

THE GOLDEN TROUT OF COTTONWOOD LAKES

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The snow was still on the ground when we got there, young Dutcher and I, with our pack trains, and as the sun was going down, we unloaded the mules, and picked out a little clear spot on the edge of the meadow, where we built a fire, hoping to dry off a small space before turning in for the night. June sixteenth seemed pretty late in the season to us when we left the desert with its temperature of over a hundred in the shade, but it seemed very early when we emerged from the scant yellow pine belt and plunged into the tamaracks ten thousand feet above sea level. The ascent had been sudden, for we had climbed along the precipitous sides of the great fault of the eastern slope of the Sierra, ascending in one place three thousand feet in less than three miles. At ten thousand five hundred feet, the shady nooks were still covered with snow, while far above us we could see the precipitous cliffs with great snow banks at their feet.

We comprised one section of the Death Valley expedition, which in 1891 spent half a year hunting and trapping in the heart of the desert, and now the two of us were to spend three months studying the birds and mammals of the High Sierra, and with our barometers and other instruments make meteorological observations at an altitude of over ten thousand feet.



At Lone Pine, at the eastern base of the mountain, people hinted at the wonderful trout we would find in Cottonwood and Volcano Creeks, and described them in a manner fit to make our mouths water; so we were a happy pair of youngsters, when, a little after noon, we poked our heads through the clouds, as it were, and crossing the first bridge, started to clamber down the Devil's Ladder, as the packers called it, to the Little Cottonwood at its foot. This is the steepest place along the **Hockett Trail**, and it certainly warrants the name, for it seemed more like riding down a spiral staircase than anything else.

After a mile or more of gradual climb along the course of the Little Cottonwood, we turned sharply to the left and followed an indistinct blazed trail until it pitched down to the crossing of the Big Cottonwood. Two miles above the crossing close to the bank, we stopped and prepared the place which we were to call a temporary home for the next three months. We were at the edge of a ten acre mountain meadow, and our first night was spent within a rod of a big snow bank.

We were astir early the next morning. While the mush was cooking, I located some likely looking pools in which the trout were darting to and fro, jumping at the bits of floating sticks and chips which I threw in. I must confess that on this occasion it was not the prospective sport that lured me from the camp fire, but the chance to fill a pan with crisp brown trout, and for once give us a change from the everlasting salt-horse and sowbelly which had been our regular fare for the past three months.

It was very hard to have to arrange camp, and get things settled generally, before starting out to try for the trout. But it had to be done, and it was not until nearly the end of the afternoon that I cut my willow pole, fastened a few yards of shoe thread to it, and baited my hook with some bluebottle flies that we found spending the lunch hour on an opened can of corned beef.

Just beside our camp the water swirled under a great pine log and fell with a roar to a pool beneath, covering the surface with foam and digging out the overhanging bank. The water was so very turbulent that I thought it unnecessary to take the usual precautions to keep out of sight, so I stood on the edge of the bank, and threw my hook above the falls, letting it drift over to the pool.

My line had no sooner fallen in the whirling foam beneath the falls when from all sides dark streaks seemed to rush toward it, and in a twinkling it was swishing through the water. I did not play him, nor did I let him play with me. The vision of the sputtering frying pan and the browning fish was before me, and with a heave ho! such as one uses to pull out a sucker or a carp, I yanked him up on the bank behind me. He was not very big, perhaps ten inches long, but oh, the colors! They were too brilliant to seem natural. From head to tail a broad scarlet stripe stretched, interrupted here and there by blotches of brown; beneath, a beautiful canary yellow merging to orange, while the tips of both tail and fins were white, and faintly discernable, as though washed over by the other colors, were scores of speckles. The tail, heavily spotted, was large and gave the impression of power, while voracity was evident in the big jaws armed with sharp teeth.

It was not until a year or two later that Dr. Jordan got hold of one and named it *Samo mykiss aquabonita* - surely a beautiful trout of beautiful waters.



Little Kern River Golden Trout

But aside from its scientific baptism it had been known as the Golden trout for years by the few people who had seen it and the many who had heard of it.

After the first it was easy. Any day one could go but a few yards from the camp and catch all that were needed, no matter how large the family to be fed.

The largest fish were found in the riffles, while any size from six to ten inches could be found in almost any hole. In fact I never saw trout so plentiful, and with the crude appliances at hand I had no trouble in landing ten in fifteen minutes one day when I chose to time the operation. The largest fish measured just eleven and a quarter inches in length, and the next year on reporting this to the fish commission I was told that this was the largest on record. Cottonwood Creek is almost free from brush and with the trout as unused to man as they were, the fishing was ideal.

Some weeks later I had to go several miles up stream to set my traps, and was delighted to discover a great chain of Alpine lakes feeding the creek. In fact, after exploring the west branch of Cottonwood we counted a total of twenty-one lakes feeding the stream. But there were no trout in them at all; in fact, none above a series of falls aggregating some fifty feet, which tumbled over the rocks below.

From some stockmen whom I found riding the range, I learned that the trout found in Cottonwood Creek are not indigenous to the stream, but had been brought there some fifteen years before by some sheep men who had found them in Mulkey Creek, a small tributary of the Kern River, just across the divide, some ten miles to the south of our camp. But a baker's dozen were taken from Mulkey to Cottonwood in an old coffee pot, but there seem to have been sufficient, as the latter creek, at the time of our visit, was fairly swarming with them. However, they were not at all plentiful in the lower courses of the stream below the crossing of the Hockett Trail, where it is said the first were planted.

Mulkey Creek, from which the trout were taken, drains towards the east, while Cottonwood is lost in the desert, or, at highwater, reaches Owens Lake after a series of great falls down the eastern escarpment of the Sierra. In the course of its meanderings the South Fork of the Kern River, a few miles above its junction with Mulkey Creek, comes within a few yards of Volcano Creek, in which are found a slightly different form of Golden trout, and it is easy to believe that at some time a transfer has been made at this point and the variation in species began.

The Volcano Creek trout has been named *Salmo roosevelti* by Mr. Evermann in honor of President Roosevelt. It differs from the Whitney and Mulkey Creek specimen in that it has a deeper golden color, and the distribution of speckles is not the same. Neither of these species reaches a great length in the streams, but as will be seen later grow to a large size in the Alpine lakes higher up.

On one occasion, Mr. James Moffit, a cattleman of Lone Pine, whose camp was at Mulkey Meadows, suggested that we try to stock the lakes with trout, and to this I readily acquiesced. I told him of a small tributary of the main creek which I had discovered, up which many of the trout had found their way - probably to spawn.



Volcano Creek Golden Trout

Accordingly the next week, together with two men who were with him, we diverted the little brook, and soon had the fish where they could be easily caught, isolated in the little pools. We had only a half dozen lard pails in which to put our catch, and these were soon filled, about fifty fish being caught, mostly with our hands or by washing them out on the bank. The horses were waiting, and as soon as the pails were filled we mounted

and dashed off through the woods, now and then returning to the nearest bend in the stream to change water. Had we realized that what the fish needed was fresh air, and not fresh water, we would probably have reached the lakes with more than twenty fish alive; for with the rough riding and the consequent slapping around of the water, it certainly would have been aerated sufficiently to keep them from dying.

As it was, we reached the lakes an hour later, with twenty-one battered trout, and carefully placed them in the water. Even these were far from frisky, and I doubt not that many of them died later.

These lakes, most of them above the timberline, are fed by the melting snows lying at the base of the cliffs above them. The shores are grassy and gravelly, with little brush, making fishing easy - a portable boat would be just the thing, as there are no snags.

Such, briefly, was the history of the stocking of the Cottonwood Lakes. A month later we left, for the snow was already beginning to whiten the ground, as early as the middle of September.

But in the fourteen years following, I never forgot the trip and often longed to get back and test the success of our venture.

In 1904, Mr. Jenkins, whom I met in Berkeley, told me he had just returned from Lone Pine, and that he heard reports that big fish had been seen in the Lakes. In 1905 the Bulletin of the Bureau of Fisheries was issued with an article by B. W. Evermann on the "Golden Trout of the High Sierra," in which a fairly complete account is given of the stocking of the Lakes fourteen years before. Here the statement is made that fish of over five pounds weight are now caught in the lakes. It goes to show that all a trout needs to increase in size is more space in which to grow and plenty of food. During the summer innumerable caddis worms are to be found along the bottom of the creek, and these themselves furnish a bait that can scarcely be improved on. I am sure that artificial flies will prove a success, as we often used the ventral fin of a fish, which, when spread on the hook, looks much like a gaily colored fly or a butterfly. In fact, we frequently could make a good catch with but a couple of bluebottle flies or a beetle to start with, and the use of the fins after the start was made.



Cottonwood Lakes Golden Trout

There are two ways to reach Cottonwood Creek, either from the West, where one may start from Visalia, and follow the Kaweah River up to its South fork, and along this until one reaches the end of the road some forty miles from the railroad. Here at Camp 1, as shown on Le Conte's map, one takes the Hockett Trail and following it, has opportunities en route to fish in the Kaweah and Kern Rivers and to try for the big fellows in Kern Lake a mile below the river crossing; thence the route is up the tributary called Volcano Creek, where the brilliant Golden trout, named *Salmo roosevelti* by Mr. Evermann, is found; then across the divide to Mulkey Meadows, from which the waters drain to the East. All of these streams contain the different forms of Golden trout. A little beyond, one reaches Cottonwood Creek. Following this and keeping to the right-hand branch, one may easily reach the lakes. I am told that our old log cabin still stands at the edge of the meadow about two miles above the trails crossing, though the thatched roof must long ago have disappeared. The surrounding tamarack forests abound in grouse and tree squirrels and a little lower down bands of quail were found.



But to me, the more attractive route, which entails less packing, is from the little town of Lone Pine on the East, which still shows the effects of the terrible earthquake of the early 1870s which shook down many of the adobe houses in the little village.

A mile to the East is the big earthquake crack, a hundred yards across and nearly twenty feet deep. A little cemetery on the north end of the town contains thirteen graves, said to be those of victims of the quake.

Lone Pine is reached from Whitney Station, a couple of miles away on the Carson and Colorado Railroad, and is a good outfitting point, though provisions are expensive as the freight rates on the little railroad are high. But pack animals are plentiful and the trip is but a day's journey, while the view, as one passes from the desert to the pines in less than five miles, is simply wonderful. As one climbs the steep trail, range after range appears to the east, each a little dimmer than the preceding one, until finally the panorama shows the Cosos, the Angus range and the Panamints, one behind the other, the latter being the eastern boundary of Death Valley, seventy miles away. And if one chances to be on the first crest late in the afternoon when the shadows begin to steal out from the base of the mountain, the vastness of the desert makes an indelible impression on the mind, as the black cloak moves faster and faster toward the East, finally swallowing up each successive range until none but the highest peaks, perhaps snow-capped, gleam like beacons across the waste and one realizes that no matter which way one turns it will take quick work to reach a camp before darkness settles down.