

Around the Northwest

News, Views, and Piscatorial Pursuits



PHOTO BY JOSH BERGAN FOR MATCH THE HATCH

Wind River Range, WY By Joshua Bergan

Butter up a local. That's my advice for getting into the world-famous top-secret golden trout fishing in Wyoming's Wind River Range. Its many lakes are cloak-and-dagger mysteries, known to only the initiated. Even published information (including this article) is dubious.

Hundreds of lakes dot the Winds. Any tarn bigger than a few acres likely has brook, cutthroat, golden, and/or rainbow trout (or hybridized versions, or, in a few cases, brown trout). We have local legend Finis Mitchell to thank for this, as he took the initiative in the 1920s and '30s to spread more than 2.5 million trout in more than 300 lakes (by his estimation). The state government took over where Mitchell stopped, stocking golden trout until 1994. The program was reestablished in 2006, according to Kevin Johnson, Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD) regional fisheries supervisor for the Lander Region. Only a select few lakes were stocked with 3.5-inch goldens in 2014, however, particularly in the Fitzpatrick Wilderness (aka "the Fitz") and the Popo Agie Wilderness. Drainages that can support wild goldens are not stocked, and there are numerous wild populations.

Though Mitchell's book, *Wind River Trails*, is still in print, its information is dated. And though WGFD keeps stocking records, they are limited in scope and are not available online. The scoop is genuinely hard to get.

Many trailheads serve the Winds, with Elkhart Park (near Pinedale on the northwest

side of the range) and Big Sandy (near Boulder on the southwest side) being the most popular. Access via the Wind River Reservation (Dickinson Park) requires expensive permits and can be complicated, but grants the quickest access to the lightly trodden Popo Agie Wilderness Area. Tribal permits are available at stores in Crowheart, Riverton, Dubois, Lander, Boulder, and Shoshoni, as well as at stores and the tribal offices (on Ethete Road) in Fort Washakie

Rumors of big brookies seem to be obsolete, but small brook trout are widespread, according to George Hunker of Sweetwater Fishing Expeditions (www.sweetwaterfishing.com). Mitchell writes, "Brooks in the Winds have largely over-populated and in some instances have out-competed other species. In a few places the brooks have worked their way upstream and gotten into our golden lakes and now there are no more goldens, unless there is a distinct falls. Drainages which are all cuts should be the same."



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The Winds are oft considered the best big-golden trout range in the world. In 1948, Cook Lake produced the world-record golden trout, a 28-inch behemoth weighing more than 11 pounds. More recently, in 2012, Golden Lake produced a 21-inch specimen, and many fish nearly that size have fallen to fly anglers over the years.

Anglers don't need to hike to the highest stone-bottom pool to find big goldens. Still waters slightly below the tree line (10,000 to 11,000 feet) are high enough, and often harbor more scuds, *Callibaetis* mayflies, leeches, and other trout food, which sustain bigger and healthier fish. Although certain trails are busy, the Winds are still unpopulated compared with nearby Jackson or the mountains of Colorado. "I was just out in late August [on trails] and saw no one," Hunker told me via email last year, noting that August 5 through 20 is the busiest time of year, while "July is surprisingly quiet and the best fishing."

That said, late July is often as early as most hikers choose to risk it, due to mud, snow, and mosquitoes. Be prepared for bears (grizzlies, in the northern range) and moose. Food storage is required in places.

Oh, and fish scuds: goldens love them; big goldens get big eating them.



Leech Lake, WA By Mark Halperin

When the weather gets as hot as it did last summer, finding water cool enough to fish for trout becomes a major problem, all the more so for catch-and-release anglers. Even spring-fed waters heat up. That's when the mountain locale of Leech Lake, elevation 4,416 feet, can save you from fly-fishing withdrawal.

At a bit more than 40 acres in area, Leech Lake is attractive for several reasons beyond the scenic mountain setting. You can drive to a clearing on the northeast shore, where there is a ramp of sorts, and easily launch a float tube, pontoon, or ridged boat.



There aren't many places to cast from shore, or many wading spots, so a craft of some sort is almost a necessity. Because the lake is in the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest, you must purchase a U.S. Forest Service parking permit (a Washington Discover Pass is insufficient). However, doing so gives you access to campsites along the northeast shore. The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife stocks the lake with brook trout, as well as large triploid rainbows.

Getting there is not complicated, except for a poorly marked turnoff just east of White Pass and a short final stretch of gravel road. Drive US Highway 12, a twisting, two-laner with mysteriously heavy truck traffic, about 50 miles west from Yakima, in eastern Washington, or about 70 miles southeast from Enumclaw via State Route 410, SR 123, and US Highway 12, respectively. These relatively large population centers subject Leech Lake to more fishing pressure than other eastern Washington lakes. Some are drawn by Leech Lake's fly-fishing-only designation, others by the fact that you can keep up to five trout, though only one exceeding 14 inches. In addition to occasional crowds, strong winds, particularly in the afternoons, can make things a little uncomfortable for anglers. Leech Lake is shallow, ranging from 5 to 10 feet deep, and the extensive shallows mean fish can be difficult to approach. Plus you'll need to account for the depth, or lack thereof, when choosing tackle and tactics.

Leech Lake is open year-round, but at this elevation that means when the lake is ice free. Early in the season, Chironomids abound. As summer arrives, damselflies become increasingly prevalent, and anglers can fish both nymphs and dries. Leech Lake was one of the first places I successfully fished adult damselfly patterns. The tall weeds that fringe the south and southwest shores harbor dense populations of damselflies and fish that feed on them. The reed edges are ideal places to try a blue dry damselfly imitation. Often, twitching the fly gently provokes strikes. Midsummer brings the *Callibaetis* hatch, typically between late morning and midafternoon.

By mid-August there's not a damselfly to be seen, neither nymph nor adult, though an occasional dragonfly does flit by, and the *Callibaetis* hatch is essentially over. At this point fishing gets considerably more difficult, but anglers using small