

Golden Trout



Golden trout (*Salmo aguabonita* Jordan). The golden trout, California's state fish, is unique and native to the southern Sierra, specifically to certain tributaries of the upper Kern River. Prized for its unbelievably brilliant color, this gold-sided, scarlet-bellied trout was among the first to be transplanted to other High Sierra waters.

The various tributary streams of the upper Kern were originally inhabited by the Kern River rainbow trout (*Salmo gairdnerii gilberti* Jordan). Natural barriers (waterfalls created by lava flows) on certain of these streams isolated the fish populations from the parent stocks, the isolated fish gradually evolving into the golden trout of today. Many factors undoubtedly were involved in the evolutionary processes. The similarity in the coloration of riparian geological formations (especially the brilliant white and yellowish sand beds of their native streams) to the trout's colors suggests that this may have exerted much influence in the development of the golden's unparalleled beauty. Although fish taxonomists differ, golden trout are now generally classified as *Salmo aguabonita* and are differentiated into two subspecies: *Salmo aguabonita aguabonita* Jordan, from the South Fork of the Kern, and *Salmo aguabonita whitei* Evermann, from the Little Kern drainage. The greater number of black spots, especially the presence of spots below the lateral line, is said to distinguish the latter from the former.

Golden trout are well adapted to high, cold waters. When transplanted to lower, warmer habitats, their gleaming colors fade to dull grays and reds. One of the most significant golden trout



Golden Trout from the Lower Rock Creek area west of New Arm Pass.

transplants occurred in 1876, when thirteen fish from Mulkey Creek (tributary to the South Fork of the Kern) were transported in a coffee pot to Cottonwood Creek in Inyo County. These fish became well established, and

in 1891 about a hundred were taken past impassable waterfalls and transplanted upstream in the Cottonwood Lakes. With completion of the Mount Whitney Hatchery, facilities were available to rear goldens; beginning in 1918, the Cottonwood Lakes were utilized as a source of golden trout eggs. They continue to be the state's primary source. Golden trout throughout the west are all descendants of the original Cottonwood Lakes stock. Each spring (generally by early June) crews from Mount Whitney Hatchery go on horseback to Cottonwood Lakes. When the fish are ready for spawning, eggs are stripped from the females, fertilized, and loaded onto pack mules for the trip down to the roadhead. Much of this trip is usually made over deep snow, and early June can still bring rugged weather. About six weeks after the eggs reach the hatchery, the young trout begin to hatch. In two months, usually early September, they are ready for planting.

Goldens hybridize readily with rainbows. Where these two species occur together, fish are found ranging from pure golden to pure rainbow. Although hybrids are generally sterile, progeny of two closely related species sometimes produce offspring with sufficient fertility to maintain a self-sustaining population; this is believed to occur in golden-rainbow crosses.

Golden trout are generally found above 9,000 feet. The Cottonwood Lakes are famous for their goldens; they also occur in some lakes of the Pine, Bishop, Big Pine, and Independence creek drainages.

Text excerpt from the *Deepest Valley* by the Sierra Club.