ADVENTURES OF THE AGUABONITA

Article & Photos by Joshua Bergan

I kept returning to the cliff, looking down, thinking it was a bad idea. I was aware that insufficient oxygen was getting to my brain, and my confusion was all that was clear. I picked berries for too long after charging up to 9,000 feet in search of golden trout, and the trail had moved.

My buddy, somewhere bagging chanterelles and porcinis, kept yelling at me to take the creek down but it went over a waterfall. But that's what Bear Grylls does and I was running out of options. At least I had some huckleberries and three questionable mushrooms to get me through.

Forty minutes later when I returned to my partner at a lower lake, I learned he was advising me not to take the creek and that he was on the trail a little ways from me. But I don't know what to believe since I'm sure I was only lost for 15 minutes. The mermaid probably wasn't real, either...

It was just another day of fishing for oncorhynchus mykiss aguabonita.

Those sharp peaks can seem so far away, especially when the biggest trout are at the bottoms of the valleys. Yet something about golden trout draws anglers through some of the steepest, thickest hikes. It could be aesthetic value of the orange stripe over the lavender parr marks and gold backdrop. Maybe the chance to touch a something most anglers will never have the opportunity to see in person. The beauty of their habitat? The challenge of getting there, and then fooling them? The change of pace? Who's to say what incites this irrational desire of anglers to hunt golden trout.

It epitomizes the height of the fly-fishing affliction. A good friend once hiked up the 3,500 vertical feet to a popular cutthroat fishery, then continued up the next 1,000 feet over the craggy ridge to the 500-foot glissade required to get to the goldens' paradise. After giving blood the previous day, and catching a buzz the previous night. He staggered home with images of 17-inch beauties - trophies in this world. He didn't skip hopper fishing on the Little Blackfoot the following day, either.

"IT WAS JUST ANOTHER DAY OF FISHING FOR ONCORHYNCHUS MYKISS AGUABONITA."

If you go, be prepared with a first-aid kit, ground clearance and multi-ply tires, Tupperware for huckleberries, a camera, lots of drinking water, and expectations for the worst. Turned ankles, altitude sickness, frustrating access and difficult fishing await.

Lightning Lake is Montana's most famous golden-trout fishery, known for its above-average-sized fish. Anglers pine to ply the still waters of this classic fishery until the lengths required to get there sink in. The most common path is up the trail-less namesake tributary via the West Fork of the Stillwater River. Author Bob Willis recounted his journey in his book, Trout Adventures North America: "It was a steep climb at a sustained 15 percent grade with lots of downfall. We decided to try to traverse around the worst of the downfall and found

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COMPARISON CHART OF BEAR PEPPER SPRAY

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Current Registrant		Counter Assault		McNeil River Enterprises	UDAP		Security Equipment	
Date EPA Registered		May 12, 1998 (The First)		Dec 22, 1998	March 18, 1999		July 17, 2000	
Manufactured by		Counter Assault		Contract Filler	Contract Filler		Security Equipment	
Recommendations Suggested by bear biologists and wildlife specialists of the IGBC*		Counter Assault		Guard Alaska	Pepper Power		Frontiersman	
Minimum Net Weight	7.9 oz 225 gr	8.1 oz 230 gram	10.2oz 290 gram	9 oz 255 gr	7.9 oz 225 gr	9.2 oz 260 gr	7.9 oz 225 gr	9.2 oz 260 gr
% Capsaicin & Related Capsaicinoids	1% - 2%	2%	2%	1.3%	2%	2%	2%	2%
		Produced with OC rated at 3.6 Million SHU's						
Shotgun-Cloud Spray Pattern		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Minimum Spray Distance	25 ft	30 ft	32 ft	15-20 ft Does NOT meet IGBC Recommendations	30 ft	30 ft	30 ft	35 ft
Minimum Spray Time	6 sec	7.2 sec	9.2 sec	9 sec	4 sec	5.4 sec	5 sec	5 sec
					Does NOT meet IGBC Recommendations		Does NOT meet IGBC Recommendations	
Meets ALL IGBC* Recommendations?		YES	YES	NO	NO		NO	

Net Weight, % Capsaicin and other Capsaicinoids, Spray Distance and Spray Time as provided above, are taken directly from each product's EPA approved label

*IGBC: The Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee consists of representatives from the U.S. Forest Service, the National Park Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Geological Survey and representatives of the state wildlife agencies of Idaho, Montana, Washington and Wyoming. In the interest of international coordination and cooperation, the Canadian Wildlife Service is also represented.

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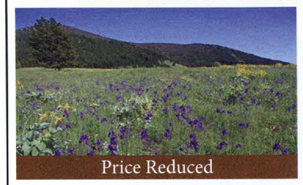

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"LIGHTNING LAKE IS MONTANA'S MOST FAMOUS GOLDEN-TROUT FISHERY, KNOWN FOR ITS ABOVE-AVERAGE-SIZED FISH."

that there was more downfall and several large boulder fields to work around no matter what direction we turned." Some sherpa-anglers won't even admit they've been there to avoid being bothered by intrepid anglers about the risky, unrecommendable hike.

For years, the state record was from Lightning Lake in the Beartooth Mountains (a 4.9-pound brute), but now Cave Lake in the Crazies holds the title - a two-foot-long 5.43-pound diplodocus from July, 2000. This lake has becoming almost as popular since. While not quite as arduous, accessing it is no Yellowstone-River Bird Float. After plodding over private land (a sign-in sheet allows for access), a decent hike leads you to about five miles of ankle-breaker talus that marks the remainder of the trek.

The presence of golden trout offers no guarantees. These fish are notoriously finicky. Even authors Ron Cordes and Randall Kaufmann, in their book "Lake Fishing with a Fly", relayed a story of being stymied: "The fish seemed to be the size of steelhead, and equally demanding. Hours of fishing yielded nothing, but just the privileged glimpse into their almost inaccessible environment was worth the 20-mile hike." This savviness seems uniform amongst golden trout, from California to Wyoming to Idaho, and certainly in Montana.

The relatively seldom-fished-to cutthroat and grayling of the high hills act like they don't see flies often - you can catch them. But I've only ever been able to get the aguabonita to eat a fly pattern once

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"The fish seemed to be the size of steelhead, and equally demanding. Hours of fishing yielded nothing, but just the privileged glimpse into their almost inaccessible environment was worth the 20-mile hike."

per day. My first ate a Bloom's Parachute Flying Ant on my first cast (thank you very much), but the fish would barely tilt their eyes for the next several hours, and no more would eat. My second golden trout, the following summer, ate a Goddard's Caddis but learned well that it wasn't real. It's as if they periodically convene to share what they've learned about the food-like debris that has gaffes hidden in it. Depuy's trout can seem like simpletons when you're at 9,000 feet.

It's almost always sight-fishing to cruisers, but sometimes they recoil into the deep abyss. Along with ants and caddis, they'll eat streamers, leeches, scuds and midge imitations. Once. Anglers can also look to the inlet and outlet streams.

They are sparingly sprinkled from Carbon County to Beaverhead County and Missoula County. I don't think I'd be spoiling anyone's secret to mention that a relatively easy place to find some cookie-cutters is the Golden Trout Lakes of the Gallatin Range near Big Sky. A one-way hike of about two miles and 1,100 vertical feet can get you there - you and other anglers.

But when you watch one swim toward your fly, you'll remember why you came. And when you confront the last-second denial, you'll remember why you almost went home already. But when one does finally bite your fly, you'll have earned a rare accomplishment that will be an long-held highlight of your fishing memories.

Where ever, whenever, and why ever you go, be prepared for adventure. The feeble should consider themselves warned. MSJ

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