

Golden Trout

Text & photo by Hal Roth

When cattlemen and shearers took their hungry animals to the alpine meadows of the Kern River in the early 1870s they found a strange trout in the streams near their camps. Like other trout it was wary, full of life, quick and energetic, and eternally hungry for choice insects. But here the resemblance stopped, for the trout was colored like no other fish the herders had ever seen.

The top of the head and the back of the trout were a shiny olive-green. Its belly glistened with a midline strip of crimson, while its dorsal and caudal fins were olive, heavily peppered with large black dots. The lower fins were reddish, the rear ones edged with white. Most surprising of all, the sides of the trout glowed with flashing slashes of crimson-gold overlaid with a row of 10 or 12 faint oval-shaped greyish patches. The fish was gorgeous!

A few vague reports came out of the mountains about the beauty and gameness of the fish but the actual existence of the trout seemed more based on rumor than reality until 1875 when Professor H. W. Henshaw saw the species in the South Fork of the Kern River and noted: "...in the clear, rapid current of the mountain stream a flash of sunlight is scarcely quicker than the gleam of gold and silver seen for a single instant as the whirling waters are cut by one of these trout as he makes a rush from his lurking place for some chance morsel that is being borne past him."

In 1893, Dr. David Starr Jordan, the president of Stanford University, received three specimens of the new trout that were caught in Cottonwood Creek on the east side of the Sierra about eight miles south of Mt. Whitney. Dr. Jordan described the fish and named it *Salmo mykiss aqua-bonita*.



Ten years later the writer Stewart Edward White visited the Kern Plateau and was so impressed with the beauty of the fish and the ease with which it could be exterminated that he asked President Theodore Roosevelt to intervene. The President directed the Commissioner of Fisheries to investigate and during the summer of 1904 three scientists and an artist under the direction of Dr. Barton W. Evermann explored various branches of the Kern River, including Volcano Creek, later to be named Golden Trout Creek.

The following winter Evermann published a lengthy report describing the country and the fish his party had found. He verified the *Salmo aguabonita* that Jordan had named 12 years before and in addition claimed two new species, *Salmo whitei* from Soda Creek, and *Salmo roosevelti* from Volcano Creek. Since Cottonwood Creek had originally been barren of fish, Evermann made inquiries to find out how these waters draining to the east had been planted.

"The golden trout were caught in South Fork of Kern River in a little stream in Mulky Meadow just where the Hockett trail enters the Meadow," wrote judge A. C. Harvey of

Lone Pine. "They were caught with hook and line by S. V. Stevens, A. D. Stevens, and Thomas George. Thirteen fish were caught and carried in a coffee pot over the Hockett trail and put in Cottonwood Creek about a mile above the Stevens sawmill. I think, in July, 1876."

Evermann suggested that rigid restrictions on fishing be adopted, including a minimum size, a limit to the number that one person might catch, and a prohibition of fishing during the spawning season. He reported the golden trout to be unusually hardy and suggested planting them in small, clear mountain streams throughout the West.

Since the days of Dr. Evermann, scientists have come to realize that many varieties of fish thought to have been separate species are really the same basic fish. Today the golden trout is considered to be one species, *Salmo aguabonita*. Taxonomists however do recognize two sub-species, the South Fork of Kern golden trout (*Salmo aguabonita aguabonita*), and the Little Kern golden trout (*Salmo aguabonita whitei*).¹ It is quite difficult for the ordinary person to distinguish these sub-species. Even Dr. Evermann was exasperated. "An examination of the large series of specimens shows them to be a very perplexing lot," he wrote when discussing the *whitei* from Coyote Creek. "The amount of variation among them is very great, and it is not without hesitation that I refer them all provisionally to *Salmo whitei*."

The closeness of the varieties of golden may be because two of Evermann's three species were taken from streams that were joined together at one time.¹ Perhaps time will erase even the subspecies of today, for the golden trout has been widely planted throughout the Sierra and readily interbreeds with rainbow trout. A thousand variations of color now flourish in the high waters of the range.¹

The golden trout is generally a small fish, six to ten inches in length, although specimens as large as 18 inches have been taken from Sierra lakes. The fish does best in waters above 9,000 feet where the summer water temperatures seldom exceed 55° though in a few places the temperature climbs as high as 65°. (The temperature of the water was 42° when the accompanying photographs were made.) The principal foods of the trout are immature caddis and midge flies and tiny water fleas.

Every year in June and July, Fish and Game workers from the State of California take about 500,000 eggs (500 to 600 per female) from golden trout specially trapped at various lakes on Cottonwood Creek. The eggs, more delicate than those of any other trout, are reared at the Mt. Whitney and Hot Creek hatcheries and the fingerlings distributed widely. The eggs take about 20 days to hatch when kept at 58° and another 18 days or so for the yolk-sac to be absorbed. In the wild, the trout spawn at much lower temperatures (often just as the ice goes off the lakes) and the incubation time of the eggs is considerably longer. At 40° for example, it takes over 40 days for the eggs to hatch. Growth is rapid the first summer and native fry double their weight every two weeks.¹

The flesh of the golden is usually white when taken from streams, and pinkish when caught in lakes because the lake diet includes tiny red copepods, scuds, and other freshwater crustaceans which also color the eggs a deep salmon pink.¹ The age of the fish depends on many things but one study showed five years to be the normal life span for a lake golden."

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