

Author's son, Matt, admires a typical planted cutthroat broodfish.

Carson River Cutthroat: Past and Present

Once the home of the rare Lahontan cutthroat trout, the Carson Forks offer a prime fishery today, with even more variety in the planning.

By DON VACHINI

Opening the door to my van, I was greeted by the sound of gurgling water in the pre-dawn light. After rousing my two sons, we decided to skip breakfast and be about our task. Emerging from a stand of cottonwoods, the three of us stood on some rocks at the edge of the stream. Rushing water pushed against the opposite bank at an angle, resulting in a long, deep eddy on our side of the river.

As I was studying the layout, one of my opportunistic boys flipped his lure into the blue-green swirl and began a retrieve. "Snag?" I guessed out loud. Meanwhile, his rod bucked and lurched and he soon led a bright 12-inch rainbow to shore.

Four more fish came to our nets in the next 15 minutes before the action ceased. A good way to begin a fishing trip! Over the next few days we were going to sample as much of the roughly 15-mile area as time would permit, working several prime waters and their tributaries for a variety of trout species.

This particular spot was a mere 100 feet off the highway, and the water was named after the famous explorer, Kit

Carson. When one mentions the Carson River, one must be specific, especially regarding California waters. Within the state's boundaries, the Carson exists in two forms — the East Fork and the West Fork.

Both forks head in the Eastern Sierra and flow between 25 to 35 miles in an easterly direction to meet just past the Nevada border to form the main Carson. It then meanders another 50 plus miles to currently empty into Lahontan Reservoir, a mammoth water storing impoundment.

The forks, referred to as either the East Carson or the West Carson, are each full-fledged rivers of slightly different magnitude, offering a variety of trout water types and sceneries.

The West Fork heads near the peaks overlooking Charity Valley and flows through both Faith and Hope Valleys before tumbling toward Nevada in a rather brisk downhill gradient.

The East Fork, with its origin in the snow-fed back country near Sonora Pass, tumbles north through a rather inaccessible canyon toward Markleeville. From this location, it changes its path to an

easterly one, flowing toward Nevada and its eventual confluence with the West Fork near Minden.

Both being snow-fed waters, their flows depend a lot upon the previous winter's snowpack. Generally speaking, the West Fork has a more moderate flow since it drains less terrain than the East Fork, which is a heavy-bodied piece of water in comparison.

Historically, Lahontan cutthroat trout occurred in the East Fork downstream from Carson Falls, in the West Fork from Faith Valley downstream and in major California tributaries such as Wolf, Markleeville, Silver, and Willow creeks. The main stem of the Carson River reportedly also contained cutthroat downstream to Carson Sink, "... though the main populations of this fish occurred in the mountainous sections of California," stated Eric Gerstung, a Department of Fish and Game (DFG) employee who has done much research on the Lahontan cutthroat.

How the cutthroat got into this territory is an interesting sidelight. Scientists believe that they gained entry into prehistoric Lahontan Lake via the Snake

River system during an extremely high water period. About 8,000 years ago, the lake began to recede, depositing populations of cutthroats in various drainages throughout eastcentral California and northwestern Nevada.

The Truckee, Carson and Walker drainages in California and the Humboldt and Reese river systems of Nevada form the rough boundaries of the old Lahontan Lake, which is now referred to as the Lahontan Basin. Lakes Tahoe and Pyramid are present-day remnants of the ancient lake.

Naturally, the cutthroat subspecies in this basin is named Lahontan cutt (*Salmo clarki henshawi*).

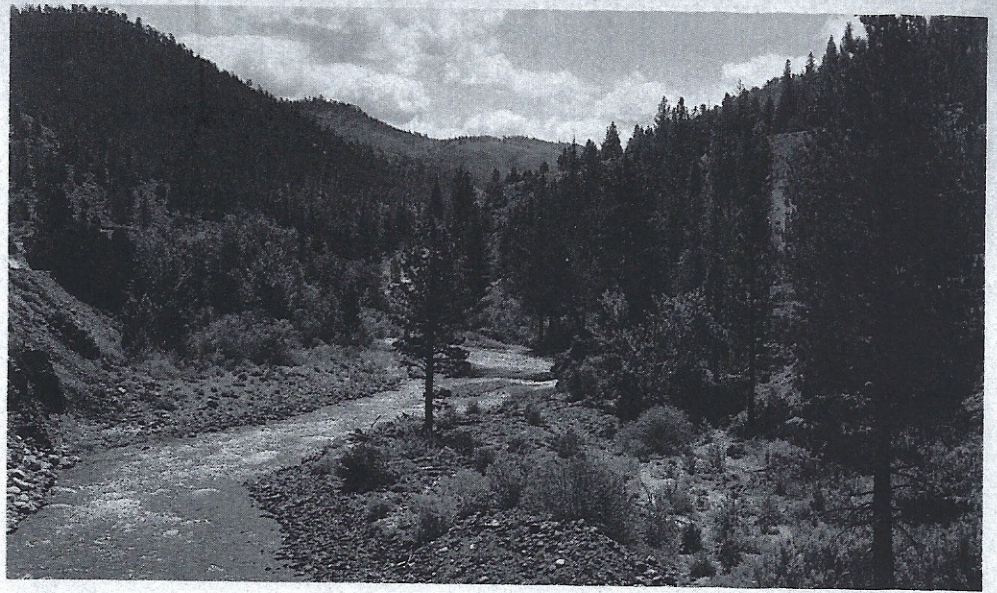
With the arrival of settlers into the area, the cutthroat's status began a change for the worse. "Prior to the coming of the white man (1850s), cutthroat were the only trout species found in the Truckee, Carson and Walker drainages," mentioned Gerstung.

Though loss of habitat due to agriculture, logging and mining was instrumental, it is generally felt the introduction of non-native trout into the drainage was the main reason for its demise.

Rainbow trout were introduced in 1879, and brook and brown stocks soon followed. In a few short years, these well meaning deeds had severe biological impacts, as by 1915 the 'bows had virtually taken over. In a 1935 seining conducted by the DFG throughout both forks, only rainbow, brook and browns showed up in the samples.

Today, according to Gerstung, no self-sustaining populations of genetically pure Lahontan cutthroat are known to occupy historic habitat within the Carson River basin. Not able to compete well with other species, losing characteristics by interbreeding, and easily caught, the cutthroat was out-muscled by the browns and rainbows on the Carson drainage. In fact, whole populations throughout the entire Lahontan Basin were lost and by 1970 the Lahontan cutthroat was federally declared endangered.

Though the pure strain cutthroat is virtually gone, the East and West Carson do not suffer for lack of fish or fishermen. In modern times, Highways 4, 88, and 89 touch parts of the waters of each fork, making them highly accessible to anglers in these sections. The DFG plants a generous amount of rainbow catchables in the more easily reached areas to supplement the native populations. Logically, rainbows dominate the fishery near these highways, while browns are more abundant in locales very hard to reach.



Emerging from a deep backcountry canyon, the East Carson courses a flood plain near Markleeville.

Coursing several open valleys in its upper reaches, the West Fork has several forest service campgrounds located on or near its banks. The extreme upper sections offer an occasional tiny brook trout to enhance the native and hatchery rainbows, while the lower meadows provide good fly fishing water with black patterns (sizes 10-14) often very effective. The stream is easily waded and icy in these areas with snow-covered Pickett Peak (elev. 9,177 feet) overlooking a green, wildflower-studded carpet adding its touch to the awe-inspiring moment.

Past Hope Valley, bait is more suitable as the flow resembles stepladder pools and falls. Though the terrain is brushy, there are some deeper pools where lures or weighted flies will work.

The East Fork offers a much larger water with more than twice the flow of its western counterpart over a somewhat different scenario. The headwaters are accessible by foot or packtrain only, offering a stiff physical challenge.

Flowing through a steep canyon, the section from Carson Falls (a large, impassable barrier) downstream to Wolf Creek is a designated Wild Trout stream. Brown trout are the dominant species in this section, with an occasional rainbow showing up in the catch. One should not sell the route into this canyon short, as it is a demanding one – rocky and over steep slopes covered with Jeffery and Ponderosa pines. Care should be taken to watch for rattlesnakes too.

Past Wolf Creek downstream, the river becomes more accessible to roadside anglers, though in some places access still involves a steep climb down a canyon trail.

Deep pools and heavy riffles being the predominant water, it is difficult to wade, especially early in the season as flows are very heavy and the boulder-strewn bottom is slick.

Near Markleeville, the river levels out somewhat as it travels over a flood plain gradient, allowing it to be easily rafted. Past the town, however, the river flows toward Nevada over private property, where land access is restricted by cattle ranches. Brown trout again become plentiful away from people, but still remain very wary and are not easily caught. A float trip is a good way to sample the above waters but care should be taken to line up a knowledgeable outfitter.

Being in a high desert locale, sagebrush is more common, forest cover is less prevalent and stands of cottonwood are more noticeable on the lower East Fork as it drifts toward the border.

The brawling riffles and deep pools offer prime trout habitat, whether easily accessible or not. In the holes, deep working lures or sinking flies can be worked with some success. Lures of special interest to trout seem to be Rooster-tails in red, brown or black (sizes 0-2), and Mepps spinners with squirrel tails (sizes 0-2). Black or brown Woolly Worms (sizes 10-14) and brown nymph patterns worked deep are effective as are Marabou Muddlers on occasion.

Fly or spinning gear are both popular but weight is needed to get down to bottom where the trout hold. Since the browns and 'bows hold near the bottom of rock-protected pockets, salmon eggs and worms are used by many anglers.

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Expect to lose a lot of gear if this tactic is used, as deep is the word.

The East Fork, though following Highway 89 for several miles, tends to curve away from the road in many places as it follows the open canyon. Large cliffs characterize the side away from the road.

Early one evening I was standing knee deep at the fringe of a deep pool, watching the melee of swallows and nighthawks performing acrobatics among the crags. Casting a black Roostertail upstream into the fast water and letting it tumble to the bottom of the pool, I would work it back across the tailwater toward me.

The pleasing roar of the water, the aerial activity around me and the evening cooling trend from a scorching day all collaborated to make me forget what I was doing. Lifting my rod as the lure ticked bottom, I was almost jolted off balance by the ensuing action. Turning my rod into a parabolic arc, the bottom sulking fish made for the fast water, rid-

ing it downstream. Hastily splashing and slipping over the rocky bottom, I followed it, steelhead fashion, to the next pool, preparing for an all-out war. However, it quickly responded to steady pressure and came almost too easily to net.

Expecting a rainbow or brown, I was initially shocked. Although the trout approached 18 inches, it was extremely thin. The narrow body had a golden-bronze hue and was sparsely flecked with large, black dots. As it gasped for air, its lower jaws exhibited deep reddish-orange slash marks — a cutthroat!

Though populations of naturally-propagating, pure-strain Lahontan cutthroat apparently became extinct in the Carson during the early 1910s, they have continued their presence in the system, albeit in limited numbers.

Hatchery fingerling plants, counted on to rebuild the vast populations, proved to be a failure. Though the cuts would reproduce satisfactorily, their offspring couldn't compete with the now-established rainbow and brown populations. Those that survived readily

interbred with rainbows and lost their characteristics.

Also accounting for small cutthroat populations in the forks was nearby Heenan Lake.

As a result of the Lahontan cutthroat being placed on the endangered list, the DFG devised a management plan for its restoration. The DFG's objectives were to halt the decline of cutthroat populations, to restore and increase their stocks, to insure their continued existence, to feasibly restore them throughout their former range and to establish sufficient numbers and populations so that they could be a source of fisheries recreation in the future.

Fifteen streams were named for management throughout the Lahontan Basin. Listed in the Carson drainage were the East Carson (above Carson Falls) and tributaries, Gold Canyon and Murray Canyon creeks.

Though not a part of their historic range, the East Fork above the falls supports a pure strain population (it is believed early-day shepherders were responsible for the transplant from below the falls). Gold Canyon and Murray Canyon



creeks were added to the management list recently.

These are hard-to-reach, back country waters which are closed to all fishing to allow the fish to grow in size and numbers. Since cutts are so susceptible to angler pressure, it is felt they can best be managed by building up the back country stocks where access is difficult.

According to Gerstung, it is believed the *Salmo clarki henshawi* could play a greater management role since they do better than other trout in alkaline lakes and are longer-lived than most stream trout. Thus, they are capable of reaching a larger size in headwater streams.

Candidate waters under consideration currently include several tributaries of the West Carson.

While much of the back country is being managed for self-sustaining cutts, the accessible waters of both forks have a different setup. Heenan Lake, located on private property near Markleeville, is used by the DFG as a cutthroat egg taking station. Closed to all fishing, its alkaline waters contain brood stock for many areas.

Eggs collected at the lake are transported to Moccasin Creek and Hot Creek hatcheries. From there, the resultant fingerlings are planted via airplane in 11 alpine lakes throughout the Sierra Nevada mountains.

Cutthroat are very abundant at Heenan. When eggs are being taken (for about a three-week period per year), many surplus brood fish are culled for use in other dimensions. Principally used for a limited put and take recreation fishery, upwards of 2,000 to 3,000 cutts from 16 to 20 inches in length are planted annually to provide a token cutthroat fishery in the Markleeville and Hope Valley regions. These stockings are not part of any management program to increase stocks but for a few months these lunkers provide some variety to a thriving rainbow and brown fishery.

Compared to the numbers of other planted trout, these brood fish are outnumbered about 100 to 1, though many anglers try specifically for them.

Fishing techniques vary, but since they are so gullible a variety of lures, flies and baits are successful. I have found red and black Roostertails, Mepps spinners with some red coloration and black and brown Woolly Worms to be most successful.

Not especially noted for their fighting abilities, they are best caught on light tackle, where their large size coupled with the fast moving water helps to make the battle a little more exciting.

Usually found in the more subdued sections of water and near undercut banks and logjams, most of these cutthroat are caught within the first month of their stocking. Some, however, become holdovers and provide some fine action the following season.

Reflecting back, it is tragic what man has done to the Lahontan cutthroat over a few short years, undoing what nature had established for centuries. Man's mistakes, however, can't be undone overnight as prior hatchery efforts made clear. The rehabilitation of *Salmo clarki henshawi* will be a slow, arduous one at best. Hopefully, man has learned a valuable lesson from the cutthroat.

Easy to catch and susceptible to angler pressure, they are best managed as the lone species in a watershed.

The return of the Lahontan cutthroat has been set in motion. But if they are to reach and maintain even token numbers of what they once were, the future fishery for them will have to be different, not just on the Carson but on the whole Lahontan Basin.

"DFG records show cutthroat grow to large size, are long living and are easily caught," stated John Deinstadt, a DFG employee in charge of the Wild Trout Program. "Since this is the case, they are well suited to catch and release type regulations," he added.

According to Gerstung, all streams under cutthroat management that are presently closed will eventually be opened to fishing, more than likely under special regulations. The special regulations will mean catch and release, zero limit and artificial lures and flies with single barbless hooks (to facilitate easy release). This is a wise decision for it will use the cutthroat's strong suit and yet not deplete their numbers. Maybe man is learning after all.

Today, the Carson forks offer a truly remarkable fishery and recreational facility to many people. Not only is there a variety of trout species but a choice of water types. Camping, backpacking, hiking, photography and rafting are some other activities offered among the ever-present menu of scenarios. To add to the water's magnitude, the rare Lahontan cutthroat is quietly being restored to expanding sections of the drainage.

It is doubtful the cutthroat numbers will approach what were present in the days of John Fremont and Kit Carson, but one day in the future maybe the angler will be able to land and briefly admire a large, pure-strain native cutt from

a Carson stream and get some indication of what the predominant fish of the 1800s was like. Hopefully, it will happen in my lifetime. □

LAKE LENORE LAHONTANS

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fast sinking line. He says the most important secret to hooking Lenore Lahontans is to strip in line "as fast as you can." For this reason, and because the fish are such heavyweights, he always uses an 8-pound test leader. A lighter one would get him nothing but smaller fish or broken leaders.

According to Bill Marts of Kaufmann's Streamborn Flies in Bellevue, Washington, Black Leeches, tied on big hooks with lots of marabou, work well. He says that various dragonfly patterns in brown or olive colors also produce fish at Lenore.

Wes Drain, of Archer and Angler in Seattle, maintains that various imitations of damselflies, shrimps and dragonfly nymphs have been effective in hooking fish there at different times.

Toward the lake's north end, most bank anglers cast and retrieve spoons, the most popular ones in fluorescent colors. Toward the south end, those not fly fishing are more inclined to use spinners such as Mepps, Bolo, Spinner Bug or Roostertail.

The most successful spin fisherman we encountered was Tom Norisada of Soap Lake, a town only a few minutes' drive from Lake Lenore. He is reputed to get his fish just about every day he goes after it, which is often. Toms uses a Browning Silaflex II spinning rod, Mitchell 300 reel, and 6-pound test monofilament line. He has had his best success with a No. 3 Mepps silver spinner, and when that's not producing, he switches to the same lure in a gold finish. He says he *always* gets his cutthroat on one way or the other!

Most boat fishermen we saw were either casting or trolling flies. However, trolled lures such as brightly-hued Flatfish or Lucky Lady's should be effective. Also, at times and places, a perch Flatfish should be deadly. Thousands of small perch from Alkali Lake enter Lenore at the inlet stream near the north end between May and November each year. They soon die in the alkaline water, unless they're gobbled down first by big, hungry Lahontans! Also, the bright sparkle and shimmer of a goldfish Lucky Lady might prove irresistible to the aggressive cutts.