

Deep in the heart of Wyoming's wilderness is a treasured fish that's eager to please those willing to reach it.

Article & Photography
by Gary Kramer

Wind River GOLD

Golden trout (inset) favor high elevations and cold, clean water, making them ideally suited for the mountain lakes of Wyoming's Wind River Range.

As we topped a ridge, the lake came into view—set like a topaz jewel in a ring of granite, its glassy surface reflected the rugged peaks that surrounded this alpine treasure. The basin was radiant; pristinely beautiful with the promise of big fish.

We quickly made the 300-foot decent to the lake like kids on a field trip, eager to wet a line. At the lakeshore, I rigged a 6-weight and tied on a size 14 Parachute Adams and a short dropper tipped with a size 14 Hare's-ear Nymph. While knotting the last fly, I glanced over my shoulder and saw one (then two) trout clear the water only a few yards from shore. I walked to the lake's edge, and false casted until I had enough line out to drop the fly a few feet from the jumping fish. As my patterns slowly drifted toward the outlet stream, a trout took the Adams and turned to display a flash of gold and red.

Almost immediately the fish jumped. It was brilliant—a crimson and gold neon glow with orange hues and white-tipped fins. I knew right away it was a female golden trout in spawning colors! I looked at my buddy Dan Connelly and yelled, "This is the biggest golden I've ever seen, let alone hooked."

The fish was strong and jumped several more times before I coaxed it to shore. It was an honest eighteen-inch long golden; a species that first caught my attention more than 40 years ago, and the first golden trout of literally hundreds that we landed and released over the next five days.

Go Far or Go Home

Last July, four anglers, our outfitters George and Hank Hunker of Sweetwater Fishing Expeditions, and myself packed 12 miles on horseback deep into Wyoming's Wind River Mountains. We timed our trip for middle July to be at the lake soon after ice out and during the peak of the spawning season. Our camp was at 10,600 feet though the lake was just under 11,000, but both the elevation and remoteness were no surprise as golden trout are fish that require high elevations (they typically don't survive at lower altitudes) and clear streams fed by snowmelt and glaciers. They're backcountry trout in the truest sense of the word, which is one

reason why only a few intrepid anglers seek them out.

My fascination with golden trout began long ago in California's Sierra Nevada. In those days, I was living in the southern part of the state and the Sierras were only a few hours away. Back then, it was simple—grab a backpack, some freeze-dried food, a fly rod and reel, and a few flies, jump in my 1968 El Camino, and drive to the trailhead near Lone Pine. From there it was a four-hour hike to one of several high mountain lakes and streams home to goldens averaging eight- to twelve-inches long.

Those early trips got me hooked on golden trout, a fish many consider the most beautiful of all the salmonids. The 1905 writings of Barton Evermann described the golden perfectly. "This is the most beautiful of all the trouts—the brilliancy and richness of its coloration is not equaled in any other known species. The delicate golden olive of the head, back and upper sides, the clear golden yellow along and below the lateral line and the marvelously rich cadmium of the under parts fully entitle the species to be known above all others as the golden trout."

Golden trout are native only to two small regions of California's upper Kern River drainage in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Fisheries biologists believe they are descendants of rainbow trout that made their way up the rivers only to eventually become isolated, evolving over eons into a separate species. California designated the golden trout its state fish in 1947.

Colonel Sherman Stevens transplanted the first golden trout, 13 fish, in 1876, carrying them in a coffee pot for four miles before releasing them in Cottonwood Creek near his sawmill. Like many streams of that era, there were no trout in Cottonwood Creek and goldens thrived in their new environment. Over several decades, goldens moved up the drainage on their own and were placed in Cottonwood Lakes. By 1918, the California Department of Fish and Game developed the Cottonwood Lakes spawning program and it became the only source of golden trout eggs and fry used for other Western states and the state's aggressive stocking program. The stocking program continued until 1939 when the California

One of the reasons anglers revere golden trout (bottom right), is because of the effort it takes to reach them. You can hike to some Wind Rivers lakes, but a pack outfitter (right) makes it easier to bring creature comforts to camp (bottom left).



legislature banned the exportation of golden trout. By then, golden trout made their way into Idaho, Montana, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming waters, but Wyoming's fish have a unique backstory.

When California decided to make eggs and fry available for stocking to other states, Wyoming was on the recipient list. However, legend has it the first goldens came to the Cowboy State by mistake. In the early 1920s, a railcar carrying live golden trout stopped in Rock Springs, Wyoming on its journey east. Upon inspection, someone determined the fish were dying. A decision was made to pack them into the Wind River Mountains and stock them in Cook Lake. The outcome was nothing short of phenomenal, partly because the

lake was devoid of fish but rich in aquatic life. The trout flourished, and in 1948, Cook Lake produced the Wyoming state record and largest golden trout ever caught—an eleven-pound, four-ounce monster.

Legends aside, Wyoming's first official golden trout stocking occurred in 1929 with fish from California. Today, goldens reside in more than 100 lakes and streams in Wyoming including the Wind River Mountains, Beartooth Range, and Snowy Mountains. Because golden trout are native to California, logic dictates the world records would likely come from the same place, but that isn't so. A look at the International Game Fish Association record book shows the majority of golden trout line class records come from Wyoming.

EXPEDITIONS

In fact, that's how we ended up at 11,000 feet. Several lakes in the Wind River Range produce goldens that reach the four- and even five-pound mark. In contrast, California goldens typically measure between six- and twelve-inches long; a fourteen-inch fish would be a trophy in their native Sierra Nevada range. I was convinced the Wind Rivers is simply the place to go for trophy golden trout and I was determined to catch a fish 18-inches long, or larger.

Gold on the Line

After catching that first fish of the trip, we were all fanned out along the shoreline and casting. Soon it was evident the trout were concentrated near the lake's outlet and taking both dry flies and nymphs. After just a handful of casts, I watched the dry floating toward the outlet stream, when it suddenly disappeared. I set the hook and a hefty golden broke the surface, then stripped line from my reel. As I brought the fish in, I noticed it was a hook-jawed male colored with even more crimson than the female I landed earlier. Amazed at the brilliant hues



Like many high-mountain trout, goldens are opportunistic feeders and rarely pass up a well-presented dry fly or nymph.

of gold and red, I took a few photos and then released the fish.

Bill Lipe, one of the other anglers on our trip, decided to prospect a fly in the creek flowing out of the lake. The gradient was gentle at the outflow, but quickly turned swift for only 75 yards before cascading into swift water and snaking its way down the mountain to another lake 500 yards below. Here he used the same setup I was using—a

dry on top with a nymph dropper, casting it upstream, and mending as it progressed downstream. His technique was flawless and during the next hour, Bill landed a dozen fish, all on nymphs.

For the rest of us that continued to fish the lake, the trout were eager to please, taking a nymph about 75 percent of the time and a dry fly the remaining 25 percent. Though after those first two hours, they seemed to figure out the game and took our offerings with less regularity, even though they continued to rise and splash the surface on a regular basis.

On the suggestion of our guide George, my fishing buddy Dan switched to a size 10 orange scud pattern. George told him to cast long then retrieve it with slow, but long, strips. The scud seemed to do the trick and some goldens eagerly took the new offering.

While we experienced excellent success on dries, nymphs, and scuds, goldens can be hard to catch. On my many trips into the Sierra, I often saw fish sulking in the depths, refusing to strike. Frequently, trout would charge the fly and change their mind at the last second. Goldens sometimes feed solely on plankton and jokingly I tell people, "You can throw everything in your fly box at them but they'll flat out ignore everything altogether."

Finding Gold

If you're interested in pursuing golden trout, the best time to go is just after the ice on the high-mountain lakes thaws, when fish are hungry and concentrated near lake outlets and inlets and adjacent streams. Moreover, this time of year typically



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If You Go

THE REGION

The Wind River Range in western Wyoming runs roughly northwest to southeast for about 100 miles. The Continental Divide follows the crest of the range and includes Gannett Peak, which at 13,804 feet, is the highest peak in Wyoming. There are more than 40 other named peaks in excess of 13,000 feet. Two large National Forests that include three wilderness areas encompass most of the mountain range. The Shoshone National Forest (www.fs.usda.gov/shoshone, 307-527-6241) is on the eastern side of the continental divide while the Bridger-Teton National Forest (www.fs.usda.gov/btnf, 307-739-5500) is on the west. Portions of the range are also inside the Wind River Indian Reservation.

GETTING THERE

Access the Wind River Mountains from Lander, Dubois, or Pinedale. The nearest airport is in Riverton with flights from Denver on Great Lakes Aviation (www.flygreatlakes.com, 800-554-5111). Other options include flying to Casper or Jackson, then renting a car and driving about three hours to Lander. Once in Lander, access the high country at Dickinson Park, Middle Fork, and Fiddlers Lake trailheads. Most golden trout lakes require between a 4- and 20-mile pack trip into wilderness areas.

CLIMATE AND CLOTHING

Because of the elevation, the weather in the Wind Rivers is unpredictable, particularly early in the season and again in the fall. Even on our five-day trip in mid July we experienced rain and a snow squall along with relatively warm and sunny days. The same can be said for the fall when there's an increased chance of snow, as the days grow shorter. Come prepared with rain gear, layered clothing, and wool or fleece garments. Be prepared for mosquitos and bring bug spray or a head net.

EQUIPMENT

The best all around fly rod is a 6-weight and it is preferred for lake fishing but a 4-weight is good choice for the streams. You can get away with just a floating line but it's not a bad idea to bring a sink tip for fishing scuds and reaching deep fish. For flies, bring an assortment of caddisfly, mayfly, midge, ant, beetle, and grasshopper imitations. While match the hatch situations occur, goldens will take most size 12 to 16 attractor patterns like Parachute Adams, Yellow Humpies, and Stimulators when conditions are right. The most effective nymphs were size 12 to 16 Hare's-ear, Pheasant Tail, and Beadhead Princes. And, as we discovered, size 12 to 14 olive scuds and size 8 to 10 Orange Mega Scuds can be effective. Most casting is done from the shoreline in both the lakes and streams, but a pair of lightweight waders will allow you to reach additional areas.

OUTFITTING

Sweetwater Fishing Expeditions (www.sweetwaterfishing.com, 307-332-3986) has been owned and operated by George Hunker since 1977. He offers full-service excursions into the Wind Rivers that include guiding, a full camp with tents, sleeping bags, stoves, solar shower, and meals. They offer backpacking and horse-packing trips for goldens, cutthroats, brook, and rainbow trout for groups of two to six anglers. Our packer was Allen's Diamond 4 Ranch (www.diamond4ranch.com, 307-332-2995), an outfitter that's taken fishermen into the Wind River Mountains since 1973. For additional information, contact the Wyoming Game and Fish Department in Lander (307-332-2688) or Pinedale (307-367-4353).

coincides with the golden trout's spawning season and the fish are more aggressive.

That said, timing an early summer trip into the Wind Rivers is tough. Generally, it's best to wait until after July 10 when most of the high mountain lakes are ice free. After that, there's about a two- to three-week window when fish are hungry and aggressive. By early August, the fishing becomes more demanding with feeding often restricted to early and late in the day. During the fall, goldens feed heavily in anticipation of the long winter ahead and can be easy to catch—the down side is unpredictable weather.

There's no question reaching Wind River golden trout lakes takes effort. Certainly, many anglers backpack in on foot. However, in my opinion, the most appealing travel option is by horseback. I like real food as opposed to freeze dried, I like a camping cot as opposed to a sleeping pad, and carrying all my photo gear on my back is not an option. Horses allow you to enjoy the scenery and make better time than hiking, and while you might be a little



Golden trout are one of the most colorful fish in the West, especially after high-mountain lakes thaw and the fish begin to spawn.

saddle sore, horses are more comfortable than hiking. Aside from carrying everyone in our party, our pack train allowed us to have a first class camp with tents, cots, stove, solar shower, and real food.

Many of the Wind River lakes offer excellent fly fishing for goldens. The best way to find out which lake meets your needs while considering its distance from the trailhead, the size of the fish, and accessibility, is to get intel from a reliable source like an outfitter, biologist, fly shop, or another golden trout addict. In fact, the Wyoming Game and Fish Department

in Lander and Pinedale can provide information on the lakes that hold goldens and leave it up to you to put in the effort to reach them. There is also an incredible amount of information on the Internet.

As our guide/outfitter George Hunker put it, "I don't mind sharing a lake with a person who has taken the time to contact people and do the research, but I don't want to put my favorite golden trout lake out there for anyone with a backpack and spinning rod to access."

Sitting around the campfire our last night, we reflected on our five days of phenomenal golden trout fishing. Most of the fish were in the fourteen- to sixteen-inch range and several met or topped my eighteen-inch benchmark. It was truly an expedition that I'll remember, long after the memory of others fades away!

For more than 30 years, Gary Kramer has traveled the globe, hunting and fishing in 56 countries. A prolific writer and photographer, you can see more of his work at www.garykramer.net.

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