair of wakes leaving the outlet let me know I'd spooked a couple of large goldens back into the depths of the lake, confirming that its reputation for housing large specimens was still legit.

Snowmelt found its way downslope through a blanket of thick forest, gouging out the main incoming channel, which

congregated 11- to 12-inch goldens—trophies at these elevations. Most of the lake's shoreline was rimmed by steeply-inclined turf and we had to avoid overhanging tree limbs and brush. This noticeable blanket of timber fostered terrestrial insects; fortuitous (for the trout, not the bugs) afternoon gusts added them to the buffet available to the goldens in the lake.

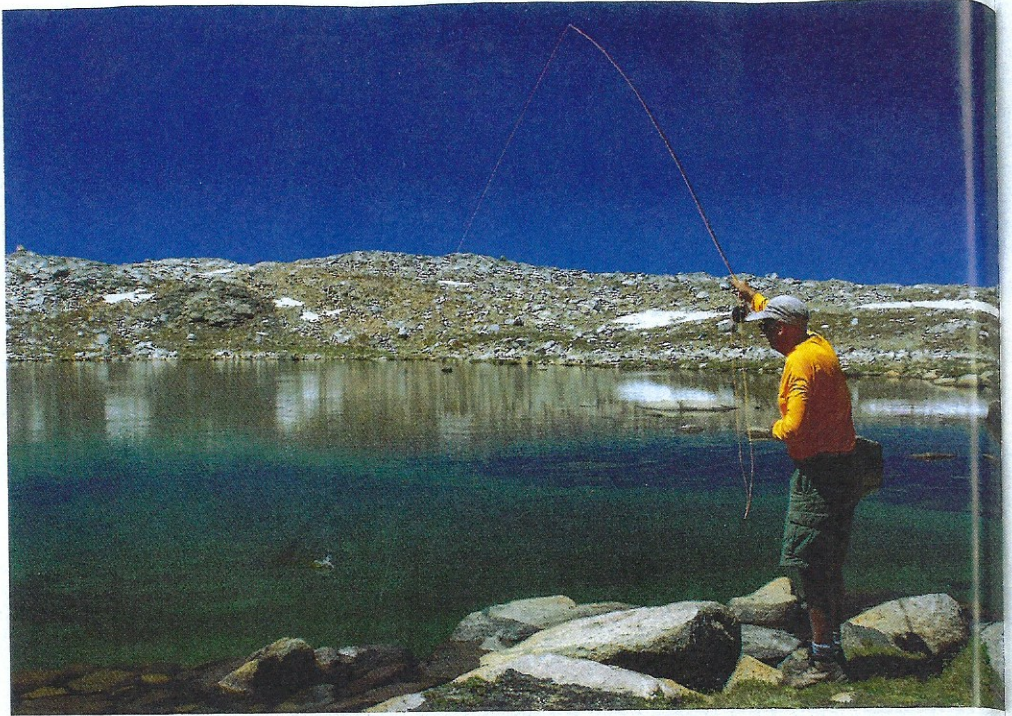


Plenty of fish were visible cruising within 15 feet of shore and often we could see two or more trout racing for the extremely popular California Red-Tailed Mosquito/Copper John tandems we employed. Twice our rods bowed deeply under the weight of what turned out to be double hookups.

Along one submerged rock shelf, a much larger fish, which we estimated at well over a pound, caught our attention as it leisurely finned parallel to the ledge. While Brandon broke out his 5-weight and intermediate line, hoping to dupe the lake's outsize denizens with a conehead Woolly Bugger, I gravitated to the open, meadow section of Rose Creek. Here, surrounded by the grandeur of stark peaks and spires and with the alpine stream providing energetic, iridescent gems, I was totally immersed in the aura of this remarkable setting.

Notable Remembrances

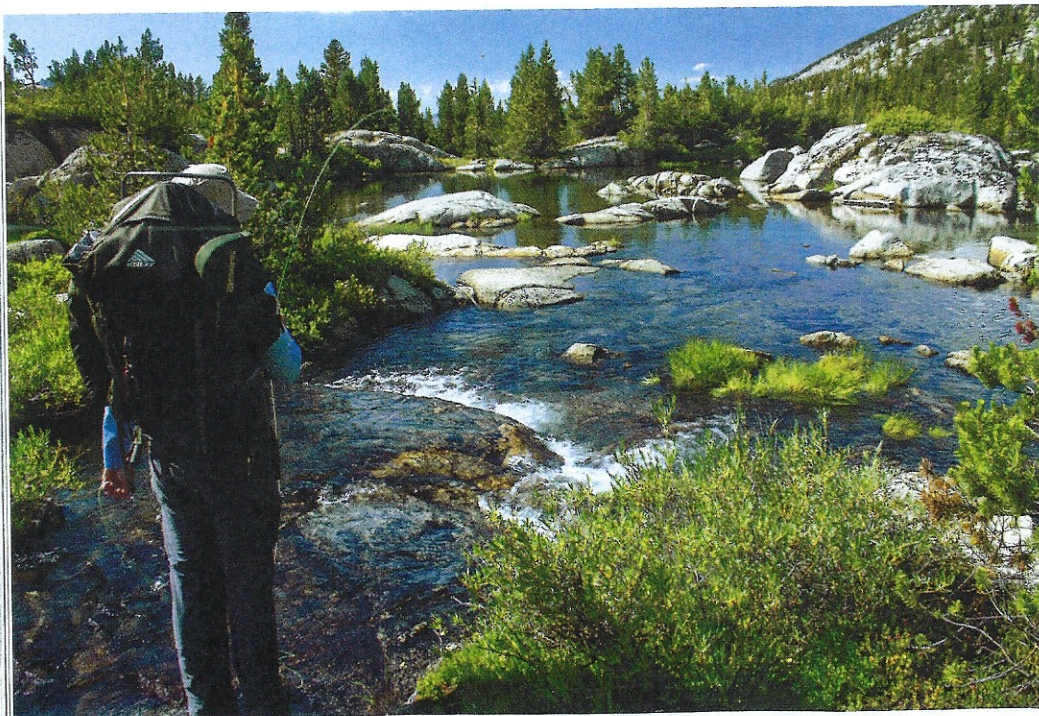
Perusing International Game Fish Association (IGFA) and National Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame (HOF) world record books during the early 1980s revealed many line- and tippet-class golden trout vacancies. Indeed, Jason (now 15), Matt (now 17), and I caught the bug for world records, providing a truly exhilarating time in our angling adventures.



Self-sustaining golden trout populations exist in 35 headwater lakes that range in size from half an acre to 124 acres. Fly-fishing action is typically steady, and scenery is unbeatable (above). A feisty pan-size trout from Bear Creek's South Fork below Sandpiper Lake puts a nice bend in Brandon Parker's fly rod. At these elevations, the trout are seldom finicky about fly patterns, but they can certainly be spooky (below).

Fisheries biologists recommended a dozen or so crag-framed lakes within the interconnecting French Canyon, Humphreys Basin, and Bear Creek drainages reputed to hold sizable specimens, and we set our sights on them. With trophy goldens most vulnerable during ice-out, our strategies in this ice-carved battlefield involved meticulous climbs over jumbled talus, boulders and snowfields, plus crawling stalks and short, close-quarter casts from sitting or prone positions. Of course, we toted numerous lines and tippets, application forms, camera gear, plus a hand-held, certified scale (Chatillon Model IN-12). In solid aerobic shape, we relied heavily on mental dedication, physical stamina, timing, a bit of skill tempered with humility—and plenty of luck.

Gratifyingly, between 1987 and 1997, a total of 16 global standards were recorded by the Vachini trio. While nine came from neighboring French Canyon and Humphreys Basin still waters, Bear Creek drainage's Big Bear, Brown Bear, and Marie Lakes combined for seven.



After ridge hopping from our base camp in adjacent Granite Park during 1989, I observed Jason stealthily approach Big Bear's hot tub-size inlet from a high vantage. Flat on his belly, he accurately dapped a nymph in front of a lone inhabitant, then cut a wide smile after he deftly netted the thrashing bruiser for his initial record.

Located just below Selden Pass at 10,595 feet, Marie Lake is known to hold large goldens and we visited it in 1990. From behind a gnarled pine, I witnessed Matt, tucked behind a boulder along the 92-acre lake's snow-lined outlet channel, peering intently at several dorsal fins breaking the nearby surface. Daintily flicking a tiny, red Glo Bug, he tempted the nearest girthy *bonita* to inhale the fly. The gorgeous fish created a kaleidoscopic spectrum before being netted, accounting for a big grin—and Matt's first record book entry.

During an epic, 1994 visit, Matt and I camped above Brown Bear Lake at 10,960 feet. The lake is tucked in a desolate, bowl-shaped cirque just off the Italy Pass Trail. Here, working a stretch of boulder-studded shoreline where a shelf dropped off sharply to ebony depths, we claimed three impressive records over a magical, two-day period.

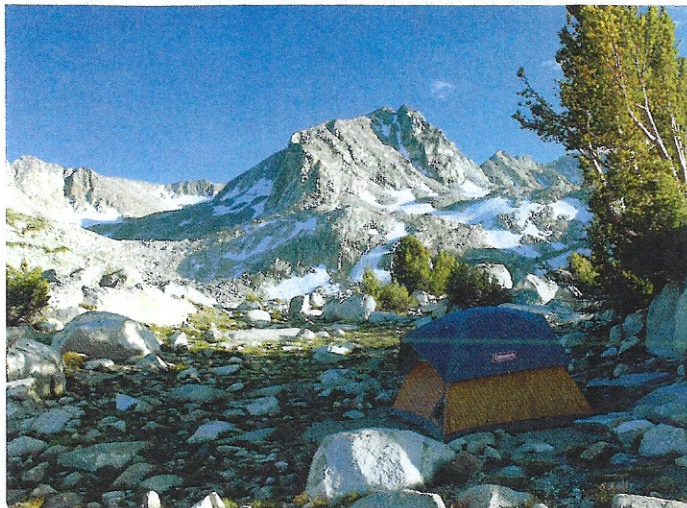
Teaming with my sons as they morphed from preteens to adolescents produced a heightened level of satisfaction during our challenging quests for angling notoriety. When admiring a potential record, boyish grins still creased their faces, but were now accompanied by high fives and hugs. All our record fish were between 1 and 2 pounds and filled former vacancies in both world record organizations. While all of our IGFA and most of our HOF marks have long since been surpassed, the pride in our combined achievements from this sky-high realm, where the golden's presence pervades everything, will always remain.

On our last night at camp, we hoisted dual toasts: one, a farewell to the Bear Creek backcountry, with an assertive vow to return again; the second, to our world record connection (Brandon celebrated the 10-year anniversary of his 6-pound, IGFA line class record golden trout, caught in a nearby drainage).

Long synonymous with high-spirited golden trout, the vast Bear Creek Drainage offers modern day prospectors myriad opportunities to strike it rich on specimens ranging from pan size to world class. Personally, I am ever thankful for the sweat-equity challenges of this Edenic venue mingled with the cherished memories of family and friendships shared during a 44-year relationship. Future hopes are that golden memories will continue to amass during my golden years. 🐟

California writer and photographer Don Vachini is a frequent contributor to Southwest Fly Fishing magazine.

Bear Creek Drainage NOTEBOOK



When: Depending on previous winter's snowpack, late-June–September.

Where: John Muir Wilderness between Fresno and Bishop.

Access: Moderate but lengthy hike to drainage from Edison Trailhead. Pack horse services available.

Headquarters: Vermilion Valley Resort and Campground, (559) 259-4000, www.edisonlake.com; High Sierra Pack Station, (559) 285-7225 (summer), (559) 299-8297 (winter), www.highsierrapackstations.com; Mono Hot Springs Resort, (559) 325-1710, www.monohotsprings.com. *Wilderness permits:* \$5 per person; available at the U.S. Forest Service office in Prather, (559) 855-5355, www.fs.usda.gov/detail/sierra/about-forest/offices.

Appropriate gear: 3- to 4-wt. rods for creeks; 5-wt. rods for lakes; floating and sinking lines; 5X-6X tippetts.

Useful fly patterns: Parachute Adams, Renegade, Madam X, Stimulator, E/C Caddis, Green Mosquito, California Red-Tailed Mosquito, beadhead Prince, Flashback Pheasant Tail, Copper John, Zebra Midge, conehead Leech, Woolly Bugger, Zonker, Matuka streamers.

Necessary accessories: Propane stove, bear-proof canister, hiking boots, tent with rain fly, clothing for a wide range of temperatures, light rain suit, wide-brimmed hat, sunscreen, polarized sunglasses, trekking sticks, face net, bug repellent.

Nonresident license: \$48.34/10 days; \$130.42/annual.

Fly shops/guides: *Shaver Lake:* Shaver Lake Sports Inc., (559) 841-2740, www.shaverlakesports.com. *Fresno:* Turner's Outdoorsman, (559) 435-8600, www.turners.com.

Books/maps: *Starr's Guide to the John Muir Trail* by Walter A. Starr; *The High Sierra: Peaks, Passes and Trails* by R. J. Secor. USFS maps of Inyo National Forest and John Muir Wilderness.