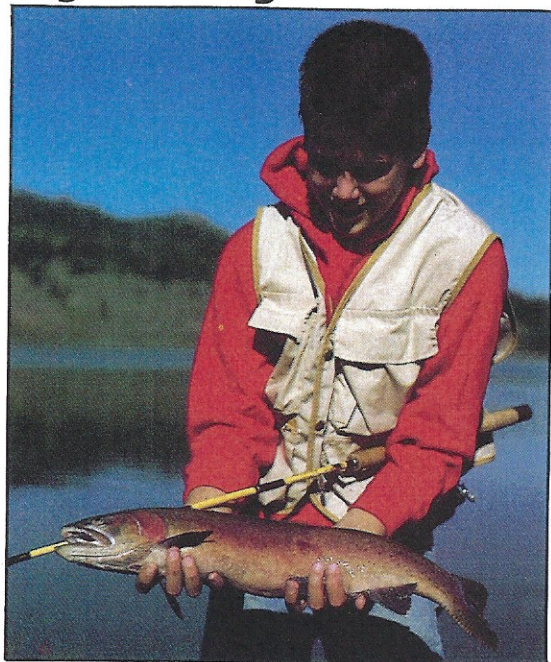


Heenan Lake

The Mystery Is Unveiled



Trout this size are the norm for Heenan Lake.

Don Vachini

As the morning air invigorated my lungs, the sun rose into a cloudless sky. Rounding a bend in the trail, I noticed a thin band of green ending at the lakeshore and could visualize the tiny creek, which served as the main feeder to the lake, hidden below this growth. We stopped hiking where a narrow channel, formed by crisp flows from the stream, jutted out into the modest-size body of water.

"Look at that," whispered my son, Matt. On the shallow, sandy bottom I could easily make out 10 to 15 thick shapes finning steadily. Seemingly unruffled by our presence mere feet away, several continued moving in and out of the inlet as if in slow motion.

My heart pounded rapidly and I could hardly keep my hands from shaking as I fumbled with my tackle. In keeping with Murphy's Law, the selected lure fell from my grasp and was momentarily lost in the shoreline grass. Thrashing about on all fours, I surely resembled some sort of cursing, lunatic beast while several salmon-size trout rolled practically at my nose! Further accounting for my outbreak of "fumble-itis" was the fact that this trout lake serves as a brood stock (Continued on page 8)

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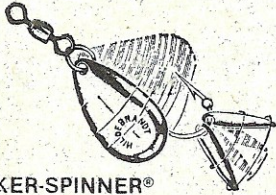


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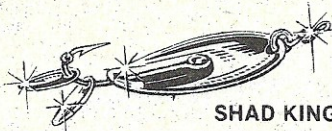
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HEENAN LAKE

Continued from page 4

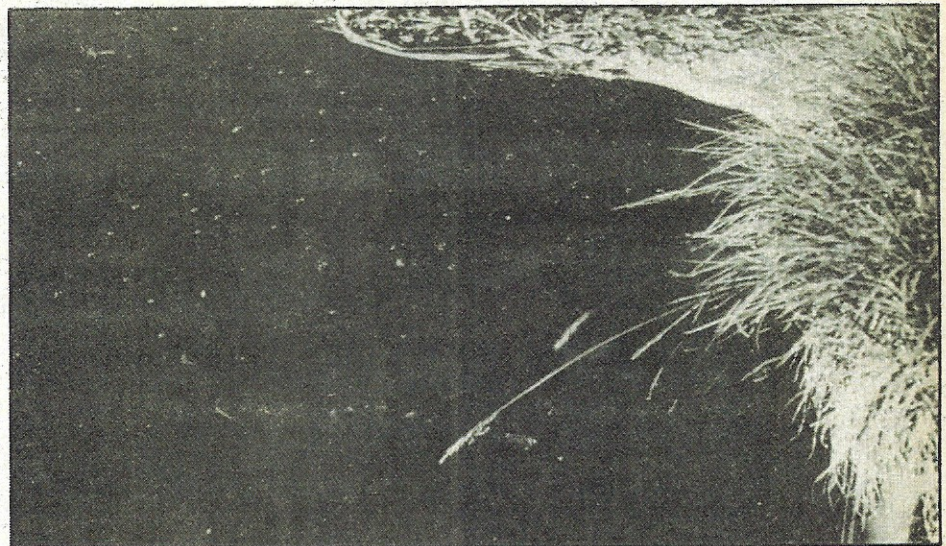
sanctuary for one of Western North America's largest resident trout species; and it had not been legal to fish here for close to half a century.

Matt and I were about to test California's Heenan Lake, the state's newest Wild Trout water, on its grand opening during July, 1984. This Alpine County water is located just west of Monitor Pass, approximately 8 miles south of Markleeville. Partially visible from Highway 89, it sits just below Sagehen Flat near the 7,500-foot elevation mark while surrounded by high country sage, aspen and sparse pine cover. As part of the East Carson River drainage, the locale is fairly arid in nature.

tragically in its dealings with modern man. When prehistoric Lahontan Lake receded, it deposited healthy populations throughout modern day remnants. Finding conditions ideal in California's Truckee, Walker, and Carson River systems (including Lake Tahoe and Nevada's Pyramid Lake), this trout grew and flourished over this range for centuries. When the white man first entered the picture in the 1850s, their populations must have registered well into the millions. Imagine the pioneers' astonishment at discovering countless numbers of spawning trout, averaging 2 to 4 feet in length, literally covering the full width of a river!

As the Lahontan became renown for its overwhelming numbers and huge size, the word spread quickly eastward. Explorer John C. Fremont labeled them

Heenan offers quality trout in a scenic setting. It is one of only two lakes in the state which contains genetically pure strains of lahontan cutthroat trout.



Even after spawning, large numbers of cutts patrol the inlet channel.

The 130-acre impoundment was formed in 1928 when the Dangberg Land and Cattle Company dammed the lower end of Bagley Valley for irrigation purposes. This water-storing reservoir not only benefits cattle and wildlife, but provides residency to an endangered trout species. Sometime in the early 1930s, Lahontan cutthroat trout (*Salmo clarki henshawi*) were planted from nearby Upper Blue Lake in the West Carson drainage and took hold in a big way at Heenan.

This subspecies, once the only trout in the entire Lahontan Basin, has fared

"salmon-trout" in his 1844 journal accounts and a "Ripley's Believe It Or Not" column billed the Lahontan cutt as the "world's largest trout." A 1920 survey party recorded an average of 20 pounds per fish for 195 trout captured and commercial fishermen consistently netted 40-pound specimens and occasional 60-pounders.

While sport and commercial fisheries which sprang up throughout the Basin accounted for tremendous overexploitation, well-meaning settlers introduced non-native trout in all the watersheds. Brown and brook trout took hold rapidly

and created extensive competition while the cutthroat readily interbred with stocked rainbows, causing them to lose their characteristics over a few short generations. Despite decreasing numbers throughout the 1920s, it was still possible to land 50 to 100 of these monsters in a day's angling, but when ranchers constructed networks of dams on the river systems above the lakes, the decline accelerated rapidly. These diversions prevented spawning and by 1940 only token populations remained, now covering less than 2 percent of their original range. In less than a century man had unwittingly pushed the mighty Lahontan cutthroat trout to the brink of elimination.

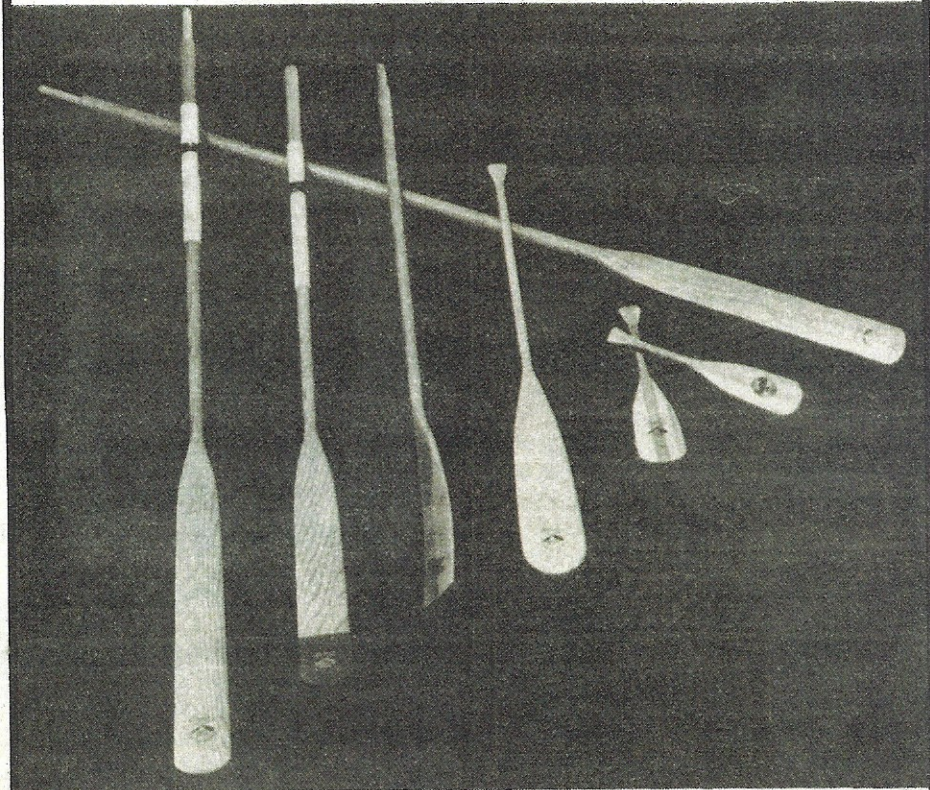
In an effort to save the species, the Federal Lahontan Cutthroat Trout Recovery Plan was formulated to insure against their extinction with the development of brood stocks in a few selected lakes in California and Nevada. Recently reclassified from endangered to threatened status, this subspecies maintains a fragile but steady existence in about 5 percent of its former stomping grounds.

Playing a vital role in the preservation of *Salmo clarki henshawi*, Heenan Lake proved to be an ideal refuge. In 1939 the Department of Fish and Game (DFG) entered into an agreement with the Dangbergs under which the Department was allowed to operate an egg-taking station in exchange for keeping the land closed to the public. Abundant nutrients, adequate year-long water conditions, and lack of angling pressure combined to form a nearly perfect environment for the rebirth of the prehistoric trout.

Heenan is one of only two waters in the state which contains genetically pure strains of these cutthroat. Under careful scrutiny by the DFG, Heenan provides up to 2½ million eggs annually, giving the lake a dual role. Eggs from here are reared in California's Hot Creek and Mocassin Creek hatcheries and then planted in selected waters throughout the state to help the Lahontan recover former range and expand to suitable locales. Anywhere from 10,000 to 40,000 yearlings are put back into Heenan each season.

Besides providing stocks for former DFG endeavors, cutts from Heenan are also used to stock such Cal Trout projects as Martis Lake and McCloud Lake in the Mammoth area (also known as Martis II). Surplus brood stocks are also used to provide bonus fishing for local waters. Several thousand are culled each season and transferred to such waters as the East and West Carson rivers, Markleeville,

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Wolf, Silver and Pleasant Valley creeks. Most of these spawners, which run 12 to 22 inches and can approach 4 to 6 pounds, account for some heart-stopping thrills for unsuspecting anglers after small, planted catchable rainbows.

Heenan had always possessed an aura of mystery to me, probably because I had envisioned the leviathans swimming in its closed waters as a tempting yet forbidden prize. That is why it was hard for me to fathom Dick May's words when I ran into him at the San Francisco Sportsmen's Exposition in 1982. May is currently the president of Cal Trout. "A big breakthrough just occurred," he said. "We are developing plans for Martis IV . . . which is to be Heenan Lake."

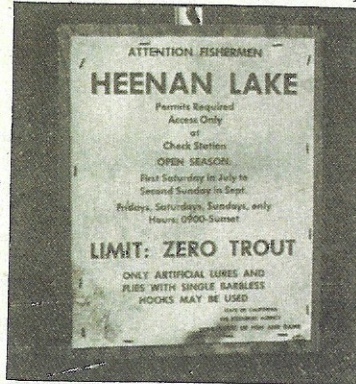
It took a moment to sink in. Though people had always pushed for the lake to be opened, the major stumbling block was that the property owners didn't want people wandering all over their acreage. However, in 1978 the Dangbergs sold out to Anderson Farms of Davis, beginning the breakthrough. By 1982, they put their 1,615-acre holdings up for sale. That same year the Wildlife Conservation Board purchased the parcel for \$902,500, opening the gates to public access. The DFG, with a big assist from May and Cal Trout, petitioned the California Wildlife Commission for a special fishery under SB-192, which mandates that at least one new lake and 10 additional miles of stream be managed by catch and release each year. On December 2, 1983, the Commission okayed Heenan for a special, limited season with zero limit and single, barbless hook restrictions.

The grand opening took place on July 7, 1984, under a clear, cloudless sky. A group of about 30 dedicated anglers were present when the gates opened at 8:00 a.m. sharp. A beehive of activity ensued from the graded parking lot where most cars headed after paying the \$3.00 fee for a special permit. Canoes, prams, rowboats and float tubes began dotting the lake's calm surface. Since no gas motors are allowed, the blissful peace was preserved.

Most anglers were concentrated around the dam area but we sought a little solitude at the inlet end. A dirt road follows the northern shoeline for approximately half a mile, ending at the egg-taking station (nothing more than a small shack over the creek). We were alone here except for a deputy caretaker. Overcoming the comedy of errors, my nerves finally settled and I was able to commence rigging. Both Matt and I were using light action spinning rods and reels loaded with 4-pound mono. While I tied

on a small silver Kastmaster, Matt selected a size 2 Mepps Aglia long with a Flectolite finish on the blade.

We had a hint of what was to come as Matt received a slashing strike right by shore as he was testing the spinner's action. Since he was the first to cast into the channel, I chose a shallower spot to his left near some half-submerged bulrushes. Seconds after I began a retrieve, Matt confidently hollered "Fish on!" While I momentarily glanced toward him, my lure was intercepted and we were involved in a double hookup!



The states newest Wild Trout lake is governed by limited season and special regulations.

Both fish fought an unspectacular but dogged battle. Their sheer weight pleasantly manipulated our rods into C-shaped curves as heavy head-shaking and short burstlike runs characterized the trouts' bids for freedom. Happily, our fish didn't cross lines as they performed a few surface rolls before being landed simultaneously. As I admired the hefty specimens flopping in the nets at our feet, I couldn't help but recall the plight of their ancestors. Gently lifting mine out of the net, I was impressed by the fish's slender, golden-hued body, sparsely flecked with large black dots. Gasping for air, it revealed its crimson jaw slashes — the familiar cutthroat trademark. After revival, the two swam back to their holding spots.

I looked over at my beaming son and we shared knowing winks. Across the lake from us a V-notch glimpse of a not-so-distant snowcapped peak added a touch of color to the blue-green sage while nearby the stream gurgled pleasantly. A pair of boats plied the mid-lake waters while a hawk soared overhead. So the long-awaited moment to fish Heenan seemed more perfect than even my dreams had anticipated. The action continued fast and furious for over an hour. Of the 11 cutthroat released before 10:00 a.m., 9 were over 18 inches with four stretching over 20 inches. All were caught from the inlet

within 30 paces of each other with a few being repeat takers.

One of the cutt's major flaws (and one which surely contributed to its near demise) is that they are not very wary and thus are too easy to catch. Their gullibility makes them very susceptible to rapid depletion. However, as a result, they are made to order for catch-and-release regulations.

Extensive biological data were reviewed and analyzed concerning when would be the optimum time to open the lake. Though the strain normally spawns from late April through May, it needs time to recover from this arduous task so the opener was pushed back. The date was set for early July, well after the fish have been stripped, and thus allowing plenty of time for the spent trout to regain strength. Many of the cutts we caught were still adorned in mating reds and had scars on their fins and tails. If hooked and played too soon after spawning, the mortality rate would be quite high.

Setting the season opener for well after the egg taking also gives the DFG a chance to evaluate both the condition of the fish and the eggs prior to allowing angling. Heenan is only open to fishing from the first weekend in July through the second week of September. The special season is also restricted to Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays during this timeframe.

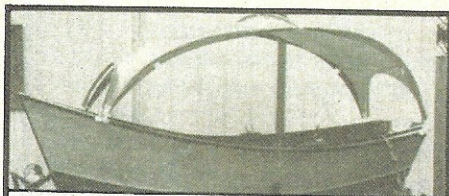
Preparing to leave for the night, I checked in with Richard Wickwire of the DFG, who was stationed at the gate. The presence of two or three wardens was very apparent as tight control seemed to be the order of the day. "The DFG hopes to control Heenan a little more effectively than Martis Lake, the state's pilot Wild Trout lake," said Wickwire. Some uncaring people illegally introduced green sunfish (which compete extensively with the cutthroat) there a few years ago. Poaching and illegal gear have also contributed to severely lower the anticipated high standards of Martis." At Heenan all gear is inspected and the wardens and deputies make themselves available, though always in a friendly manner, to insure compliance.

Even though a graph survey, conducted a week before the opener by the DFG, showed fish scattered all over the lake, we fared best at the inlet. When fishing any new lake, incoming water is where we usually head. This proved a rewarding tactic, for over one three-day period in mid-July two of my sons and I landed close to 30 cutts, all in or near the channel.

After three visits I began to notice a difference in some of the trout landed as a couple had noticeably more spots than the others. I mentioned this to Wickwire, who is an assistant fisheries biologist, and he explained that the DFG is phasing out the Heenan Lake strain in favor of the Independence Lake strain. The old Heenan strain supposedly tends to hybridize readily while the Independence strain remains the genetically purest in the state. Since 1975, all Independence strain cutthroat that are planted in the lake have clipped fins to identify them. Only eggs from clipped-fin trout are taken to maintain their genetic purity. The old Heenan strain, which is still present in the lake, are thinner and have more spots, accounting for the slight difference in appearance.

In praise of Heenan as a complete brood fish sanctuary, the lake has maintained only Lahontans as a single species since its inception. When left alone, cutts historically grow rapidly and are long-living and that seems to be the case at Heenan.

The egg-taking station is located on the only tributary that can support spawning, although fish are kept from ascending the tiny creek. By artificial propagation, genetic purity is insured plus a greater percentage of hatching success is achieved than would occur naturally.



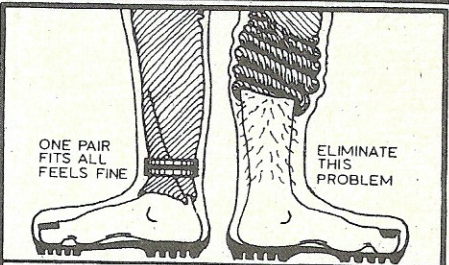
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Food in this nutrient-rich water is plentiful. While DFG surveys show a lack of any forage fish, bountiful food forms include scuds, snails, leeches, heavy hatches of midges and caddisflies plus an assortment of zooplankton—in all, quite a smorgasbord. Since there are no large organisms (forage fish) present in the lake, smaller lures (size 0-2) or flies in the 10-16 size range are good first choices. Silver Kastmasters and Rooster Tails in brown, yellow and white seemed to be the ticket for me during our three visits. Matt stuck with the Mepps Aglia long and Luxex series while Jason found success with black-and-white spotted Panther Martin spinners.

the lake to avoid swamping as well as a possible shock as midsummer thunder and lightning storms often follow the breezes.

In September the water level decreases significantly. With the inlet an insignificant trickle, a floating craft of some kind is a good bet to patrol the deeper water near the middle in search of the now scattered cutthroat. At this time they go on their fall feeding rampages in preparation for winter, and will attack almost any type of offering. I observed several boat anglers having fairly steady action trolling both lures and flies while shoreline fishermen were being skunked.

“All trout ranged between 15 to 22 inches with many pushing five pounds.”

Though I don't know much about how to fish the lake at this point, I have found that what is successful on most other lakes will work here. Since Heenan is only 32 feet at its deepest part, the abundance of zooplankton tends to make the water slightly murky. For this reason we chose shiny attractor lures to probe its cold depths.

For hardware tossers, a light action rod and reel is a sporting choice, especially when matched with 4- to 6-pound line. For fly anglers, a light action rod matched with a floating line is sufficient. Ultralight gear, while extremely challenging, would cause too much stress on the fish due to the length of time needed to play them. Care should be taken to handle the big cutthroat as little and as gently as possible.

Caddisfly hatches occur throughout the summer at Heenan. Dry fly enthusiasts should do well sticking to basic patterns such as the Adams, Cahill and Quill Gordon (size 14-16) in light to olive shades. Initial wet fly choices should include the Woolly Worm, leech, nymph and streamer patterns (size 10-12) in black, brown and white tones. A high density sink tip is necessary for getting the flies deep.

Boats, though not necessary, add a different dimension. Whether you are casting toward shoreline weedbeds, plying the channel or trolling lures or flies, a boat offers the luxury of easy movement throughout the lake. A primitive launch is available just below the parking area.

While the water is usually calm early and late in the day, it can be disrupted by afternoon winds which make casting an effort in futility. When these gusts hit, boats should vacate the center of

Various forms of lodging are available within a few miles of the lake. East Fork Resort provides nice cabins while Markleeville also has cabins to go along with both state and national forest campgrounds. Grover Hot Springs, located in the state park of the same name, offers some relaxing hot baths.

With Heenan's first season over, the tabulated results confirmed the quality of the lake's fishery. While the numbers of fish caught were slightly below expectations, the inaugural ten weekends were viewed as a rousing success according to DFG officials. "Based on creel census studies conducted at the lake, practically all trout fell between 15 and 22 inches with many pushing 5 pounds," beamed Wickwire. There were also some unconfirmed reports of trout approaching 8 to 10 pounds. While nowhere near the world record 41-pounder, cutts of this size are not only capable of testing tackle but nerves, too!

Soaking in a soothing hot bath, I relaxed while visualizing the past as well as the future of Heenan Lake. I was extremely grateful for the protective circumstances surrounding the lake's past. While introduced rainbows, browns and brookies have long replaced the Lahontan cutthroat in surrounding watersheds, this isolated lake still plays a major role in the survival of this trout. With the addition of Heenan to the growing list of Cal Trout projects, cutthroat heritage should be continue to be safe in the future. Not only should the status quo of this quality water be carefully guarded but anglers can enjoy this trout without fear of depleting its ranks . . . thanks to the never-ending magic of catch and release. □