

# Golden Trout

*By Ralph Cutter*

The golden trout is larger than life. It is not just a trout, but an embodiment of trout fishing taken, literally, to it's highest realm. Because they dwell in the highest, starkest and most remote terrain in this country, the pursuit of goldens is not a casual affair.

The golden trout can be found in a handful of roadside waters but most of these locations are jealously guarded secrets. Most fish touted as vehicle-accessible goldens are invariably rainbow trout with only a hint of golden crossed in their lineage. For some reason, Monache Meadows at the extreme southern end of the Sierra is frequently described as offering excellent roadside golden trout angling. One author even stated these waters were "too good to be true" and unwittingly he was right. The golden trout of the Monache area have grossly hybridized with rainbows and are at best ugly step sisters of their pure bred backcountry cousins.

Goldens live virtually everywhere in the High Sierra (consult the Sierra Trout Guide for a complete listing of all waters containing golden trout), but the strongest concentrations will be found in the southern half of the range. I would advise first time seekers of gold to prospect in the Golden Trout Wilderness. The most convenient access into the Wilderness is via the Cottonwood Lakes trailhead.

Cottonwood is perched at 10,000 feet just east of the town of Lone Pine. It sports several improved campgrounds (complete with corrals for horse packers) and is within spitting distance of several creeks brimming with tiny but beautiful goldens (this is one place you can catch real golden trout from your tailgate).



A nice golden turns on a midge pattern in the High Sierra

Sierra weather is predictably unpredictable, so be prepared for everything from scorching sun to mid-summer snowstorms. Hypothermia, altitude sickness, and lightning are the most commonly encountered environmental hazards, but every year backcountry users get bit by rattlesnakes (myself included), break bones, have heart attacks, get their eyes pecked by hummingbirds, and even die. You'll read all about these hazards and more in the propaganda handed out with your Wilderness Permit. [Wilderness Permits are required throughout the range. Contact the Forest Service at (888) 374-3773 for an application].

Take these law suit-inspired catastrophic warnings to heart, but as a paramedic who has worked 20 years adjacent to some of the most heavily impacted Wilderness in the nation, I'll tell you straight up that the Sierra is a lot safer than any city street. Use common sense, do a bit of reading, and consider using a professional outfitter for your first taste of the backcountry. [To receive a list of licensed outfitters contact the California Department of Fish and Game at (916) 653-7664].

Don't approach the Sierra expecting to catch huge fish. Though the state record golden trout is nearly ten pounds, most run eight to twelve inches and anything over eighteen inches can earn bragging rights. Most truly huge goldens live in Wyoming's Wind River Mountains where their ancestors were transplanted from the Sierra some sixty years ago. Unlike the Sierra, the Lakes of the Wind River's are rich with scuds and intelligently managed for quality trout.

Large golden trout typically dwell in deep waters and are only readily accessible during spawning. Spawning typically occurs just after ice out usually in June and early July. Snow is usually still on the ground and 99% of Sierra visitors wait until warmer conditions to visit. To me this is a perfect combination—big trout all to myself!

As trout leave the lakes to spawn in tributary streams, they are suckers for roe flies. Orange 3mm pom-poms (available at craft stores) speared on a #14 hook and held in place with a few turns of thread are irresistible. Trout eggs are virtually weightless and it is best to use a piece of split shot a short distance up the leader rather than weighting the fly itself. The bright fly in

crystal clear water makes for exciting visual grabs. The hook must be set the instant the fly disappears so the fish gets hooked in the mouth; egg patterns can get deeply inhaled and seriously injure the trout. Trout in the spawning mode are typically underwhelmed by the experience of being caught. Many, many times I've released a fly-caught golden only to watch it swim off and immediately start vying for position on the gravel beds.

Some people feel that fishing for spawners is unethical. In crowded streams where the fish get perpetually harassed I would agree; however, in golden trout country this is rarely the case. Play it by ear and use common sense.



This golden is as good as dead. Don't EVER let me catch you laying a trout on the dirt.

Genetically, goldens are kissing cousins to the rainbow trout and their feeding habits are identical. In creeks, they can be so easy to catch as to become almost boring. We lead annual trips into the high country and one year we had a client who was so taken by the sheer numbers of willing goldens that he returned the following year with a counter like baseball umpires use. Using only a #14 E /C Caddis, he averaged over 100 golden trout a day (note: I am not an advocate of sticking big numbers of fish. With even a minimal hooking mortality, that is well over 30 dead fish in a week).

Creek goldens will of course eat nymph patterns but they are so susceptible to dries I rarely bother dealing with subsurface presentations. Lake dwelling goldens are an entirely different ballgame altogether.

Presentations must be exceedingly delicate and drag is poison. I typically use a six-foot 5x or 6x tippet on a 10 or 12 foot leader. Short striking fish are often a sign of subtle drag and when this happens, I'll lengthen the tippet and make sure the fly is attached with a loop knot to reduce the potential for drag. Despite what might be easiest, I cast into the wind so the fly drifts naturally with the breeze rather than skates on a taught leader.

During daylight, goldens will usually be found feeding along lake margins or on the bottom. A favorite quarry in almost all Sierra lakes are the various caddis larvae that build gravel cases (most commonly Limnephilidae). There are some exact patterns on the market but I've found the standard pheasant tail nymph to be as good as any. The mottled colors of the feathers and the

subtle sparkle of the wire looks uncommonly like the stones and bits of reflective mica on the natural's case. Allow the nymph to settle on the lakebed and give it only the subtlest twitch when a golden swims into view. Golden trout are opportunistic feeders and it is the rare trout that will pass by the offering as long as you don't give it too much movement.



The Golden. The most coveted trout to rise to a fly.

the fish will expose themselves and feed freely on the surface. Midges are the mainstay of most golden trout and you would be well advised to devote a flybox strictly to midge patterns. The E/C Caddis in sizes 18 through 24 doubles as an excellent midge pattern and in fact is my number one fly in the high country. Randall Kaufmann's Midge Emerger is outstanding golden flies but there are times when a generic hares ear parachute takes fish when all else fails.

It is tough to catch large goldens under the bright Sierra sun but your best chance is with streamers worked deep in the blue water or along the deep shadows along the lakeshore or against boulders. Bright flashy flies tend to spook clear water goldens so stick with wooly buggers, muddlers and Clouser minnows tied in earth tones.

Dawn and dusk are prime time to catch goldens. Under subdued light

When you finally have that living, breathing nugget splashing in your hands, pause for a moment. In my flyfishing travels around this tiny planet I've seen many beautiful fish in some pretty spectacular waters, but I have yet to find a more wonderful creature than the golden trout. The golden is a treasure unlike any other and relatively few anglers will ever share your experience. Treat it carefully, release it gently and smile at your great fortune.