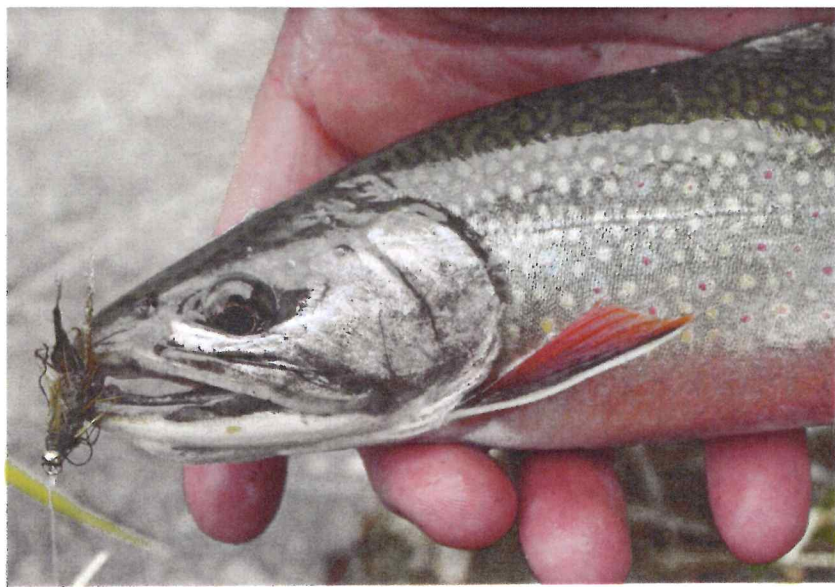
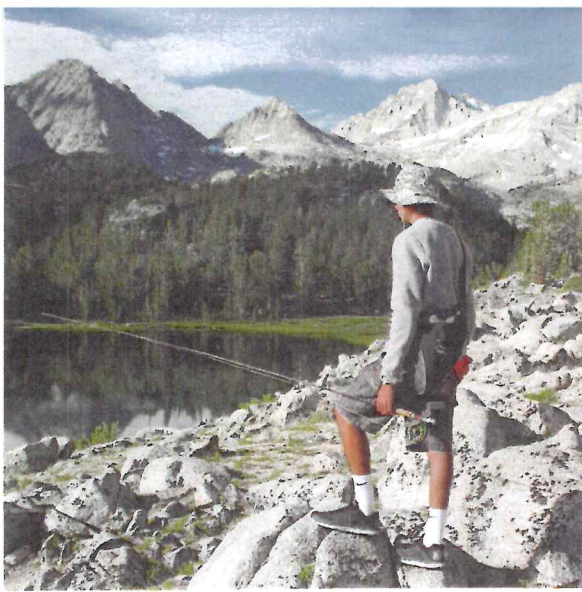




California: Gem Lakes / Story and photos by Don Vachini

Gradually gaining altitude on the well-maintained trail for nearly 3 miles, my grandson, Domenic, and I began a slightly steeper ascent. A mile farther, nearing 11,032-foot Morgan Pass, we boulder-hopped across a vibrant creek, switched onto a signed spur off the main trail, and then followed its scant path to the Gem Lakes.

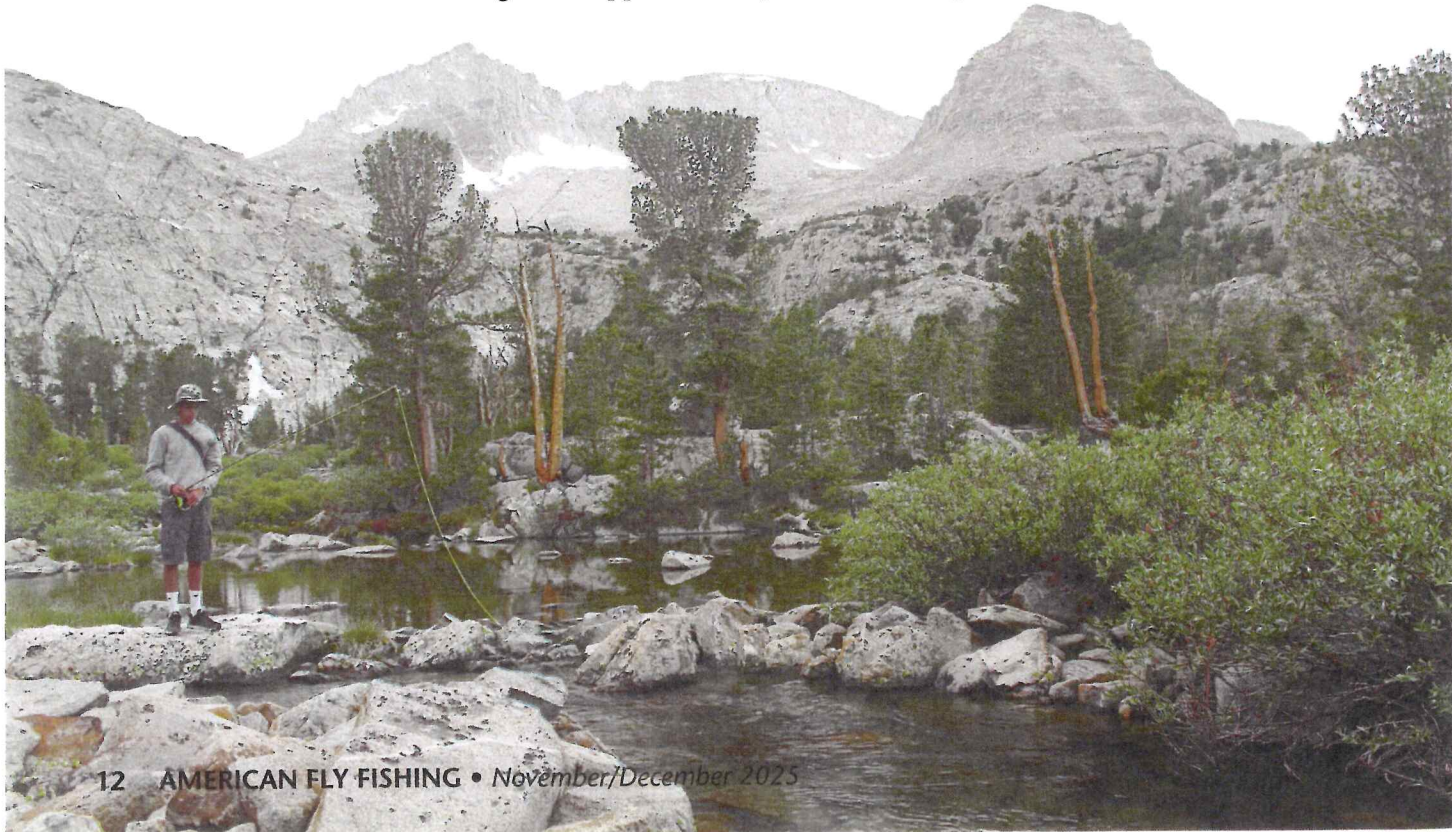
Escaping flows from this tightly clustered trio of lakes located at the top of Little Lakes Valley high in the John Muir Wilderness help form the headwaters of Rock Creek. Garnering

infusions from several other feeder lakes, the creek tumbles down its canyon under a canopy of cottonwood, aspen, and evergreens for 18 miles to eventually enter the Owens River above Pleasant Valley Reservoir.

Soaring to nearly 13,000 feet, both Pyramid Peak and Rosy Finch Peak provide snowmelt to create Upper, Middle, and Lower Gem Lakes, all slightly higher than 11,000 feet. Ample timber and scrub willows surround these 4- to 5-acre tarns, providing just enough insect life to support healthy, self-sustaining

populations of colorful brook trout. Caddisflies, mosquitoes, and midges form the bulk of their diet, which is supplemented by terrestrial insects uplifted on winds from downslope.

Scoping for fish-attracting structure from a loftier vantage is always a wise endeavor when you fish alpine lakes. Early- and late-day calm periods, when the breeze dies, are usually the most productive times. Fish often congregate near the food- and oxygen-rich inlets and outlets, but they also form pods and cruise along the dividing line of the littoral zone,



going deeper as the sun ascends. Although generating plenty of bugs, the overhanging limbs and bankside brush can make maneuvering along portions of the shore a bit tricky, and in places you'll need to roll cast.

The abundant little char top out at about 10 inches, perfect for 3- and 4-weight rods. My favorite flies include the Elk Hair Caddis, Parachute Adams, Green Mosquito, BH Copper John, Zebra Midge, and Pheasant Tail Nymph, individually or as cohorts in a dry/dropper rig. However, during our morning fishing on that July day, size 14 BH Woolly Buggers, both black and olive, retrieved parallel to the deeper drop-offs, were highly effective. Visible through polarized sunglasses, flaring black- and white-edged fins repeatedly alerted us that our offerings were about to be vanquished. We then admired the "gems of the Gems," as each fish shimmered in the shallows prior to release.

The boggy, interconnecting creek courses through a meadow between the two lower lakes, providing limited but efficient spawning habitat along with challenging angling opportuni-

ties. Here, its diminutive but frisky jewels are always aware of shadows. From a distance, I watched Domenic sneak into range to dap flies over the brushy stream bank.

After cascading from Lower Gem, the stream tumbles through a more readable section as it picks up speed toward nearby Chickenfoot Lake. Before hiking out, we took turns savoring a few last strikes to size 16 Elk Hair Caddis patterns riding atop the swirling current.

Leaving US Route 395 at Tom's Place, follow Rock Creek Road (FR 12) for 10 miles to its termination at the Mosquito Flat Trailhead. The parking lot sits at 10,215 feet, so the lower Little Lakes Valley waters are often very crowded. However, the 4.2-mile hike to the Gem Lakes usually ends in solitude. And, with minimal gains in elevation, the round-trip day-hike makes for an invigorating angling escape. The Gems usually thaw after June. Nearby Rock Creek Lakes Resort, (760) 935-4311, www.rockcreeklakesresort.com, offers information, supplies, food, and lodging. Tom's Place, (760) 935-4239, www.tomsplaceresort.com, is a friendly venue where you can enjoy a burger and brew after an adventuresome day trip.



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