



Catch Martis Lake Cutthroats

By Don Vachini

As the morning sun rose over the nearby Ponderosa Pines, Martis Lake's glassy surface was shattered by feeding trout. Standing about 30 yards apart near the water's inlet stream, my three sons and I began casting to the fish.

"Here comes one, Jason," I yelled to my 10-year-old as I saw a large form swim in his direction. Continuing to strip in line, his Woolly Worm twitched once, twice, then vanished in a swirl. Jason's fly rod bent into an arc and line melted from the reel. After several powerful runs, a 21-inch hook-jawed cutthroat grudgingly came to the net.

The fishing action continued briskly for another hour. Of the seven fish we released before breakfast, five were longer than 17 inches.

Over coffee, my thoughts drifted back to the days of explorer John Fremont, who passed through this area in 1844. His journal noted Indians netting trout of extraordinary size. "Generally two to four feet in length," he wrote. Extremely abundant, Fremont called them "salmon-trout."

The "salmon-trout," rightfully known as the Lahontan cutthroat, probably was the largest trout in Western North America. Fish regularly weighed 40 pounds.

Because of man's carelessness, however, the Lahontan was flirting with extinction by 1930. It currently exists in only 5 percent of its original habitat.

Martis Lake is one of the two California lakes that still contain significant Lahontan

populations. This is partly due to a California Department of Fish and Game management plan to increase their numbers.

A shallow 70-acre impoundment north of Lake Tahoe, Martis was selected to protect cutthroat heritage. According to Richard May, president of California Trout Inc., the lake was chosen because conditions made it "perfect to establish a reproducing trophy fishery, solely for the Lahontan cutthroat."

After all its fish had been removed, Martis was restocked with 3,000 yearling and 300 brood stock pure-strain Lahontan cutthroats. Martis was reopened in 1979 with catch-and-release regulations in effect to protect the stocks and to allow angling.

"Fast-growing and long-living, cutts are easy to catch, which makes them susceptible to rapid depletion," said John Deinstadt who is in charge of the state's wild trout program. "However," he added, "they are perfect for catch-and-release regulations."

To facilitate easy release, only artificial lures and flies with single barbless hooks may be used.

I use a floating line with a light-action fly rod when fishing at the lake. Martis' cutthroat "are not very selective and they'll take a wide variety of fly patterns," said May, who regularly fishes the lake.

For those who prefer hardware, a light-action spinning rod and reel loaded with four-pound-test line is perfect. Rooster Tail, Panther Martin, and No. 0 to No. 2

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Mepps spinners are good first choices. Light-colored lures with dark spots also are very popular with Martis cutts, especially along the dam.

For the entomologist, predictable early-season hatches include damselflies and the late season consists of callibaetis mayflies. Caddis fly hatches occur throughout the summer. Adams, Cahill and Quill Gordon patterns on No. 14 to No. 16 hooks in light to olive shades provide good imitations.

When the hatches emerge, usually between 9 and 11 a.m., cutthroats cruise very close to shoreline weed beds. They seem to be oblivious to nearby anglers. "They don't exhibit the wariness of a rainbow or brown," confided May.

During these periods of activity it is common to see a feeding fish; cast to it, watch it approach the fly, and then set the hook.

Later in the day cutthroats seek the sanctuary of the deep inlet channel. Here they prefer light to dark-brown leech, Woolly Worm, and nymph patterns on No. 10 to No. 12 hooks. A high-density sink-tip line can come in handy.

Likely to be found anywhere in the lake "Martis cutthroats seem to favor coves, points and the inlet area," May said.

While the water often is mirror calm early and late in the day, it usually is disrupted by afternoon gusts, which can make casting an effort in futility.

Float tubes, which are very popular because no motorized crafts are allowed, are practically necessitated by the late summer and fall weed bloom.

Under the watchful eyes of the fish and game department and California Trout, Martis, the state's pilot catch-and-release lake, is providing valuable information for future Lahontan cutthroat management.

Still in its infancy, the lake has the potential to be an ideal cutthroat sanctuary. According to Deinstadt, successful spawning in Martis Creek has been recorded for three successive seasons. Angler censuses conducted by the fish and game department show that more than 40 percent of the cutts landed were longer than 16 inches.

"While there is an increase of fish in the four-pound, 20 to 22-inch bracket, catches of 16 to 18-inchers are still the most common," said May. "However, fish in the neighborhood of six to eight pounds or more is our eventual expectation."

While nowhere near the world record of 41 pounds, cutthroat of this size test both tackle and nerves.

To fish at Martis, one needs a current California fishing license. A resident license costs \$17 and a nonresident license costs \$26.50. A 10-day nonresident license is available for \$10.50.

Martis Lake can be reached by turning off I-80 at Truckee and driving south four miles on Highway 267. Just past the airport, follow the signed road to the lake. A free campground is available.

