

# Lake Cushman Area — A Unique Fishing Mecca

Amid the breathtaking beauty of the Olympic Mountains, this water offers not only esthetic beauty but several species of trout to add enhancement and charm

By DON VACHINI

**T**he morning on the river had already been fruitful. Upwards of 20 cutthroat had been landed and released before the 10:00 a.m. sun touched the water. I was both tired and fulfilled.

However, one more likely stretch of water beckoned. Yielding to temptation, I removed my fly and bubble and tied on a small, gold-covered wobbling spoon. Flipping it downstream, I began to retrieve it through the bottom of the pool and parallel to a large log which was partially submerged in the eddy.

A dark shadow darted from the log's cover and an instant later my rod bowed heavily. The 4-pound line whined against my drag (something none of the 6- to 10-inch cutthroat had done all morning). My adrenalin began flowing, as it was obviously a substantial fish.

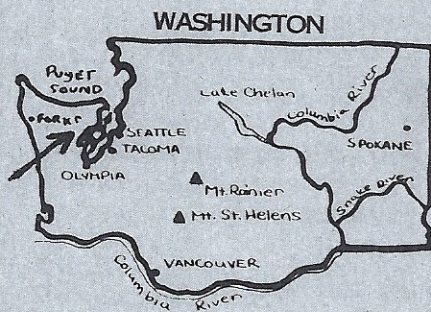
But something was amiss. Even though approximately 20 yards of monofilament were peeled from my spool and the fish was very active, I noticed that the line remained in the same location directly under the end of the log. As the fish continued its bottom-hugging battle, I could nevertheless feel the line being pulled against the resistance of an underwater snag. It was not a favorable situation at all, as it was just a matter of time before the line was frayed to its breaking point.

My wife, Pat, and I were in the middle of a four-day, mid-August fishing foray in the Lake Cushman area of Washington State. We were staying at Staircase Campground, located on the North Fork of the Skokomish River just at the Olympic National Park boundary. This was our third venture into this multi-faceted wonderland.

Lake Cushman, situated on the southeast portion of the Olympic Peninsula near Hoodport, offers virtually unlimited recreational possibilities, both in

the lake and its surrounding terrain. Hiking, backpacking, hunting, skin-diving, photography and water skiing are all available.

However, our main reason for visiting the area again was to resample its outstanding fishing. Rainbow, cutthroat, Dolly Varden trout, kokanee and mountain whitefish are present in the feeder streams or lake. All species but kokanee (sometimes called silver trout in Washington) are taken in the streams. They are



caught as adults only in the lake (being salmon, they die soon after spawning). Largemouth bass are present and occasionally caught in the lake, also.

Since we were at the lake too late in the season to catch kokanee (May and June are the most productive months), we did not try for them. According to several sources at Lake Cushman Lodge, located near the dam, a boat and motor are needed to catch them in any significant numbers. Trolled flashers with worms is the most commonly used rig, with depth being the major factor. Once located, kokanee are fairly easy to catch, and we were told the lake contains an excellent population. Care should be taken while playing this species as they have notoriously tender mouths.

Mountain whitefish, though present, are not too commonly taken in the lake. They do, on occasion, turn up among trout catches on the feeder streams. On my last visit, I observed an elderly gentleman hook two from a large pool using white eggs, but I have never caught whitefish there.

Rainbow trout are present in fair numbers and are taken throughout the lake using conventional means. Trolling flashers and worms, spinners, and still-fishing bait from boats are shore all bring results. They ascend the feeder streams to spawn and sometimes become residents, where they are occasionally hooked by cutthroat fishermen.

My main interest, however, centers around cutthroat and Dolly Varden, and that is why I initially zeroed in on this area several years ago. Both species are rare or non-existent in California, my home state. Cutthroat are found but in skimpy numbers and then only near salt-water. Dolly Varden are probably extinct in their only native water, the McCloud River.

I am an avid trout fisherman and am fascinated by what I call the "exotics" — species of trout other than rainbow (the most common trout in California). I often plan trips just for the purpose of trying for an exotic species. When two are available, so much the better. The Lake Cushman area is one place where two of my exotics can be pursued.

Prior to 1925, the North Fork of the Skokomish flowed freely to meet Hood Canal, after it merged with the South Fork to form the main Skokomish River. It contained sea-run cutthroat, Dolly Varden, and rainbow trout (steelhead) throughout its course. Mountain whitefish were also present.

In 1926, Tacoma City Light, a power company, finished constructing Cushman

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Dam, thus forming a 10-plus-mile long impoundment holding 4,000 acres of water. The dam, located at an elevation of 750 feet, cut off access to saltwater, so there are no anadromous fish above it.

The dam did create a spectacular high mountain jewel, however. Looking into its depths, the sapphire water is awesomely clear. It is estimated to have visibility for over 25 feet, which makes it one of the clearest in the world! Most of its 23-mile shoreline drops off gradually, and in many places ferns and other growth protrude almost to its waterline.

The lush dense forest surrounding the lake imparts a rolling, carpet-like appear-

ance to the peaks and mountains, misleading you into thinking they are easily climbed (they are not).

Mt. Rose (elev. 4,301 feet) and Lightning Peak (elev. 4,654 feet) dominate the skyline near the inlet end of the lake, making the body of water appear smaller than it actually is. As with all the Olympic Range peaks, they seem to tower over the area due to the fact that they rise so sharply from sea level.

There is a smaller lake about three miles long (formed by Cushman Dam No. 2) immediately below Cushman Dam No. 1, named Lake Kokanee. It holds rainbow and cutthroat trout and

is ideally suited for small boats. It likewise possesses an alpine setting.

Coastal cutthroat are by far the most abundant trout species in the area. According to Larry Barger of the State Game Department, "70,000 legal-sized, sea-run are planted in Lake Cushman prior to the season to supplant the native fishery. The sea-runs are planted because of their tendency to cruise the shoreline, thus making them accessible to bank fishermen.

Attesting to plentiful food and excellent spawning habitat in the feeder streams, the cutts flourish, maintaining a good resident and holdover population throughout both lake and streams.

Dolly Varden, the other exotic I sought, provide another story. They are not planted anywhere in the state. Those found in the lake are descendants of the original stock trapped behind the dam. They have done well over the course of 56 years, establishing and maintaining a healthy and self-sustaining population.

"Cushman has some large Dollys in its waters," states Barger. "The larger specimens live deep in the lake and ascend the feeder streams in the fall to spawn before returning to the lake."

Each year the state game commission nets and weighs many specimens during their upstream journeys. According to one report, the lake contains many 14- to 16-pound Dollys and several up to 25 pounds. Fish from 3 to 10 pounds are not uncommon.

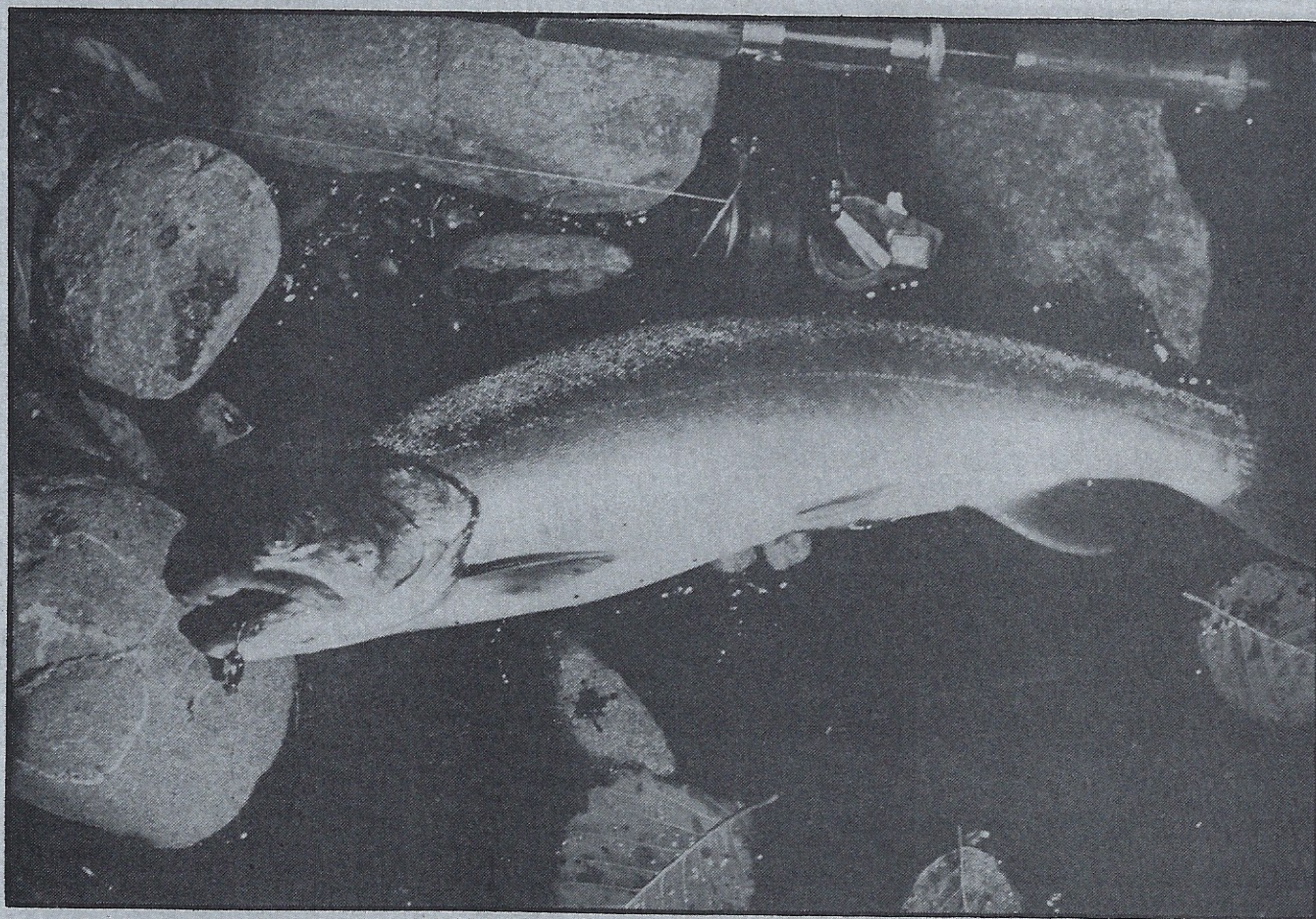
To catch Dollys (actually a member of the char family) consistently in the lake, you need a boat and deep trolling gear as they lie along steep dropoffs to ambush their prey. Many are caught inadvertently by fishermen after other species.

Barger suggested we try the lower courses of the feeder river early each day, as these trout tend to move upstream from the lake under the cover of darkness, and then lay over in the big pools during the day. About two miles upstream from the lake there is a large pool (named the Dolly Pool) where many large fish wait for increased flows to journey upstream.

According to old-timers at the lodge, eggs and lures dredged through the bottom of the deeper holes are very effective. Though flies are accepted by smaller specimens, the large Dollys, for the most part, ignore flies.

As we are primarily interested in stream fishing and hiking, we opted to concentrate on the tributary waters. Besides, we had spent one productive day on the lake already.

Exploring the North Fork upstream



This Dolly Varden was caught in the North Fork of the Skokomish above Lake Cushman. Caught on ultra-light tackle, 4 lb line with a 3 lb leader, the fish measured 22 inches and weighed 4½ pounds.

from the lake, we heard a sound distinctly different than the one caused by the lapping waves. The river is the principal tributary to Lake Cushman. It heads in the high upper canyons of Mt. Stone (elev. 6,612 feet), Mt. Skokomish (elev., 6434 feet), and Mt. Henderson (elev. 6,204 feet), and cascades roughly 12 miles before entering the lake. Its rock streambed, approximately 60 to 80 feet wide, gives rise to pleasant gurgling sounds. Pools, riffles and pocketwater are present throughout.

The stream's flow is mainly the result of snow and ice-melt with several spring-fed tributaries contributing along its course. Due to its source, the temperature remains cold year-round, providing excellent trout habitat in the river as well as the lake.

Upstream, a maintained trail allows good hiking for several miles amid splendid scenery. The forest cover consists primarily of fir and spruce in the upper courses. Nearer the lake, maple, cottonwood and various ferns join the evergreens to shade and cool the air.

Drinking in the colorful autumn serenity of the dark forest, I was methodically drifting a No. 14 Black Gnat through some likely water. Sens-

ing a take, which broke my trance, I raised my rod tip and felt a solid surge. The fish did a quick tailwalk, betraying its size, and followed that with several quick, freedom-seeking mini-runs. Mere seconds later, I slid a silvery 9-incher gently to my hand and immediately noticed its trademark — vivid, red-orange slash marks on its lower jaw, enhanced by a whitish background. The red on its mandible seemed to blend in perfectly with the decor of autumnal colors around me. Easily removing the barbless hook, I quickly released the beauty.

Using ultra-light rods and reels, 4-pound line and bubble and fly attachment, we had no trouble enticing North Fork cutts to inhale our small, dark patterns.

With the successful morning nearing an end, I approached a medium-sized pool into which a huge fallen tree, about 80 feet long, lay partially submerged. This log created a good-looking sanctuary for hiding trout.

My first cast resulted in a solid take, but I soon realized my predicament. The fish, rather large by the feel of it, had

retreated between some submerged branches and run further downstream, tangling my line in the process. Walking down the log to its end, I tried dunking my rod tip in an effort to free the snag, but to no avail. One powerful run almost caused me to lose my balance, as I was looking for another alternative. Rather than try to horse such a large fish back through the limbs, I decided to try one more stunt: submerging my rod and reel and passing it underneath the log to the other side. However, the tree was too large in circumference.

As a last resort, I stepped off the log into the icy water and slid my fingers down the monofilament to the underwater limb that was creating the problem. A substantial piece of luck ensued at this point, as the branch broke off and my line came clear of the log. I could now feel the full force of the fish.

The battle, however, was far from over. The fish ran further downstream, taking line in steady bursts. Wading, stumbling, and scrambling in pursuit, I finally managed to get below it.

Many hectic minutes later it tired and was carefully beached. Flopping on the shore, the large fish showed an abundance of pink spots on its dark,



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olive-green sides and flashed white-bordered lower fins, marks which firmly identified it as a *Salvelinus malma*. Measuring 22 inches and a tackle-straining 4½ pounds by my pocket de-liar, it was truly a magnificent trophy taken on ultralight gear.

During the following days, we tested several nearby locations, including hiking upstream, following log roads, and finally sampling another feeder creek, Big Creek.

The North Fork from the lake to the Staircase Rapids offered excellent cutt angling, with a scattering of small Dollys. Small, dark patterns (Nos. 12-14), both wet and dry, proved more than adequate.

Hiking two miles above the rapids led us to a good catch of rainbow. According to Barger, "rainbow trout are resident above the rapids and . . . dominate the further upstream you hike." Even though fishing is the main attraction, the rugged majestic beauty of the area captures your senses.

Big Creek was small but satisfying for small native cutthroat. This stream, incidentally, should only be fished for the pleasure of angling and not to tally fish. In the words of an old gentleman, native to the area, "If you want big fish, don't fish it, but," he went on with a twinkle in his eyes, "if you just plain like to fish,

then fish it!"

The Big Creek arm of the lake is also a productive area to troll for cutthroat and rainbow.

Olympic National Forest land surrounds the lake on three sides, Lake Cushman State Park rests on part of the eastern shore and the inlet is on the southern tip of the Olympic National Park. The lodge, with its cabins, tackle shop, boat rentals and public launch, rounds out a variety of amenities available.

Certainly the lake and streams, with their surrounding scenery, corner a large part of the action, but definitely not all of it. Roughly eight miles from the lake to the east is Hood Canal, which offers fishing for sea-run cutthroat, silver and king salmon, in addition to cod, flounder, perch and rockfish. Clams, crabs, and oysters are also available.

Excellent paved and oiled roads out of the town of Hoodsport make access to the lake and streams easy.

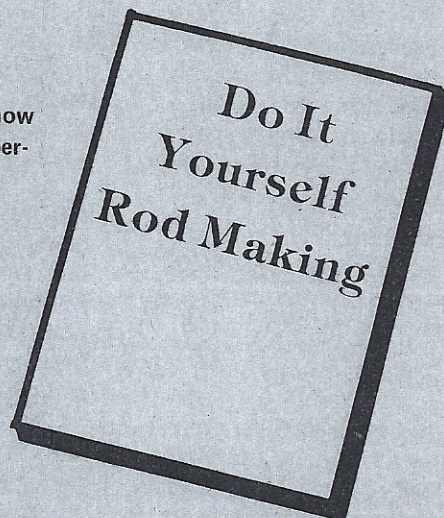
The southeastern sector of the Olympic Peninsula is truly blessed with a potpourri of fishing activity, including not only a great variety of gamefish but the choicest environment for all of these species to exist and flourish.

The Lake Cushman area of Washington State is one we look forward to revisiting.

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