

California: Summit Lake/Story and photos by Don Vachini

On previous fishing forays deep into California's Humphreys Basin drainage, Brandon Parker and I carried heavy backpacks laden with supplies for establishing multiday base camps. However, on a recent August morning, we donned light daypacks for a demanding, one-day visit to a favorite golden trout lake.

From Bishop, we drove west on California State Route 168 for 20 miles to arrive at the North Lake Trailhead. We started hiking at 6 a.m., moving swiftly through a forest of quaking aspen, cottonwood, and pines, steadily gaining altitude in the cool air. Initially, the 4.8-mile trail follows the North Fork of Bishop Creek to its origin, then ascends steeper above timberline prior to crossing Paiute Pass at 11,420 feet.

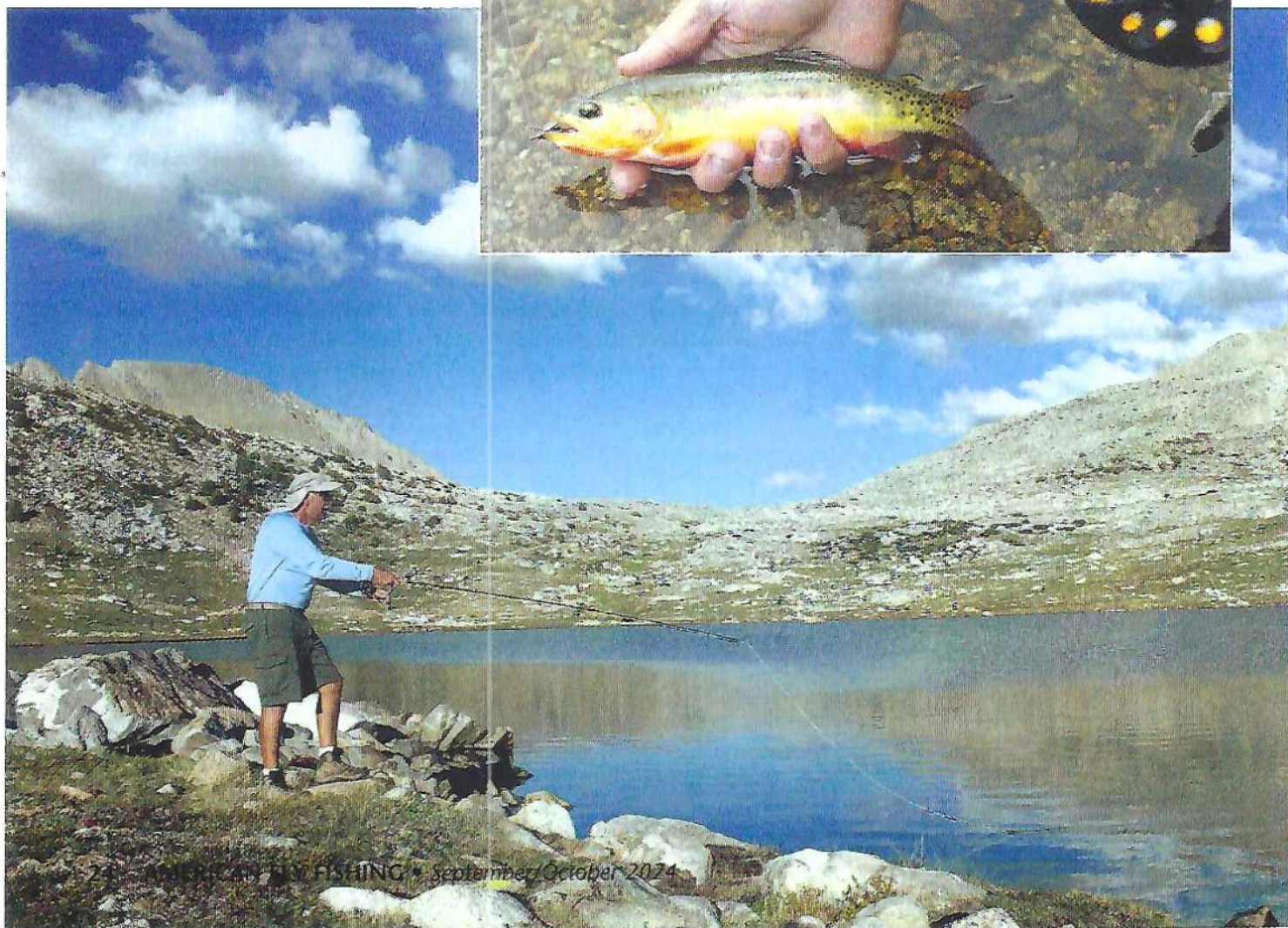
Just past 9 a.m., we approached our destination: Summit Lake, at 11,297 feet, and tucked up against the west slope of the Sierra Nevada crest.

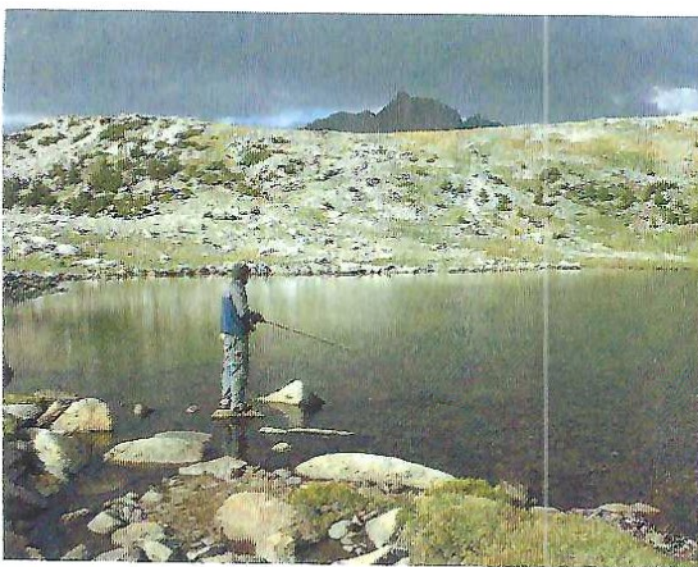
Nestled just below the pass atop the 42-square-mile Humphreys Basin drainage in the John Muir Wilderness, Summit Lake contributes to the headwaters of Paiute Creek, which eventually becomes a major tributary to the westward-flowing South Fork of the San Joaquin River.

Despite its harsh setting in a treeless, windswept depression, this 25-acre lake gets an annual influx of icy snowmelt; it offers minimal spawning habitat for trout, and its underwater topography features submerged boulders and drop-offs, with depths approaching 20 feet. In addition, varied insects and terrestri-

als are lofted up canyon and deposited by anabatic winds. All contribute to a healthy, self-sustaining golden trout population, with fish ranging from 6 to 14 inches.

With 12,937-foot Muriel Peak guarding our backs to the south, we were armed with 9-foot, 4-weight rods matched with floating lines. Past experiences had brought familiarity with the lake's two most productive areas, so we promptly gravitated to the outlet stream, where escaping water funnels past a submerged shelf along the lake's western edge, and where larger *Oncorhynchus agwa bonita* often lie





in wait. Keeping a low profile while casting parallel to the deep ledge, I watched a trout ambush my tan, size 14, beadhead scud pattern. The perfectly proportioned 13-incher battled like a fish twice its size. We worked to the outlet itself, where current begins to form. Here, gaudily-attired, 8- to 9-inch golden nuggets finned in the clear water and favored a size-16 Copper John suspended under a size 12 Sierra Bright Dot.

Snowmelt percolates via subterranean aquifers into the depths of the lake's east side, forming a nearly inaccessible yet well-oxygenated water sanctuary. Fish can hunker here in virtual anonymity. Switching to a sinking line, Brandon commenced lengthy casts well beyond the boulder-strewn shoreline, allowing an olive, size 8, conehead Woolly Buggler time to sink deep. Emulating a bite-size fingerling, the streamer soon piqued the interest of a pair of sequestered residents.

A short distance away, I opted for a size 14 Soft Hackle Caddis with a size 16, BH Zebra Midge trailer to cover the water column closer to shore. Fortuitously, the chop created by early afternoon winds initiated a seductive fluttering movement to the trailing fly, which proved hard to resist to the trout. Although noticeably distracted by this advantageous feeding frenzy, we suddenly realized that the swirling zephyrs were also rapidly ushering in menacing cobalt clouds. Prudently, we immediately departed before the weather intensified, each savoring our golden trout fixes on the hike out.

With its location alongside the trail and proximity to the Paiute Pass, Summit Lake makes for a reasonable day-hike destination. The caveat: visitors must be in top aerobic condition to safely achieve this feat in a full day's time. Utilizing proper time management, you should allot three hours to hike in, about four hours to fish and eat, and three hours to descend back to the trailhead.

The lake is accessible from July through September. For a less-strenuous adventure to Summit Lake or for a more thorough multiday exploration of the numerous high-elevation lakes of Humphreys Basin, Bishop Pack Outfitters (www.bishoppackoutfitters.net) can provide a full array of horseback options.

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