

*Nothing beats finding an aspen grove in peak color. Including a few green pine trees in the frame helps to provide a color balance that makes brightly colored aspen look even more spectacular.*

# California Gold

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOSH MILLER

The Sierra Nevada mountains offer dramatic backdrops and the potential for an extended season of autumn photography

**T**he fall colors of New England and Colorado are at the top of every outdoor photographer's destinations, but the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada mountains in California have been growing in popularity as an alternative to these locations. With multiple roads climbing into the mountains as high as 10,000 feet, the range allows photographers to shoot brightly colored aspen groves and flowing creeks set against the dramatic backdrop of John Muir's "range of light." By shooting at peak elevations in late September and working down slope as winter comes to the high country, in a good year photographers can shoot peak fall colors for more than a month.

The "eastside," as it is known to locals, offers great roadside access to aspen groves and alpine lakes. For the more adventurous photographer, there is an endless supply of backcountry lakes with the high peaks of the Sierra as a backdrop. With many lodging and camping options, the eastside has been drawing climbers and photographers for generations.

## WHEN TO GO

Typically, fall starts by the end of September at the highest elevations in locations like North Lake. Leaves start to turn with the first cold snaps and stay on the trees until storms blow through and strip them from the trees. As conditions continue to change and the leaves are blown off the high-elevation trees, the lower elevation groves are typically





**LEFT:** The Sierra Crest makes a great backdrop to drainages filled with dramatic aspen. While some vistas are obvious, scouting locations when the light is dull allows you to maximize your options when the light is good.

**BELOW:** Finding soft, intimate scenes like this meadow and aspen can help to tell a deeper story and balance with the more dramatic “hero”-type shots of towering peaks at sunrise.

just coming into condition. Photographers just start working their way down slope as the leaves change. As the lower-elevation aspen groves start to pass their prime in mid-to-late October, the cottonwoods and oaks in the Owens Valley start to change, making it possible some years to photograph fall colors all the way into November.

While there is no substitute for actually being on the ground and seeing conditions with your own eyes, there are several online resources that post current color conditions in the Eastern Sierra. For the past few years, the Sacramento Bee newspaper has maintained a webpage that not only includes a map of many of the best locations but also marks the locations with the current leaf conditions. This helps photographers who are new to the area discover the good spots, and it also saves driving time by knowing which groves will be the most productive.

#### WHERE TO GO

While fall colors run the entire length of U.S. Route 395 along the eastern side of the Sierra from Lake Tahoe to Lone Pine, the epicenter for fall photography on the eastside is between the towns of Lee Vining and Bishop. Lee Vining is on the east end of Tioga Pass, so many photographers also make it part of a trip through Yosemite if the pass is still open. Lee Vining Canyon offers intimate images of fall leaves, and you can't miss



shooting a sunrise at Mono Lake before heading up to Lundy Canyon to look for beavers among the flooded colorful aspen groves. Conway Summit just north of Lee Vining offers pastoral scenes with rolling aspen-covered hills and grazing sheep.

Between Lee Vining and Bishop along U.S. Route 395, several roads climb west into the Sierra, offering photography at a range of elevations. While both Bishop and Lee Vining are great bases of operation, Lee Vining is smaller and has fewer lodging and resupply options.

Most photographers will spend only a night or two in Lee Vining and spend the

majority of their time based in Bishop. This allows time to explore up and down the popular Bishop Creek Road (State Route 168). At the end of Bishop Creek Road, try popular North Lake in early fall or, later in the season, explore many of the lesser-visited groves lining both sides of the creek near South Lake or Lake Sabrina. You can also hike into the backcountry for unique angles of the towering peaks at sunrise.

Having shot many times on all the roads of the eastside, I would say they all have a very different feel and are worth exploring, but if your time is limited, make Bishop Creek, June Lake Loop, Lee Vining



*Explore the mountains above the Eastern Sierra town of Bishop for endless opportunities to line up the towering peaks of the Sierra Crest with groves of aspens at sunrise.*

Canyon and Mono Lake your priorities. If you have a little extra time or it isn't your first visit, spending time at Rock Creek, Conway Summit and Lundy Canyon will add a lot of depth to your portfolio. For the motivated photographer who is willing to put some miles on the car, don't forget that from Bishop, the Ancient Bristlecone Pines of the White Mountains are a couple hours' drive away and make for a great long day.

No matter what itinerary you choose, remember to be as flexible as possible so you can adjust your plans to take advantage of the weather. Also remember the Sierras aren't called the “range of light”

for nothing—set that alarm early for a chance at sunrise alpenglow on the high peaks. If you still have energy after being up before sunrise and shooting all day, a sunset shoot along the Owens River near Bishop can be a great way to end the day.

#### WHAT TO PACK

The weather in the fall along the eastern front of the Sierra can be warm and pleasant or stormy and very cold. In the space of a single trip, I have shot wearing nothing but shorts and a T-shirt, then a couple of days later I was wearing a down parka and the temperatures were in

the teens at sunrise. Make sure you plan for changing winter weather and pack accordingly. Remember, the best photos are the ones that happen during bad weather or right after the first dusting of snow—don't forget the chains, and don't run for cover when the weather hits. **OP**

*Josh Miller's images have been featured in Outdoor Photographer and in publications throughout the world. To see more of his work, and for info on his workshops, visit [joshmillerphotography.com](http://joshmillerphotography.com). You can also find him on Instagram @joshmillerphotography.*