

# An Invitation to Catch Golden Trout 1966

*(NOTE -- Research fails to reveal much of the very early history of propagation and planting of trout in Inyo County nor was there reliable recording of events leading up to game preservation and establishment of laws governing limits. The following, regarding the extension of golden trout fishing, which annually attracts thousands of sportsmen to the area is taken from an article in Outdoor California. Permission to reprint has been given by the author, Phil Pister, Fishery Biologist of the Dept. of Fish and Game).*

A little-known fact is that the streams flowing easterly off the crest of the southern Sierra Nevada contained no native trout. Colonel Stevens' desire to have fish in Cottonwood Creek near his sawmill resulted in what may have been the first transplant of golden trout into waters other than their native habitat, the full significance of which he would never realize. In 1876 13 golden trout were taken by the colonel and his crew from a small tributary to the South Fork Kern River (Mulkey Creek) and transported in a coffee pot over the Hockett trail to Cottonwood Creek, a distance of about four miles.

These fish thrived in their new home and in 1891 about 100 goldens were collected from Cottonwood Creek and taken several miles upstream past impassable barriers to the Cottonwood Lakes at the head of the drainage. As is common when barren waters receive an initial stocking of fish, the newly planted goldens and their progeny grew rapidly, and fish weighing over five pounds were reported by early-day anglers.

About the turn of the century, golden trout began to be distributed into barren waters throughout the southern Sierra Nevada. This was done by collecting adult fish from small streams in their native habitat and transporting them by pack train. By 1914 the range of the golden trout had been extended nearly 100 miles northward from the upper Kern River drainage. However, this method of collecting and distributing fish was both expensive and laborious. Occasionally, it was necessary to hold fish in pack cans for as long as 14 days prior to planting. Consequently, more efficient methods of extending the range of the golden trout were sought.

The completion of the Mt. Whitney State Fish Hatchery in 1917 marked the first major step in the establishment of large-scale stocking programs for the many waters throughout the high Sierra. The following year (1918) the first golden trout spawning operations were conducted by the Department of Fish and Game at the Cottonwood Lakes. An attempt to collect eggs the previous year proved unsuccessful; the fish had finished spawning before operations could commence.

To avoid the possibility of being too late in the spring of 1918, the first reconnaissance trip was made in mid-March. The lakes, over 11,000 feet in elevation, were found to be completely covered with about six feet of ice and snow. The same condition existed in mid-May, but ripe male goldens were observed in the outlet of the lowest lake.

On June 1, 1918, the Cottonwood Lakes spawning station was opened for the first time, when two men from Mt. Whitney Hatchery left with pack animals from Lone Pine, traveling a distance of 26 miles and climbing over 7,000 feet to install traps and holding pens. On June 13, the first egg-take was made.



In the early days golden trout eggs were shipped throughout the western United States and, in some instances, to foreign countries. It is no longer permissible under the law to export golden trout or their eggs from California. Golden trout are commonly reared and planted in other areas of the west, but these fish are all descendants of the original Cottonwood Lakes stock.

While it has been possible to develop hatchery broodstocks of most of the other species of trout planted by the Department of Fish and Game, golden trout have steadfastly refused to become domesticated. Consequently, the methods employed in the golden trout egg-taking program today are essentially the same as those pioneered in 1918, although a road to the vicinity of Carroll Creek has somewhat lessened the distance and elevation to be traveled.

Each spring (usually by early June) crews from Mt. Whitney Hatchery leave the Carroll Creek roadhead on horseback, leading a string of pack mules loaded with supplies and equipment necessary for the spawning operations. A considerable portion of the trip is generally made over snow and ice, since spring comes late in the high country. Working in freezing water is a difficult and tiring chore, and the small sheet iron cabin built in 1930 still provides a welcome haven at the end of a hard day's work.

Traps are installed at the inlets and outlets of the five lakes, and each morning the trapped fish are sorted according to sex and readiness for spawning. Every five days the fish are spawned, and the fertilized eggs are held overnight in running water. The following day the eggs are placed in pack cans and loaded onto mules for the trip to the Carroll Creek roadhead, where they are taken by truck to Mt. Whitney Hatchery.

Beginning at this point, various technological advances are now used which were unheard of in 1918. In order to speed hatching, the eggs are now placed in temperature-controlled incubators rather than in hatchery troughs where the hatching rate is much slower. Once hatched, the young fish must be handled with great care, since their crowded hatchery existence makes them susceptible to disease.

They are fed a newly developed dry ration in the hatchery, but it is still necessary to supplement their diet with fresh meat, a practice generally unnecessary for other species of trout. Since size at time of planting greatly influences their chances of survival, every effort is made to obtain the quickest possible growth. Even so, they seldom exceed 0.01 ounce apiece at planting time in early September.

At this stage of the program we note the greatest change from the old days. Whereas all back-country planting up through the 1940s was done by means of pack stock, today the department's twin-engine Beechcraft accomplishes the job in a fraction of the time at greatly reduced cost. Lists of lakes and numbers of trout to be planted in them are furnished the hatchery superintendents and, in early September, hatcherymen arise about 2 A.M., weigh out the proper number of golden trout, place them in marked aluminum cans and transport them to the Bishop or Long Valley airstrips.

The department's pilots, furnished with clearly marked maps and aerial photographs, drop their cargo unerringly into the many back-country lakes of the Sierra containing golden trout, thus helping to provide unique golden trout fishing for California's ever-increasing throngs of back-country anglers. The two-week trip by mule train is now a thing of the past. Seldom do more than a few hours elapse between initial loading and airdrop.

