

FAMILY ENTERPRISES • 2002

# FISHING

*the California Alps*



**The 2002 Guide to High Sierra Angling**

INYO • MONO • ALPINE • EL DORADO • AMADOR • STANISLAUS • CALAVERAS • CARSON VALLEY, NEVADA

## Gold Diggers

BY MICHAEL L. BAZZO

**I**t was early in the day when we began the nearly vertical hike into the high country wilderness in search of California's gold. Yellow Aspens covered the hillside, adding a splash of color to a dusty landscape. Across the valley, Mono Lake looked like a refreshing blue fragment of sky, misrepresenting its true briny nature. Though the altitude at 10,000 feet had thinned out my blood considerably, it could not alter my resolve to locate and capture the most elusive of fish: the remarkable Golden Trout.

It was rumored that "Goldens" lurked in a little known lake up here and the rumor turned out to be true.

It had been nearly thirty years since I brought to hand a golden and I have never forgotten the experience. I was just a teenager then, on my first extended trek into the high country above Bridgeport. My dad had only introduced me to the magic of a fly rod a few years earlier. Fortunately, a big cast was unnecessary in the small streams that course through the East Walker Wilderness. My high school football teammate and I had shared many memorable experiences on the gridiron, but I dare say none were as exciting as bringing that first little mysteriously colored fish to the net. The forest rang with the shouts of my friend, "It's a golden!" Laboring under the belief that golden trout were only to be found in the Southern Sierra, I challenged his fish identification abilities, but he was correct. It was a golden



*A sample of our "Sierra Gold"*

and imbued with the most strikingly brilliant coloration. Goldens are not big fish, but they more than make up for it in style.

Goldens are easily the most intensely colored of all trout. Rarely longer than eight inches, the Volcano Creek Goldens, our State fish, are adorned with bright golden yellow on their sides with a profound red stripe that runs the length of their bodies. The Par marks are soft vertical drops of color, nearly evenly spaced, with a handful of black dots sprinkled near the tail for good measure. Goldens can be found all along the Sierra range from the Kern River to Bridgeport and beyond. The problem is their affinity for the high country; the more inaccessible the better! Goldens are generally found in high altitude lakes and streams the majority of which are only accessible to backpackers.

While the trail wound its way up to the lake, which was our intended destination on this day, we instead detoured down the side of a gently sloping hill that depos-

ited us beside a little brook that ran beneath a canopy of lush forest. The trees were very close together in spots and where separated, a dense undergrowth of shrubs and ferns concealed the soft and spongy earth below. The breeze tickled the Aspen leaves that fluttered in a delicate melody of rushing water and carried the tune down the canyon and out of range.

Having adapted to such a harsh wilderness for centuries has made golden trout a hardy and resolute bunch. Such conditions also make for opportunistic feeders, not unlike brook trout which also occupy an oftentimes austere environment. While brook trout will hit nearly anything offered, golden trout are more finicky and spook easily at the sight of a fly not properly presented. Once put down, it is difficult to coax them into a renewed interest.

My brother-in-law, Greg, was the first to make contact as he gently dabbled his little elk hair caddis in a high stick maneuver beginning at the riffles entering each

pool, then allowing the fly to bounce its way along. As he brought that first fish to hand, his shouts were reminiscent of those of my high school buddy so long ago and were no less exciting as they caused me to leap frog my way over rocks and make my way upstream to behold his prize. My search continued further downstream where I prospected each likely looking hold with a little elk hair caddis of my own. The imitation approached reality as it skipped along the riffles and rode the current across the deeper pools. Nearly every offering yielded an acceptance, or at least a strike, and I truly felt like a teenager again.

As the sun climbed high in the sky, the morning shadows became increasingly abbreviated and we decided to prospect elsewhere for other treasure. Golden trout can be found in the higher altitude lakes and streams in and around the Mammoth area and, of course, further south, in the Golden Trout Wilderness, near Lone Pine and Independence in such lakes as the Cottonwood Lakes and Hidden Lake. Some only require a short hike, others a much more strenuous trek of 10 or more miles. Many areas are accessed by service roads so that a truck or four-wheel drive vehicle will at least get you part of the way there. Consult the local DFG or ranger station for exact locations and regulations. The automobile club also offers a good map of the region, "The Eastern Sierra Guide Map," that points out which Lakes contain goldens. Catching golden trout takes a little effort but it's well worth the trouble.