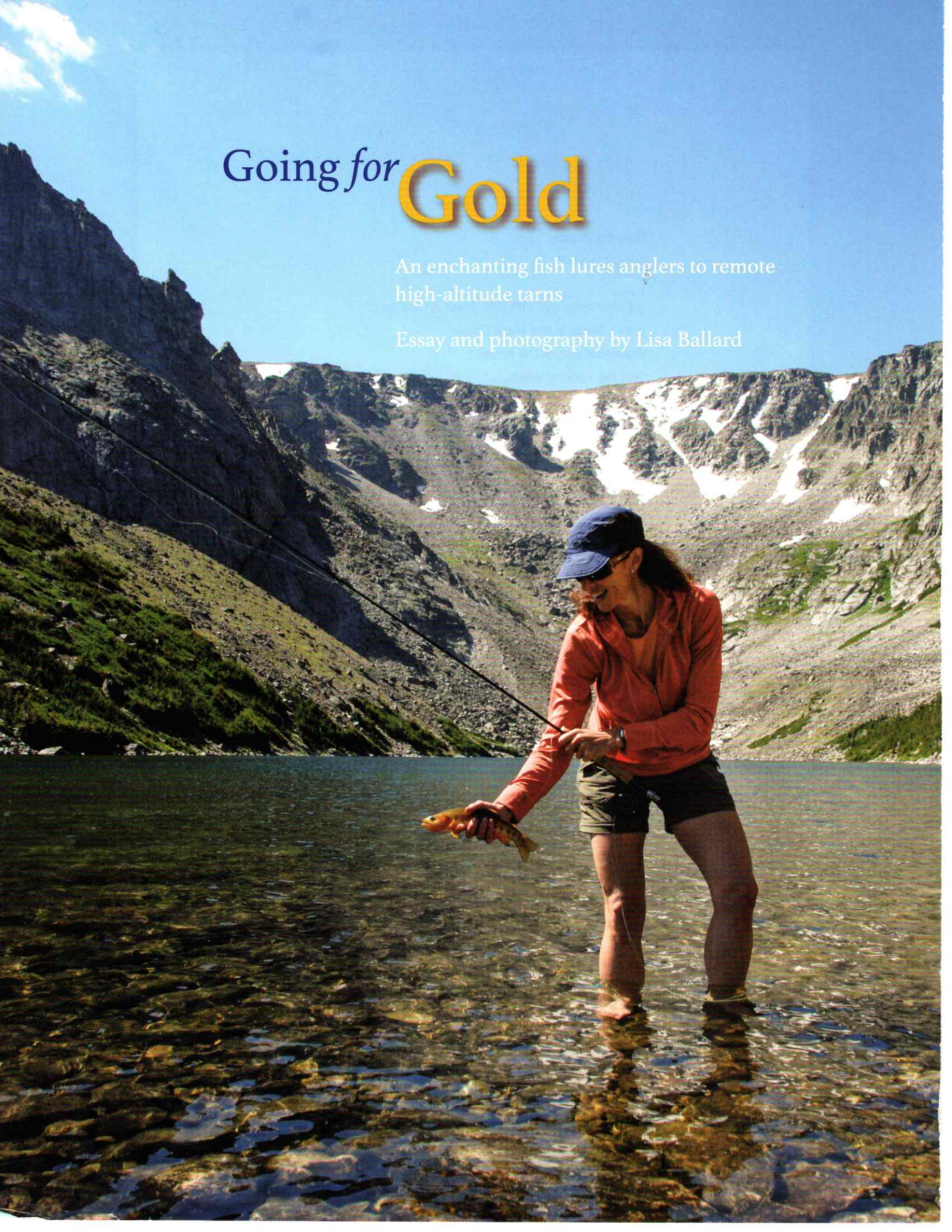


# Going for Gold

An enchanting fish lures anglers to remote high-altitude tarns

Essay and photography by Lisa Ballard







*The fish wasn't big, only about 10 inches long, yet it was a trophy I had longed to catch. Though I held it for less than a minute, just long enough to remove the hook, take a photo and then release it to its underwater world, its gold-tinged body with its bold crimson stripe, gill plates and fins is forever etched in my instant recall. Among anglers, some fish are memorable due to their size, but this one was special because of its striking color, rarity and the effort it takes to catch one.*

**B**ased on its exquisite hues, you might expect to find this prized piscine finning a remote tropical reef, yet it's not a saltwater species. On the contrary, it needs cold, clear, fresh water to survive, the kind found above tree line in the highest mountain ranges in North America. I landed that 10-incher about as far from an ocean as one can get in North America, at Sylvan Lake, in Montana's Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness, about 9,200 feet above sea level.

*The Fish.* The fish was a golden trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss aguabonita*). Sylvan Lake, where I caught it, is about 6 miles and 3,900 vertical feet from a trailhead near the tiny hamlet of Roscoe, population 15. The trout is a species that many avid anglers have on their bucket list. For hikers who love to fish, landing one is as heavenly as the alpine tarns where they're found.

*Left: The author with golden trout in hand, Sylvan Lake.*

*Above: The gold-tinged body and bold crimson stripe of the golden trout.*



Landing a golden trout  
is as heavenly as the  
alpine tarns where  
they're found.

Even without the allure of golden trout, Sylvan Lake is a destination worth hiking to. Framed by the rugged buttresses of the East Rosebud Plateau, one end of the lake is crowned by its namesake Sylvan Peak. The other drops off the end of the world, not unlike other hanging tarns that pepper the Beartooth Mountains. However, "going for gold" is what sets Sylvan Lake apart.

Golden trout are a subspecies of rainbow trout with which they can

hybridize, and therein lies one of the reasons for their rarity. There are very few pure golden trout left. Nowadays, Sylvan Lake is one of those few spots with the right habitat.

Golden trout originally came from the Kern Plateau in the southern Sierra Nevada and are California's state fish. Early prospectors, loggers and shepherds stumbled upon them during the 1800s. Enamored with their color and spunk, a few of these early travelers distributed goldens into other lakes and rivers in the





Sierra Nevada, carrying a few at a time in coffee pots and other simple containers.

At first, the fish flourished, but by 1900, golden trout populations had steeply declined. Overgrazing by sheep and cattle and the introduction of other trout disrupted the fragile alpine ecosystems where they fished. By 1978, as goldens neared extinction, the federal government created the 303,000-acre Golden



Trout Wilderness in California to help revitalize the native habitat of this beautiful fish. The effort proved futile. Today, all of the surviving golden trout in California have hybridized with other trout species.

By sheer luck, a number of pure golden trout ended up in Montana's Sylvan Lake, which now provides golden trout eggs to the rest of the world. Around the turn of the 20th century, a train carrying golden trout fingerlings from California and

*Left: Sylvan Lake, with Sylvan Peak in the background.*

*Above: Lodgepole pine and fallen logs in an old burn area.*



Sylvan Lake is  
about 6 miles and  
3,900 vertical feet  
from a trailhead.

bound for somewhere east of Montana broke down near the Beartooths. To save the fish, rescuers released them into several high mountain lakes, including Sylvan.

The next shipment of golden trout to Montana was on purpose. In 1907, 600 golden trout eggs were transported from California to a hatchery near Bozeman by the US Bureau of Fisheries. Additional eggs came to Montana regularly until 1939, when California imposed an embargo on their export. The year before the embargo, Sylvan Lake received its

first stock since the train debacle. 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 golden trout to other tarns in the Beartooths, as well as a few high lakes near Bozeman, in the Mission Mountains, and in Wyoming, the only places today where you can cast for pure golden trout. But you have to work for them. Golden trout can survive only in the cold, clear waters of the most remote alpine lakes







and streams. They do not tolerate water over 60 degrees (F) or a disturbed environment. In fact, golden trout are an indicator of water purity as they quickly disappear in places of excessive human intrusion, domestic animals, farming and the presence of other trout. Brown trout eat them. Brook trout out-compete with them for food and rainbow trout and cutthroat trout hybridize with them.

Of the 50 lakes in Montana that once harbored populations of golden

*Left: View of East Rosebud Lake from the trail.*

*Above left: Old burn area.*

*Above: Angler hiking through the old burn area.*





a pristine spot above tree line, I can't get my pack ready fast enough. Add to that the chance to catch a fish I have never seen before, well, you can imagine my enthusiasm when my husband suggested going to Sylvan Lake, in 2011, shortly after we moved to Red Lodge, Montana.

The route was an unrelenting slog from beginning to end. The trail started up long switchbacks as it climbed away from East Rosebud Lake. About a mile into the hike, I gratefully paused atop a boulder at a bend to catch my breath and ogle the view of the lake, already 1,000 feet below.

Above that rock perch, the path continued its steady ascent through acres of stunted Douglas fir, which require wildfire to germinate. The forest beside the trail had sprouted 45 years ago, but most of the trees were still only head high. Hundreds of barren tree trunks lay prone across the mountainside like giant gray pick-up sticks. Other charred sentinels stood here and there, clinging to the rocky soil. Fireweed, Indian paintbrush, pearly everlastings and other wildflowers bloomed beside the trail, intermixed with a multitude of



trout, only 20 still support the species. All of these lakes are at least 5 miles into the backcountry. Most are off-trail. Adding to the challenge, the opportunity to catch them is short, about six weeks per year when these high-elevation ponds are free of ice.

Golden trout are not big compared to other trout species. The Montana state record is a 5.4-pound, 23.5-inch fish. Most anglers net 6 to 12-inch fish. Yet catching a golden trout is the angling equivalent of striking a precious mother lode, which is why anglers travel to Montana from around the world in hopes of hooking one.

*The Hike.* Sylvan Lake is considered the most accessible body of water containing golden trout because there's a footpath to it. But it's not a route to follow on a whim due to the distance, elevation, vertical gain and the risk of afternoon thunderstorms that commonly develop in the northern Rocky Mountains during the summer.

In my case, I love fly fishing, and when I can combine it with a hike to



*Left top: Old burn area.  
Middle: Fireweed.  
Bottom: Indian paintbrush.*

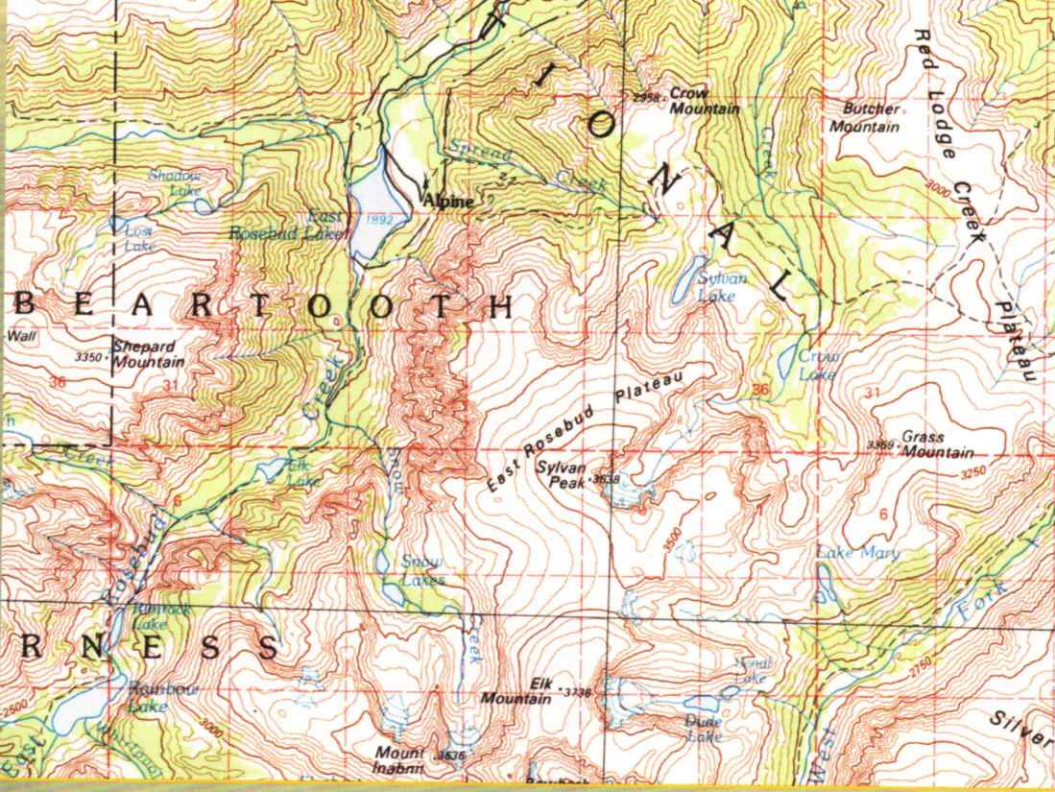
*Opposite far right, top: Wild raspberry.  
Middle: Columbine.  
Bottom: Huckleberry*

*Opposite right, top: Mountain harebell.  
Opposite bottom: Fly fishing on Sylvan Lake.*









wild huckleberries, raspberries and thimbleberries ripening in the sun. The berries tempted me to give up the climb and fill my belly, but I had a goal. I was going for gold.

After about 5 miles, the trail broke onto a broad, treeless plateau, then dipped momentarily before the last uphill push to the lake. I marveled at the expanse of it all, acres of tundra speckled with delicate alpine flowers, with hulking goliath peaks just beyond.

We reached the lake by late morning. The water reminded me of green-tinted glass. A fish rose now and again, the telltale rings briefly disturbing the smooth surface. I strung my rod then walked half-way down one side of the shoreline, while my husband shed his hiking boots

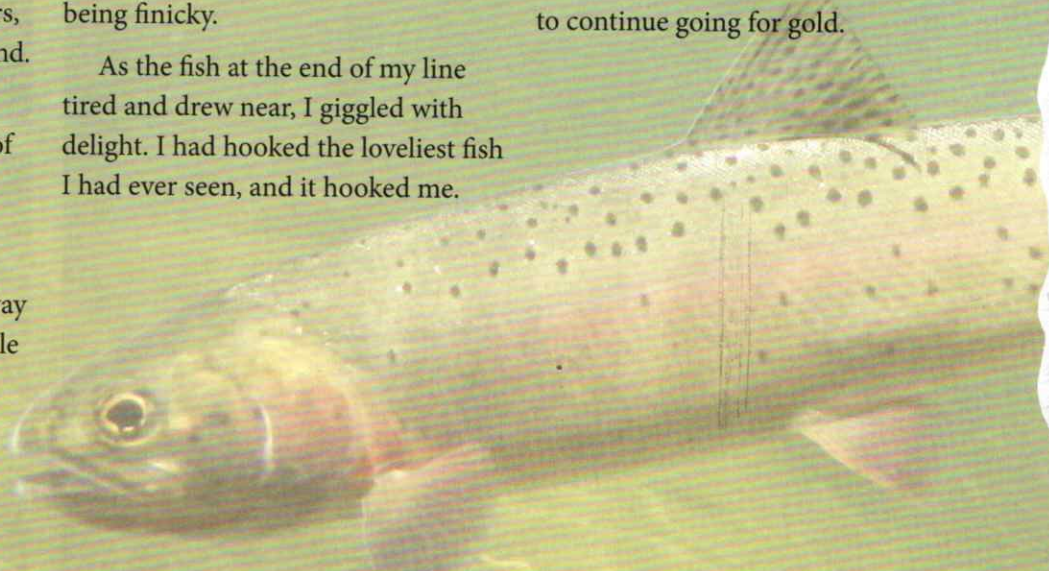
and stepped gingerly through the frigid shallows toward a small, half-submerged boulder.

I stood on a rock, too, near the shore, but the trout seemed to be rising just beyond my longest cast. I wet-waded into the leg-numbing water. Within three casts, I had my first golden trout. Lucky? You bet. These fish have a reputation for being finicky.

As the fish at the end of my line tired and drew near, I giggled with delight. I had hooked the loveliest fish I had ever seen, and it hooked me.

Since that first visit to Sylvan Lake, I've returned a number of times, and each time it has been a new adventure in the high country.

Though the name of the lake, Sylvan, suggests a pastoral setting, sometimes a fierce wind makes casting impossible. Other times, clouds shroud the lake, or raindrops pepper it. Once, a snow squall blew through in mid-July. There's no telling what conditions will be like until you get there, even when it's clear and mild at the trailhead. But once in a while, I get another day like that first one, calm and blue with a willing fish or two. It's those times that convince me to continue going for gold.



Top: USGS map quadrangle of Mount Sylvan Peak area, Montana, 1996. Detail.

Above: Yellowstone cutthroat trout, Wyoming.



### **Other Backcountry Fishing Hotspots**

Whether you pick an alpine fishing spot based on the place or the type of fish, here are four more special hike-to places to cast a line:

#### **Stratton Pond, Vermont**

Stratton Pond is a well-known backcountry destination among both day hikers and thru-hikers on the Appalachian Trail and Long Trail, which are concurrent here. This 47-acre tarn is the largest on the AT/LT in southern Vermont, but it's only 15 feet at its deepest point, which makes it wadeable from a number of places along its shoreline. The State of Vermont stocks it with over 7,000 brook trout every year. You probably won't catch a monster, but it's a thrill to reel in a brookie anywhere in New England, and the odds are good at Stratton Pond.

#### **Oswegatchie River at High Rock, New York**

New York's Adirondack Park has over 3,000 lakes and ponds and 30,000 miles of rivers and streams. You can hike to many of them, but the fishing often requires a canoe or something inflatable to get on the water. The Oswegatchie River where it rolls around High Rock, 3.8 miles from the trailhead in Wanakena, is not only a great perch to view the water but also a fine place to camp and cast for brown trout.

#### **Long Lake and Trapper Lake, Wind River Range, Wyoming**

Wyoming's Wind River Range is 100 miles long and 30 miles wide along the Continental Divide. Except for the Grand Teton, the 22 highest mountains in Wyoming are here. It's a hard-core trekking destination laced with over 600 miles of trails. An overnighter hardly scratches the surface, but a two-nighter will get you to both Long Lake and Trapper Lake from the Elkhart Lake trailhead where you can catch tasty cutthroat.

#### **Sloan Lake, Handies Peak, Colorado**

Handies Peak (14,058 feet) is a hikers' favorite near Lake City, Colorado. About 1,000 feet below the summit lies Sloan Lake, a high-elevation tarn harboring colorful cutthroat trout. You can bag a 14-er and then ogle the sizable trout in its spectacular spawning hues if you land one. But even if you don't, you can see the fish finning in the crystalline water. Most people don't take the time to cast a line in Sloan Lake en route to the summit, but it's worth pausing to try for a trout in this aquamarine alpine lake.



*Top: Stratton Pond, Vermont, fly fishing.*

*Middle: Oswegatchie River at High Rock, New York.*

*Bottom: Colorado River cutthroat trout, Colorado.*

*Left: Trail by Trapper Lake, Wyoming.*

