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Crazy!

A writer's quest to find the golden trout in Montana

Lisa Densmore



AS I STARED ACROSS THE NEAR-VERTICAL SCREE FIELD, I THOUGHT that I needed my head examined. This was by far the most treacherous test of endurance I had taken, and all for a fish! The entire wall of the steep-sided ravine felt as if it were moving. The cardinal rule of climbing, three points on the rock at all times, seemed a moot point if all three of those points threatened to roll 1,000 feet into the chasm below. I paused, jealously watching a mountain goat pick its way expertly up the scree on the opposite side of the canyon. The large white billy stepped sure-footedly upward, eventually cresting the ridge and disappearing into the next drainage in the time it took me to go about 100 feet. I gingerly placed one foot ahead of the other, testing each step before I trusted my full weight to it, which inevitably sent a half-dozen grapefruit-sized rocks tumbling toward the ribbon of Milly Creek far below.

Milly Creek runs clear and cold from Cave Lake, my destination, deep in the Crazy Mountains in south-central Montana. Day two of this three-day backpacking trip was waning, yet my partner, Jack Ballard, and I still hadn't made it to the lake. It lay eight miles from the trailhead. We had planned to reach it yesterday. Jack estimated that we had another two miles to go, which isn't far on low-elevation trails. Now there was no trail, only an exposed mountainside of loose rock at 8,000 feet above sea level. We traversed at an uphill angle, taking care to stay above the cliffs yet not so high that we became trapped in the ledges above us. The expanse of this landscape made me feel minuscule and expendable.

We climbed slowly but steadily under our 50-pound packs. At this elevation, two miles seemed to take an eternity, especially when every step triggered a micro-landslide. I stared at Conical Peak (elevation 10,715 feet) at the end of the valley, one of 23 peaks above 10,000 feet in the Crazies. Cave Lake apparently lay at the bottom of a cirque on the side of the mountain. I was dog-tired, hot, and dehydrated. The intense afternoon sun baked the mountainside. My water reservoir had run dry an hour ago.

"I don't like Cave Lake anymore," Jack declared. He rested by a scrubby lone shrub amid this barren alpine land.

"But we haven't gotten there yet," I said, carefully lowering my pack onto the rocks, happy for the chance to air out my sweaty back. I had started hating Cave Lake just before lunch.

To reach Cave Lake, Lisa Densmore, left, and her companion, Jack Ballard, had to traverse a scree-covered mountainside. JACK BALLARD

“Exactly,” said Jack, “This is probably the worst alpine destination that I like to go to.”

Jack had made the arduous journey twice before. He still claimed the sweetness of place greatly outweighed the effort to get there. I think it more a case of the human brain’s natural suppression of pain over time. Jack hadn’t remembered how challenging this route was. He had only remembered the reward: the chance to hook a rare golden trout in one of the most pristine lakes in the Rocky Mountains.

Cave Lake is among a dwindling number of places where golden trout swim. They survive only in the cold, clear water of the most remote alpine streams and tarns in the Sierra Nevada and the Rocky Mountains. They do not tolerate warm water or a disturbed environment. Golden trout’s presence indicates water purity because they quickly disappear from places of excessive human intrusion, domestic animals, farming, and lakes where other trout swim. Brown trout eat them. Brook trout out-compete them for food, and rainbow trout and cutthroat trout interbreed with them.

Of the 50 lakes in Montana that once harbored populations of golden trout, only 14 still support the species. All of these 14 lakes lie at least five miles from a road. Adding to the challenge, the opportunity to catch them is short, about six weeks per year, when these high-elevation tarns are free of ice. Golden trout may be small—typically 6 to 12 inches long—but earning the chance to cast a line into a lake filled with them is the angling equivalent of striking a precious mother lode of real gold. And one does have to work for it.

A few weeks earlier, we hiked 11 miles round-trip to Sylvan Lake in the Beartooth Mountains where I caught my first golden trout. Like a prospector on his first claim, I was hooked on gold. I had never seen a more beautiful freshwater fish, gold-hued for sure but with large dark spots, an olive back, and a cranberry-red stripe down each side. But our time to fish in Sylvan Lake had been brief because of the long day hike to reach it.

Trekking to Cave Lake sounded good from the comfort of our living room staring at a topographical map of the Crazy Mountains. Though half of the route was off-trail, Jack seemed confident we could cover the roughly eight miles to the lake in a day, then fish for a day, then hike out the third morning. To me, an avid backpacker and angler, the trip sounded wonderfully romantic: I would camp by a remote mountain tarn with my handsome sweetheart and cast for one of the most winsome fish in the freshwater world.

Golden trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss aguabonita*) are technically a subspecies of rainbow trout. California's state fish, goldens are native to the Kern Plateau in the southern Sierra Nevada. Isolated in this hanging valley, they evolved there over a period of 100,000 years. Though American Indians were likely the first humans to see golden trout, the first Europeans to discover them were early prospectors, loggers, and shepherds who traveled by chance to the Kern River area during the 1800s. Enamored with the color and spunk of



Lisa Densmore admires a golden trout she has just caught in Sylvan Lake. These elusive fish live only in remote lakes with no contaminants. JACK BALLARD

these mountain fish, a few of these early explorers soon distributed goldens in other lakes and rivers in the Sierra Nevada, carrying a dozen or so at a time in coffee pots and other simple containers.

At first, the fish flourished, but by 1900, golden trout populations were in serious decline. Overgrazing by sheep and cattle and nonnative species of trout disrupted the fragile ecosystems in which goldens fanned. By 1978, as goldens neared extinction, the federal government created the 303,000-acre Golden Trout Wilderness to help revitalize their native habitat. Today, only ten miles of water in the Kern region contain pure golden trout, but the breed also survives in several other isolated bodies of water in the western United States, including Sylvan Lake and Cave Lake in Montana.

According to the oft-cited 1984 government report, *The History and Present Status of Golden Trout in Montana*, by Patrick E. Marcuson (State of Montana, Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks), a fisheries biologist for the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries transported 600 golden trout eggs from California to a hatchery near Bozeman, Montana, in 1907. Though records are vague, Marcuson believes that additional eggs arrived in Montana until 1939, when California imposed an embargo on their export. The year before the embargo, Sylvan Lake received its first stocking. When California resumed egg shipments in the 1950s, additional golden trout were added periodically to Sylvan Lake, where they thrived. Since the 1950s, Sylvan Lake has supplied the brood stock for other Montanan tarns, with the stockings usually accomplished from the air.

Cave Lake was one such recipient. A fisherman pulled the Montana state record golden trout, weighing 5.4 pounds, from Cave Lake in 2000. A five-pounder isn't huge by trout standards, but considering these fish have only about ten weeks per year without ice over their heads, the record-breaker was one grand fish!

Golden trout feed on a variety of aquatic insects that hatch off the water, as well on as terrestrial invertebrates, such as grasshoppers, that accidentally fall into it. Anglers consider a one-pound fish a noteworthy prize. The trout I pulled from Sylvan Lake was about that size and a feisty fighter. That's when Jack suggested that we backpack through the Crazy Mountains into Cave Lake.

An isolated range that straddles Gallatin and Lewis and Clark national forests, the Crazy Mountains extend for 40 miles between the Musselshell and Yellowstone rivers, northwest of Big Timber. As a result of their

location on the leeward side of the Continental Divide, they are more arid and less forested than many other mountain ranges in Montana, and less visited. Surrounded almost entirely by private land, access into the Crazies is limited especially from the south and east, where the highest peaks rise.

Though mostly roadless, the government has not classified the Crazies as Wilderness; they are therefore vulnerable to human exploitation, particularly for natural gas and mineral extraction. Several efforts by conservation groups to gain protection of the interior of the range have failed in the past, complicated by the patchwork of land ownership. When I learned of this, my desire to see pristine Cave Lake and its golden trout increased. At some unknown point in the future, the opportunity might cease given this species' intolerance for disruption. The difficulty of the situation hit home on the first day of our expedition to Cave Lake.

Like other parts of Montana, the approach to the Crazy Mountains is a checkerboard with private owners effectively having private access to public sections of land because the public quadrants are not by a public road. One of the only ways to access the Crazy Mountains is on a right of way through a private guest ranch. It's a challenge to find it. We had to park outside a specific gate, walk to the main ranch house to sign in, then follow a poorly marked footpath through several pastures. Once through the ranch land, the route followed Sweet Grass Creek, passing through several gates, each a boundary between public and private land.

We had a late start but covered the first three and a half miles in a quick one and a half hours. Though it was tough to tell the footpath from the many cow paths, the direction was obvious. To the west, we could see the bottom of the deep, narrow Milly Creek drainage at the end of the valley.

The ranchland ended at a clearing known as Eagle Park. From there, we followed Sweet Grass Creek, the main waterway into which the mountain streams in this part of the Crazy Mountains, including Milly Creek, flow. Spruce moths flitted around their namesake trees chased by a ruby-throated kinglet. Now, in early August, Sweet Grass Creek looked like an average brook, though it was obvious by the broad, rocky swath on either side that it swelled to an impressive hundred yards wide in the spring.

Though there was no official trail, horses and cattle had trodden a narrow path. The footing remained reasonable until we reached the crossing for Sweet Grass Creek. My legs instantly turned scarlet after three slippery steps in the chill water, but the spot was too picturesque to leave without a few photos. The ford was just below the mouth of a narrow gorge. I imagined the



Deep in the Crazy Mountains, eight miles from a road, Cave Lake is nestled in a cirque. LISA DENSMORE

powerful torrent that must have funneled through the gorge only a couple of months earlier.

An hour later, we were still by Sweet Grass Creek with the shadows from the surrounding mountains drawing closer. We decided to halt for the day rather than try to make it to Cave Lake, which was still four miles away as the crow flies. The rest of route would be rugged and off-trail. Once on the scree, there would be no place to camp. And straying off-course could prove extremely dangerous among the ledges and cliffs. We thought it best to be prudent even though we were in the Crazy Mountains.

The Crazy Mountains were originally known as the Crazy Woman Mountains. Captured in the popular 1972 film, *Jeremiah Johnson*, the story goes that a pioneer woman went insane here after her family died. This is a western translation from the Crow Indian language. The Crows, who hunted in the Crazy Mountains long before European settlers arrived, called them the Blue Bird Mountains. In the mid-1850s, Crow Chief Plenty Coups had a vision atop Crazy Peak—at 11,214 feet, the highest in the range—that told him how to lead his people. When the Crow tried to describe this

vision to early explorers, they misinterpreted “vision” to mean “crazy.” As we labored on the loose rocks, I thought I would go crazy if we didn’t arrive soon at Cave Lake.

The morning had started normally enough. Shouldering our packs, we climbed through a forest of moss-bearded trees. We saw evidence of moose among the monarda, harebells, and yarrow as we scrambled over an inconvenient blowdown, soon gaining an open steppe. Looking at the massive peaks and high rocky ridges above us, I felt the expanse of the area for the first time.

We passed a rock cairn, the first of many random cairns built hastily by prior backcountry travelers to Cave Lake who wanted to remember the route on their return. Despite the markers, they probably didn’t travel the exact way twice. It was impossible to properly mark the route yet still make timely progress. The cairns merely confirmed that someone had passed that way before. I trusted my map and GPS more than those rock piles.

We dropped off the steppe and headed toward the mouth of the canyon from which Milly Creek flowed. I could hear, roaring below us, the creek we needed to cross. We could do this at only one spot. No wading this time. The crossing required a three-foot jump, from one rock to another, across the fast-moving creek before it headed into steep-sided chasm. Even if Cave Lake were free of ice, Milly Creek would prove an impassable barrier before July 4 or after a heavy rain.

As the timber above the steppe thinned, Milly Creek’s roar became a distant whisper far below us. Waterfalls, a thousand feet tall but only a few feet wide, cascaded down the opposite side of the canyon. Soon the trees gave way to the cursed scree. I crested a rib of the mountain, exhausted and wondering how much farther I could go before succumbing to an unwanted Crow vision of my own, when I came to a thick patch of alpine lupine alongside a fast tumbling stream. Water! It was so cold it made my teeth ache, but so sweet! I felt rejuvenated, and we had reached the end of the sidehill rubble.

An alpine garden greeted us on the other side of the stream. We walked through the asters, paintbrush, fireweed, and goldenrod. Bluebells nodded in the sun and alpine daisies smiled warmly at us from their boggy mounds. We stepped over dozens of foot-wide tributaries, each snaking their way through the colorful wildflowers toward upper Milly Creek. This was an alpine Eden compared with the hell we had just traversed. It occurred to me that we trod on a fragile alpine bog, but there was no trail or durable surface to walk on. In New England, where I had gained most of my mountain experience, walking



Jack Ballard attempts to hook a golden trout in Cave Lake. LISA DENSMORE

here was akin to a cardinal sin. I consoled myself with the fact that in one year, perhaps eight people would come this way.

The large cirque promised to encircle us just ahead, though ominous clouds were quickly obscuring the top of the mountain. We waded around the edge of a small pond that Jack dubbed the “nursery,” making our way to the main lake just above.

Fish rose, nabbing the small bugs that floated off the glassy surface. Golden trout!

A staircase of large boulders speckled with orange roe separated the main lake from the nursery. Golden trout typically spawn at ice-out near the outlet of their resident lakes when the water temperature creeps above 44 degrees. At Cave Lake, elevation 8,645 feet and sheltered by Conical Peak, the spawn was apparently still going on in August.

Summer here brings no guarantee of fair weather. A few drops of rain began to fall as we quickly set up our tent. Within moments of crawling inside, claps of thunder and powerful gusts of wind rattled our flimsy shelter as lightning snaked across the summit of Conical Peak. I shuddered briefly at the violence of the storm, then fell asleep, exhausted and not caring whether a bolt of lightning found our tent or not.

When I awoke in the morning, the weather still brooded, but the rain had stopped. After breakfast, we assembled a fly rod then walked to the edge of Cave Lake. The lake was a 40-acre mirror with Conical Peak perfectly reflected in the water. It was chilly. Patches of snow lingered on the large glacial moraine that blanketed a third of the great cirque like a pale nubby veil.

It was grand yet peaceful, one of nature's amphitheaters waiting for the next act to begin. Undoubtedly, a lot of backstage action hid from Jack and me, as the annual cycle of life in this fragile ecosystem must be completed during the lake's brief thaw. If the heavy frost coating our tent and the tingling of my cold toes were any indication, winter would return soon to this majestic place.

All trace of the previous evening's storm had vanished, but a wedge of mackerel clouds forecast another mountain gale later that day. I was anxious to pack up camp and get through the scree field with a buffer of time. For me, the challenge of the route trumped the chance to catch golden trout, but Jack was anxious to hook a fish.

I followed him for a while with my camera as he worked his way along the bouldery shore, casting for unseen fish in the crystal clear water. Without any fish to photograph, my attention wandered to a tuft of Merten's mountain heather, a white alpine flower endemic to the northern Rockies and the Cascade Mountains. As I focused on the tiny bells at my feet, Jack worked his way away from me along the lakeshore.

"Get over here, quick!" Jack suddenly shouted, "I got one!" The tip of his bent rod wiggled erratically as he tried to keep his line from going slack. Cave Lake still harbored large, healthy golden trout.

"Quick" is a relative speed when navigating 70 yards of large rocks. As I leapt from rock to rock, taking care not to slip or sprain an ankle, I heard Jack groan.

"Lost it."

We spent the next hour trying to catch another but had no luck, not even on the nursery pond, though fish still rose here and there on its calm surface. As we began the journey back to civilization, Jack was already planning our next expedition to Cave Lake. His attraction to golden trout was even stronger than mine. I knew we would be back. I only hoped the human brain would pull its usual trick, allowing me to forget the pain and luring me back for the rare golden reward.

Professional writer and photographer LISA DENSMORE is a longtime member of the Appalachian Mountain Club and a frequent speaker at the AMC Pinkham Notch Visitor Center. Her latest book is *Best Easy Day Hikes Adirondacks* (Falcon-Guides, 2011).

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