

The Walker River: One Of California's Best

Don Vachini

While releasing a small rainbow, I gazed into the slightly murky river and reflected back in time. Since the John C. Fremont party passed through the semi-arid high deserts of Nevada and California over one hundred and forty years ago, the Walker River has undergone some drastic changes. Though not readily apparent to the naked eye, "progress" has changed much since yesteryear.

The Walker River courses a pair of states, originating as two distinctly different forks on California's eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Both flow in an easterly direction over sparse sage-covered terrain toward their eventual confluence near Yerrington in the Silver State. From there, the main body winds its way well over fifty miles to terminate in Walker Lake.

This lake, an alkaline body of water located at Hawthorne, Nevada, contained huge populations of Lahontan cutthroat trout, which annually migrated upstream near the headwaters of the two forks on spawning pilgrimages. Remnants of prehistoric Lahontan Lake, they were the sole trout species throughout the Walker drainage for centuries.

With the coming of white settlers around the 1850s, however, changes were slowly put in motion. First, water was diverted for irrigation, mainly in Nevada's Smith and Mason valleys. With the increase of settlers, the number of small dams gradually but steadily grew, making spawning access more difficult and reducing downstream flow. Secondly, non-native species were introduced throughout the drainage by well-meaning sportsmen. Rainbow and brown trout were sent from the East regularly in the 1880s with occasional loads of brook trout to supplement the main shipment.

While most of the irrigation dams were well into Nevada and fairly easily negotiated by spawning cutthroat, upstream damage was being wrought by the non-native trout as early as 1895. Competition and interbreeding were slowly crowding the cutts from their habitat.

These telling blows, however, were not as serious as the future developments in the name of progress. The Lahontan cutthroat (called "salmon-trout" by Fremont due to its large size) was a popular sport fish well into the 1920s. Present in seemingly endless numbers, they were extensively sought and easily caught, adding to their downfall. "The fact that they were so gullible made them susceptible to rapid depletion," related John Deinstadt of the California DFG's Wild Trout Program.

While Bridgeport Dam (1924) and Topaz Lake (1929) cut off spawning gravel well upstream on the two forks, the killer was Weber Reservoir (1933), a dam which prevented migration a few miles above Walker Lake.

Thus, with spawning access completely cut off from below, non-native species crowding above and fishermen catching them in prodigious numbers throughout, *Salmo clarki henshawi* soon faded into oblivion on the Walker drainage by the early 1940s.

Offhand, one would imagine that the drainage is in sad shape, what with future migrations halted and drastically reduced flows. Wrong! While the lower river has indeed become virtually devoid of trout and habitat, California's two upper forks, named the East Walker and West Walker, offer completely changed but prime fisheries today, definitely more conducive to heavy angler pressure.

The West Walker originates in the vicinity of Sonora Pass in the Leavitt and

Pickel meadows area and flows over a fairly steep, rocky gradient, through pine forest toward the Walker Canyon, where it is paralleled for about 16 miles by Highway 395. Draining a vast amount of the backcountry, it gains a lot of muscle from an array of small and large tributaries by the time it reaches Highway 395.

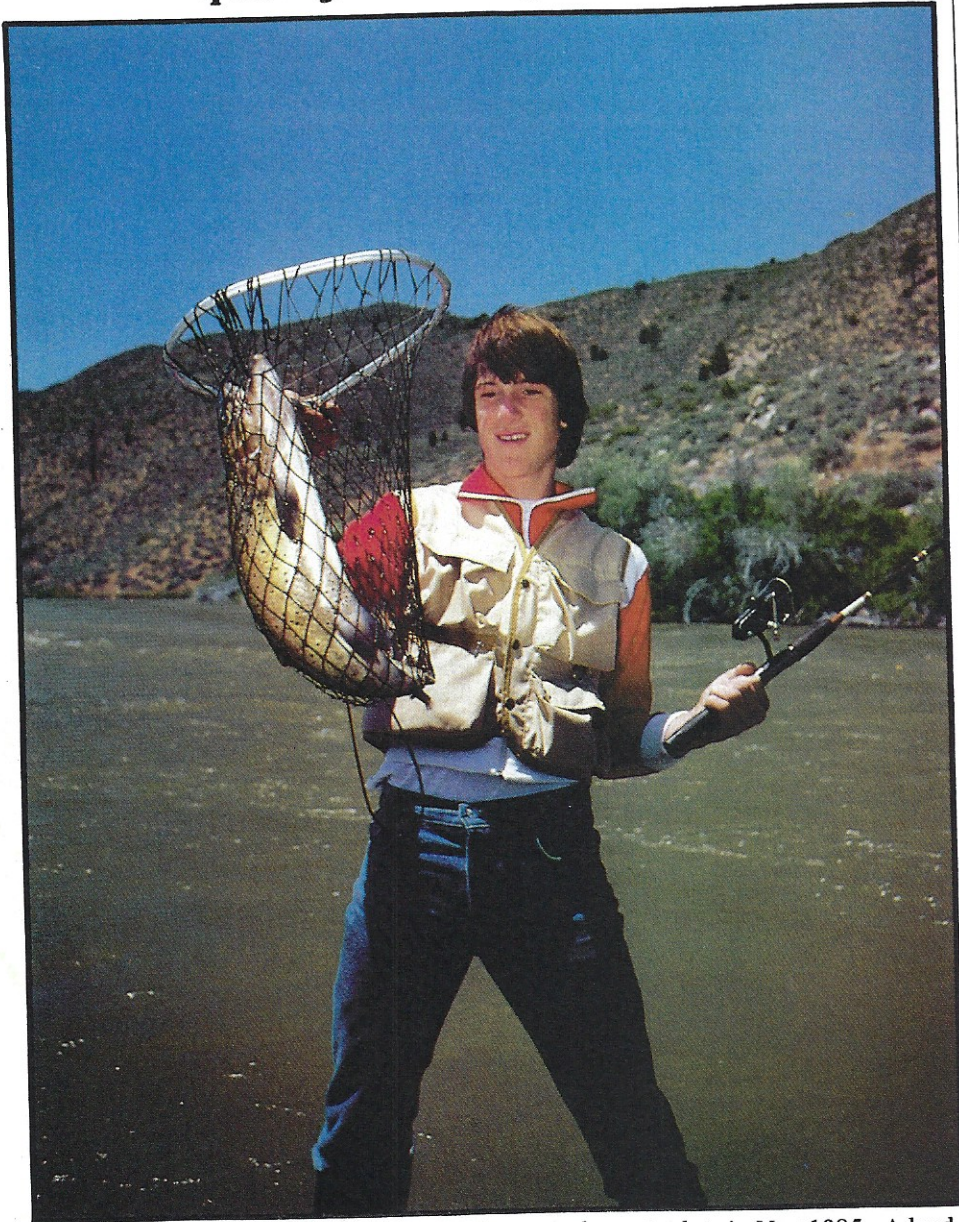
In its upper reaches, Highway 108 makes access fairly easy and campgrounds abound. In all the easily-reached locations, the DFG plants huge amounts of rainbow catchables in the eight- to 12-inch category.

Rocky stepladder falls and deep holes make up the river's characteristics below the Pickel Meadows area. Bait fished deep is the most common and effective method in this section, although there are limited sections where flies and lures are feasible.

The 16-mile stretch through the Walker Canyon is also heavily planted in the campground areas and wherever easy access permits. Obviously, easy-to-reach spots result in heavy angler pressure. Even so, this fork has always been good to me, never failing to yield at least a few trout on each occasion.

My favorite strategy on this water is to hike a short distance away from the easy-to-reach locales to try for holdover rainbow or native browns (which are present but not common on this fork). One such hot spot is where the Little Walker (a major tributary) enters the West Fork near Highway 395. One day late in June 1983, my son Matt and I walked out of sight of the roadway and around a slight bend in the riverbed. The river was still dropping from a swollen state as the previous winter's snow-pack was a monstrous one. Barely fishable, the water was somewhat discolored

This complicated water system provides quality trout experiences.



Author's son Matt hefts a sizeable brown from murky water late in May 1985. A landing net is necessary on the special section.

and swift, but we located a slower swirling eddy near some willows.

Matt chose a size 1 green Rooster Tail spinner, cast upstream of the brush and allowed the lure to bounce deeply through the hole. On the retrieve a hungry rainbow nailed his offering and returned to the current, making for an interesting battle on 4-pound monofilament. By loosening his drag slightly, he still managed to keep steady pressure on the fish and soon netted a 2½-pound 'bow. While this was not the typical trout found on most parts of the West Fork, the water is capable of kicking out natives like the above in off-the-beaten-path areas.

The section rushing through the canyon offers bait, fly and lure fishing as the water courses an open flood plain. Red salmon eggs and worms are the most effective means for planted trout but dark fly patterns (Woolly Worm, Coachman, Black Gnat) worked deep have produced well for me. For lures, good choices include Panther Martins, Kastmasters, Rooster Tails and Mepps spinners in the 0-2 size range.

Past the town of Topaz, the West Walker leaves Highway 395 and proceeds eastward toward Nevada in a much smaller capacity since a good portion of it is diverted into Topaz Lake.

While the West Walker comes on as a

rough-and-tumble drawing water, it is a marked contrast to its counterpart fork, the East Walker. Originating as seepage from Dunderberg Peak (elev. 12,374 feet) Twin Peaks (elev. 12,314 feet) and Matterhorn Peak (elev. 12,264 feet), the East Walker is formed by the merger of Virginia, Green and Dog creeks in a huge open valley known simply as "the Meadows." Pre-1924 tributaries of note included Robinson and Buckeye creeks, but these now flow into Bridgeport Reservoir as does the East Fork.

Here, the upper East Walker, which is not much more than 40 feet wide, snakes its way in a lazy path for about five miles through a lush green field, framed to the west by looming snowcapped peaks. Without cover, the native brown and rainbow in this sector are big, wary and offer a true challenge, for any fish taken here is earned.

One must sneak quietly and not place a shadow on the water or trout will be spooked. Dark Woolly Worm, sculpin, black marabou streamer and mosquito patterns are all effective here as are earthworms fished deep. There are virtually no holding pockets, but undercut banks prove good choices. Casts can be very short along the bank where many trout hold.

Large rainbows and browns use the lake to grow further in size and stature and ascend the tributaries to spawn. Rainbow usually are on the move in early spring while the brownies travel the feeders in late fall.

While the surrounding land is used for raising cattle and horses and remains in private ownership, access is open providing users respect the ranchers' rules — don't damage fences and leave all gates as you found them! Don't litter!

Below the reservoir, the river gains new life from steady releases as it courses a willowy, brushy path about four miles before dropping down a moderately steep canyon for ten more miles into Nevada. This stretch is paralleled by Highway 182.

Listening to the roar created by releases from the dam, I walked downstream a short distance to a bend in the river. The blue-green willow growth was all around me and seemed to blend in with the sagebrush blanket covering the nearby hills. With maybe twenty minutes of light left, the evening breeze disappeared, allowing swarms of mosquitoes their chance.

Using a five-inch gold Rapala with 8-pound line, I commenced casting across stream. The river here appeared
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THE WALKER RIVER

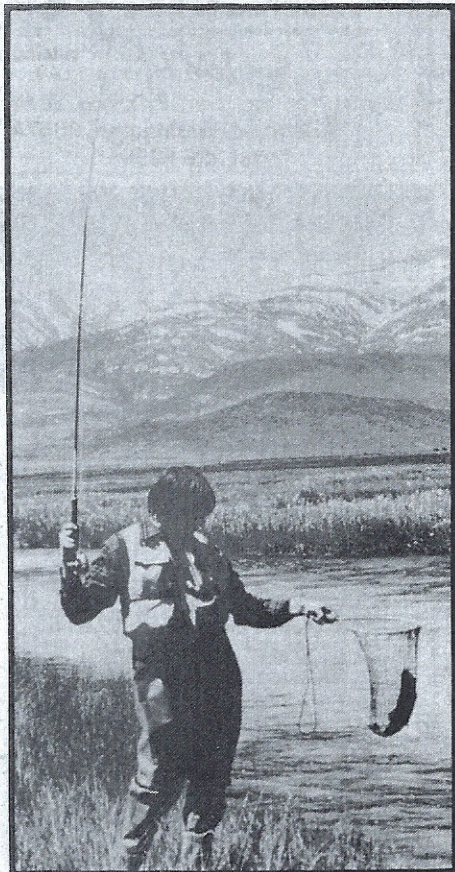
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dark green in the fading light as I slowly worked the lure back upstream, making it swim deep. Seven casts proved fruitless and my eighth resulted in a snag. Trying to free the lure, I suddenly noticed the line methodically move to the middle of the river bottom; my rod tip pulsed.

The brown was quiet for awhile but pressure suddenly turned him wild and powerful. Fighting deep, he fled across and downstream, making him seem twice his weight in the fast current. Leading him around and through several submerged willows, I silently wished I had 20-pound line!

It was dark by the time I wore him down enough to try netting but finally succeeded in that endeavor. Cradling him gently before release, I estimated his weight at around 3½ pounds. Even in the dim light, the deep bronze hue and dark spots forged a mental picture on my memory as he disappeared without hesitation.

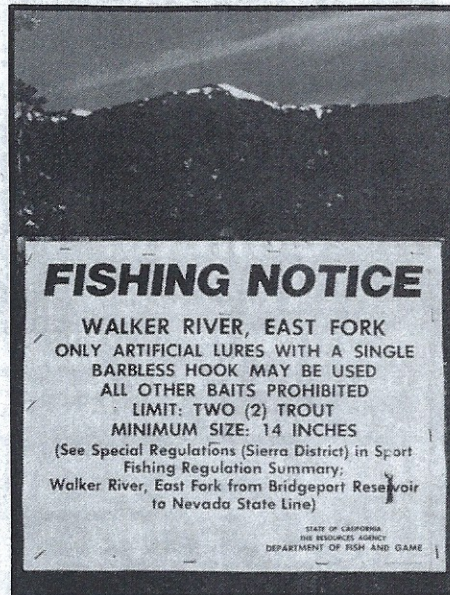
This section was virtually overlooked, except by locals, until the early 1960s.



Not more than 40 feet wide, the upper East Walker courses a huge meadow framed by snow-capped peaks.

When it became increasingly popular, its large population of brown trout, descendants of the first plants in the late 1800s, began to show signs of depletion.

Rather than witness another quality fishery go upside down, several individuals and groups banded together to try to rectify the situation before it became drastic. Combining the input and services of the DFG, Cal Trout, Inc., outdoor writer Bob Rogers, and local sportsman Rick Rockel, special regulations were



established for the 14 miles of stream between Bridgeport Reservoir and the Golden State's border.

Limits were reduced from ten to two trout, with 14 inches being the minimum keeper size. Only artificial lures and flies with single barbless hooks may be used as the method of take.

Within five short years, results were astounding for this stretch of water. "The overall size of the browns has increased steadily since the special regulations," stated Rockel of Ken's Sporting Goods in Bridgeport. According to his figures, the East Walker currently yields more large brown trout per mile than any stream west of the Rockies!

The first mile and a half of slow moving water below the dam produces many 14- to 20-inchers with fish to eight pounds consistently showing. "I've seen fish as long as your arm in this section," exclaimed Rockel, who fishes this area on a regular basis.

As is true throughout the special section, big fish are very hard to land because of the thick shoreline willows and steady current. Early in the season, dam releases are heavy, making wading dangerous, if not impossible. Each year there are near drownings due to gross carelessness.

Later in the season when releases are cut down and the stream becomes wadeable is a good time to try for the lunkers. Being able to wade puts the odds slightly in favor of the angler. "However," Rockel points out, "a five- to ten-pound brown is still a tough customer to land anywhere."

Entirely self-sustaining, the river contains 95% brown trout with rainbows washing down from the lake accounting for the other five percent. The rainbow entering via the spillway had better be of fair size because "if they are under 12 inches they will probably be eaten by a large brown," claims Rockel quite matter of factly!

To stand a decent chance of landing one of these leviathans, one must come specially equipped. For the spin fisherman, Rockel advises a medium to heavy action rod and reel loaded with 8- to 12-pound monofilament, with 10-pound being the best bet. Top lures are 3- to 5-inch Rapalas or Rebels in gold or rainbow finish. Large gold-plated spoons or spinners also work well, too.

For the fly angler, a rod designed to cast 6- to 8-weight line is best. Four- to 8-pound leaders are fine because most of the time the water is cloudy. Top patterns are marabou, Minnow Muddlers and muddler patterns in black and yellow. A specially designed sculpin pattern, tied locally, also produces well according to Rockel.

A landing net is an absolute necessity.

In an effort to further insure the immense brown stocks, "We are pushing for an eventual 18-inch minimum, one fish limit," confided Rockel. "This is planned for sometime in the future," he added.

Obviously the two forks have plenty going for them today, offering both native and hatchery rainbow and brown trout under varying conditions and circumstances. Since settlers first traversed up the Walker Canyon and Bridgeport Valley, many changes have indeed transpired here — the two biggest being the disappearance of the legendary "salmon-trout" and the various upstream dams and diversions which have caused a restructuring of trout habitat.

However, what could have been a major trout tragedy was minimized. True, the cutthroat is gone but taking its place are the now native rainbow and brown trout, which can better handle the increased angling pressure. Hopefully, under the watchful eye of the DFG, Cal Trout, Inc., and individuals like Bob Rogers and Rick Rockel, the future angling "progress" of the Walker River fork will be in good hands. □