

The Legend Grows at Martis Lake

by Don Vachini

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“Got him!” hollered my youngest son. Turning my head, I noticed Jason’s rod straining in a pulsating arc as whoops of excitement confirmed a hookup. His reel screeched in protest as the fish fought a stubborn but unspectacular 5-minute battle before steady pressure took its toll.

“Look at the size of it,” he exclaimed, struggling to hoist a hefty, hook-jawed 21-incher that literally filled his net. As Jason cradled the leviathan in his hands, we both admired the long, golden-hued body sparsely covered with black flecks. While he gently removed the hook, the trout revealed its trademark of crimson gill slashes before unhurriedly wriggling back to its domain.


*While nearby
casinos gain the
notoriety, cutthroat
trout at Martis
Lake offer the
High Sierra’s
brightest payoff*

Experiencing a pride that only a father could feel, I glanced about and breathed deeply. The sun, barely peeking over the ponderosa pines blanketing nearby peaks, caused Martis Lake’s azure water to shimmer, while a pair of cruising Canada geese etched a V-trail

on its mirror-like surface. A thin mist gave the surrounding sage cover an even more desolate appearance, and an unknown fragrance in the arid mountain air held me in its spell.

For a short time the magic continued. Of the eight cutthroat we released before stopping for a nutrition break, six were 17 inches or longer — a much more aesthetic jackpot than the monetary ones offered in smoke-filled casinos just across the border.

Resting in a free campground above the lake as a gentle wind hissed through nearby evergreen, my thoughts drifted back to the days of explorer John C. Fremont and his description of the Lahontan cutthroat. While mapping a portion of what is now known as the Lahontan Basin, his 1844 journal ac-



*With the aid of a float tube, a solitary angler works
a deep inlet channel in the early morning mist.*

counts recall Indians netting trout of extraordinary size "generally 2-4 feet in length." Awed not only by their large size but by their seemingly infinite numbers as well, he named them Salmon-Trout.

Rightfully known as the Lahontan cutthroat trout (*Salmo clarki henshawi*), this description was certainly not an exaggeration on Femont's part. The fish was billed as the "world's largest trout" in a "Ripley's Believe it or Not" column, and scientists thought it to be the largest resident trout in western North America. During a spawning run in 1920, a survey party recorded an average of 20 pounds per fish for 195 trout captured. At this same time, commercial fishermen consistently netted specimens approaching 40

pounds with an occasional 60-pounder entering the take!

Nearing the Sierra Nevada Divide during the 1850s, white settlers were astonished by the piscatorial splendor they discovered in the nearby waters. "Cutthroats were the sole trout inhabitants of the Lahontan Basin, and they must have numbered in the millions," estimated Eric Gerstung of the California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG).

Shortly after the turn of the century, sportfishermen were traveling from all over the globe to challenge these big, abundant and, by then famous trout. Lake Tahoe, Pyramid Lake and the Truckee River in Nevada accounted for some unbelievable sport and commercial catches. And despite declining numbers, heavy angling pressure con-

tinued through the '20s when it was not uncommon for individuals to land 50-100 of these bruisers in a day! Slowly at first, but then more rapidly, the decline accelerated.

Quite suddenly, the party was over. By 1940, entire populations throughout the basin had vanished. The Lahontan cutthroat, victims of human carelessness, seemed destined to share the fate of the passenger pigeon.

"While introduction of nonnative trout caused extensive ecological competition and loss of characteristics from interbreeding, and commercial fisheries resulted in severe overharvesting, dams were the real culprits, because they prevent spawning," stated Gerstung, who has done exhaustive research on the plight of this trout.

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from my grasp...”**

However, under the federal Lahontan Cutthroat Trout Recovery Plan, this subspecies was issued a new lease on life. Managed separately by both California and Nevada, the plan attempts to preserve existing populations as well as establish new ones in suitable locales.

The CDFG management plan outlines a dozen potential restoration sites, calling for chemical removal of non-native trout and stocking pure-strain Lahontans.

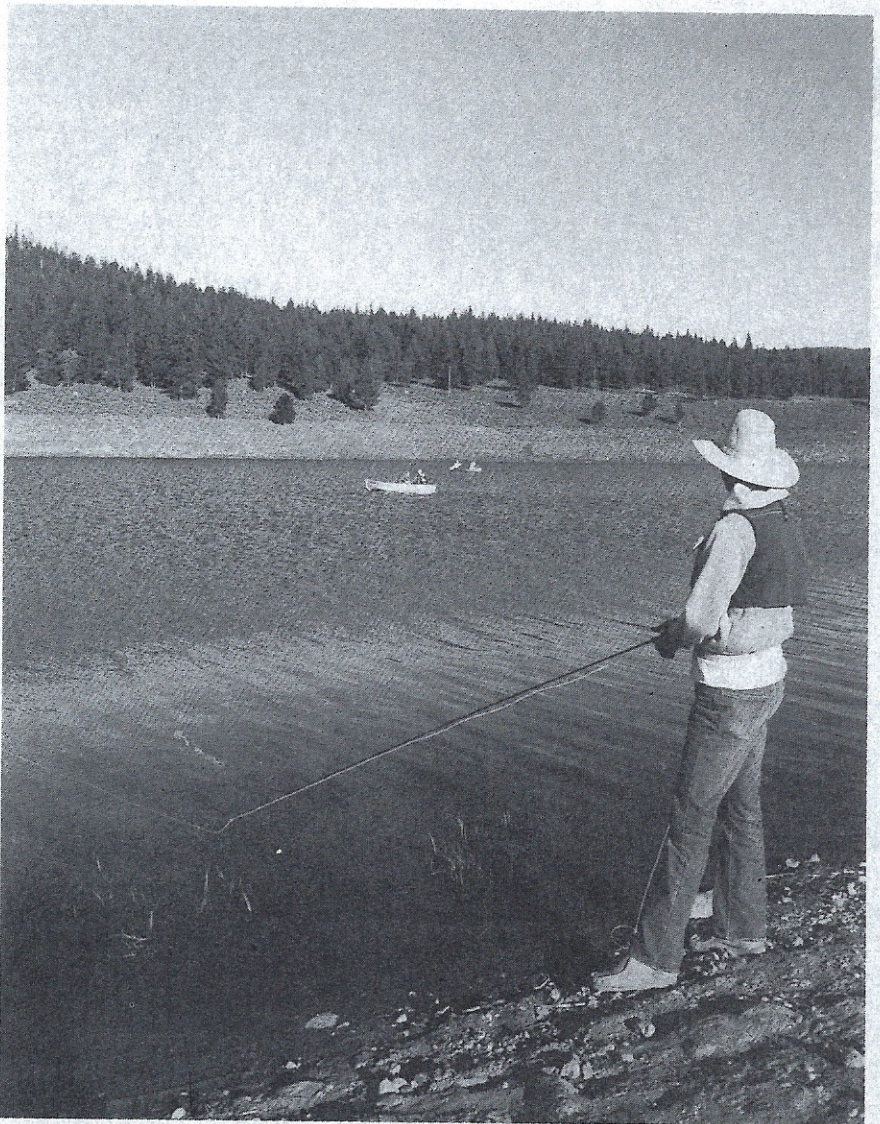
The development of broodstock in a few selected lakes in both states has resulted in reclassification from endangered to threatened status. “While present efforts will likely prevent extinction...one of the West’s greatest fisheries of all time has been lost — probably forever,” lamented Gerstung.

Benefiting from a special project, Martis Lake, a 70-acre impoundment east of Truckee, is one of two California waters that currently contains significant populations of this strain. Through the combined efforts of the CDFG and Cal Trout, Inc., an organization dedicated to protection and preservation of wild trout, work began at Martis on a project designed to help save the dwindling cutthroat heritage while providing a trophy fishery.

Martis possesses a thriving plant and aquatic environment, and is located in a high-density recreation area, 12 miles north of Lake Tahoe, at an elevation of 5,832 feet. Nearby snow-covered Sierra Nevada peaks provide cold, year-long flow; in addition, an abundance of spawning gravel exists in its feeder tributaries. “It was an ideal location to establish a naturally reproducing trophy fishery solely for the Lahontan cutthroat,” said Richard May, president of Cal Trout.

The CDFG liked the selection, too. Not only were the ecological conditions perfect, but the lake, formed by a flood-control dam on Martis Creek in 1972, was small enough for extensive monitoring.

In 1978, Martis was chemically



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Martis can be fished effectively from either a boat or the shore. Cutthroat like to cruise just beyond the weedbeds.

treated to remove all fish and subsequently restocked with pure-strain Lahontan cutthroat. “Approximately 3,000 yearling fish and 300 broodstock spawners made up the initial plant,” said John Deinstadt, who is in charge of the state’s wild trout program. According to CDFG records, cutthroat are best managed as the lone species in a watershed because they don’t compete well with other trout and tend to interbreed readily.

Under the scrutiny of inquisitive anglers throughout the region, the lake was opened to fishing the following season. To allow quality angling and natural buildup of stocks in accordance with the wild trout program, catch-and-release regulations were imposed. “If the Lahontan cutthroat is to maintain even token numbers of what it once was, the future fishery will have to be

different. Historically, cutthroat are easy to catch, which makes them susceptible to rapid depletion,” continued Deinstadt. “However, they are made to order for catch-and-release regulations.”

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

As the word spreads, Martis is becoming increasingly popular. The lake receives heavy pressure from anglers from all over the state. A current California Inland Fishing License, at \$13.50, is necessary to sample this grand design in trout management. Residents can reach the lake from Highway 267, the connecting artery between Truckee and North Lake Tahoe.

Since cutthroat are notoriously gullible, I find tackle that is on the light side

a sporting selection when fishing Martis. For the lure angler, a light-action spinning rod and reel loaded with 4-pound-test line is a perfect setup to enhance the battle. Kastmaster, Panther Martin, Roostertail and Mepps spinners in sizes 0-2 are good first choices. Light-colored lures with dark spots have worked well for me, especially near the dam.

A fly-bubble setup with a spinning rod will be effective, but serious fly-fishermen will want to rig up differently. A light-action fly rod with a floating line is a good choice to accurately and efficiently present an array of flies.

Bountifully endowed with insect life, the lake provides the following sequences of hatches for the entomologist: Early season consists of damselflies and late season primarily *Callibaetis* mayflies, while caddis fly hatches occur all season long. Typically, Martis cutts are not very selective and "will take a wide variety of fly patterns," according to May, who fishes the lake regularly.

When the fish do sulk, which isn't often, it is best to try to match the hatch. I have found Quill Gordon, Cahill and Adams patterns in light to olive shades (sizes 14-16) to be suitable imitations.

While blind-casting will take fish, I enjoy traversing the open shoreline in search of active feeders. Usually not hard to locate when the hatches emerge, (generally between 9 and 11), Martis cutts seem to throw caution to the wind. I was provided an example of this on my first visit.

Keeping a low profile, I stealthily moved within casting range of a large form noisily slurping mayflies. Strategically presenting my nymph, I began stripping in line. Within minutes the fly completed its course without a take, and I focused ahead for yet another cast. Before I could lift my fly from the water, the rod was almost jerked from my grasp; a different fish, an 18-incher, dined on my feather-and-chenille combinations — a mere 6 feet away!

On several other occasions since, I have had cutthroat follow and inhale the fly virtually under my nose. I appears that most of their feeding takes place within 15 to 30 feet of shore whether or not a fisherman is present. As May confided to me, "They certainly don't exhibit the wariness of a rainbow or brown trout."

As the day wears on, they usually seek the sanctuary of the deep inlet channel. When here, they prefer a Woolly Worm, light- to dark-brown

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Located 12 miles north of Lake Tahoe, Martis is heavily fished. Motorized boats aren't allowed on the lake, so a variety of floating crafts appear.

Leech or Nymph patterns (size 10-12) fished on a high-density, sink-tip line to work them deep. It is here that the majority of fishing pressure takes place. Since the channel bottom is sandy, cutts line up here to gather food delivered to them by the current. Many times I have felt the hard, jolting strike as a bottom-hugger intercepted my Woolly Worm.

Mirror-calm, early and late in the day, the lake is vulnerable to afternoon gusts whistling through the open valley, which can make casting an effort in futility.

June, July and August are the lake's busiest times and angling pressure increases with the summer temperatures. However, spring and fall provide some outstanding action, too. When visiting early and late in the season, keep in mind that winter gives up its grip slowly and redeems it quickly in these high elevations.

While the lake can be fished adequately from shore or with waders early in the season, some kind of floating device is handy as the summer progresses. Float tubes, prams and rowboats, popular here because no motorized boats are allowed, become almost necessary due to late-season weed bloom. This growth, which wrecks havoc on leaders but is an ally to trout, usually becomes bothersome by late August.

Under the watchful eyes of the CDFG, the state's pilot catch-and-release lake, though still in its infancy, is already producing encouraging results from both angler and management standpoints, as it exhibits the potential to be an ideal *Salmo clarki henshawi* sanctuary.

According to CDFG population surveys, successful spawning has occurred in Martis Creek through the past four seasons. To me, it is heartening to observe groups of parr-marked juveniles zipping about in the shallows, for it shows that natural propagation is truly taking place.

Based on positive feedback, some additional California sites have already been selected for special Lahontan cutthroat fisheries. McCloud Lake (labeled Martis II by Cal Trout) is in its second year under catch and release, and the Heenan Lake project (Martis IV) is currently in the hopper.

Besides providing data for future projects, Martis also serves as a brood-stock lake. "Should some unforeseen tragedy occur at other locations, there would still be a gene pool to draw from," said Deinstadt.

With each passing year, Martis seems to be increasingly close to fulfilling its potential, especially from the angler's point of view. Results of surveys at the lake show that fishing suc-

cess continues to improve. Over 40 percent of the cutthroats landed at Martis are of trophy size — longer than 16 inches.

"Based on current creel censuses, catches of 16- to 18-inches are common. There is also an increase of fish in the 4-pound, 20- to 22-pound inch bracket," beamed May. "That makes it one of the best fisheries west of Yellowstone!"

It is no wonder that May is excited, because things should get better. "For a lake of Martis's dimensions, trout in the neighborhood of 6- to 8-pounds are the eventual expectations of both Cal Trout and the CDFG," said Deinstadt. While nowhere near John Skimmerhorn's world record 41-pounder, from Pyramid Lake, cutthroat of this size are very capable of testing nerves as well as tackle.

While it is doubtful that the Lahontan cutthroat will ever approach historic range or populations, special management and regulations have dealt it another hand, hopefully one that will enable it to survive human blunders of yesteryear. Today, while the sleight-of-hand artists ply their trade in neighboring casinos, the grand design of Martis offers a sample of what Fremont experienced over a century ago. Here the Salmon-Trout still beckons to modern-day anglers and should continue to do so for a long time! □