

# Martis Lake's Second Life

*Once a thriving Lahontan cutthroat fishery, this catch and release lake is now managed for its wily rainbows and browns*

**Don Vachini**

**A**s 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 fish.

"Here comes one, Jason," I yelled to my 10 year old as I noticed a large form swim in his direction. Continuing to strip in line through the channel, his Woolly Worm twitched once, twice, then vanished in a swirl.

"Got him!" came the high-pitched reply. Jason's reel screeched in protest as the fish fought a stubborn but unspectacular five minute battle amid whoops of excitement.

As he struggled to lift the hook-jawed 21 incher that literally filled his net, we admired the long, golden hued torso sparsely covered with black flecks. While he gently removed the hook, the leviathan revealed its trademark crimson slashes before unhurriedly finning back into the depths. The fishing action continued briskly for nearly an hour. Of the seven Lahontan cutthroat we released before breakfast, five were longer than 17 inches!

This hotbed of activity took place in May of 1982 and served to introduce my young sons, Chris, Matt and Jason, to lake fly fishing. The two day experience they had pursuing this gullible cutt subspecies was a tonic for their young egos and helped inspire them to further refine their skills.

In June, 1991, I was standing along the same marshy inlet with my 10 year old daughter, Angela. Reminiscing, I was pointing out the spot where her brother enjoyed such memorable action a few years back. Though the creek still gushes with water, weedbeds remain well defined and Canada Geese still patrol astutely, some dramatic changes had taken place beneath the surface—rainbow and brown trout have replaced the susceptible cutthroat.

According to Eric Gerstung of the California Department of Fish and Game's Inland Fisheries Bureau, Lahontan cutthroat were the sole trout inhabitants of the entire Lahontan Basin (made up of the Truckee, Walker and Carson river drainages in California and the Humboldt and Reese river systems in Nevada), prior to 1850. Due to man's endeavors, however, the fish flirted with extinction by the 1930s as "...commercial fisheries, introduction of non-native species, interbreeding and dams all combined to nearly spell its doom," lamented Gerstung.

Absent from about 95% of their original range and habitat, this subspecies was reclassified from endangered to threatened status in 1975, mainly as a result of the federally enacted Lahontan Cutthroat Trout Recovery Plan.

A shallow, 70 acre flood control impoundment north of California's Lake Tahoe, Martis Lake was initially selected to help protect cutt heritage. According to Gerstung, the lake was not only chosen because conditions made it perfect to establish a reproducing trophy fishery strictly for *Oncorhynchus clarki henshawi* but Martis Creek, a Truckee River tributary, was also part of their historic range.

After chemically treated to remove all fish, the lake was restocked with pure strain Lahontans in 1978.

"Approximately 3000 yearling fish and 300 brood stock spawners made up the initial plant," said John Deinstadt, the person in

charge of the state's Wild Trout Program.

Reopened to angling in 1979 under artificial lures or flies with single barbless hooks and zero limit restrictions, Martis became the state's pilot catch and release lake. For the next six seasons, this specimen made resounding comebacks and the lake gained notoriety both as a fishery and a refugorium. Seemingly made to order for catch and release, these fish were big and easy to catch, as we experienced firsthand. DFG statistics revealed that up to 40% of the fish taken were in the three to four pound class. "Catches of 16- to 18-inch trout were the most common," said Deinstadt, "...with projected catches in the six to eight pound category anticipated for the future."

If kept isolated, this legendary trout would undoubtedly have flourished here. However, slowly at first and then rapidly, they were being out-competed by survivor species. "When we chemically treated the lake and adjoining Martis Creek, we didn't quite eliminate all the fish in one tiny tributary," explained Deinstadt. "It took years, but the rainbow and browns slowly built up their numbers and sizes. As you know, browns are very voracious predators and soon began taking their toll on the immature cutts. They especially ravaged the fingerlings which had hatched in the tributaries, thus severely impeding the intended natural recruitment."

Sometime during the early '80s, green sunfish were illegally introduced, creating yet another glitch. The growth of this prolific warmwater species coincided markedly with the brown and rainbow comeback, and the beginning of Martis' second life. Seriously competing with the cutthroat for food, they served as a forage base for the predator browns.

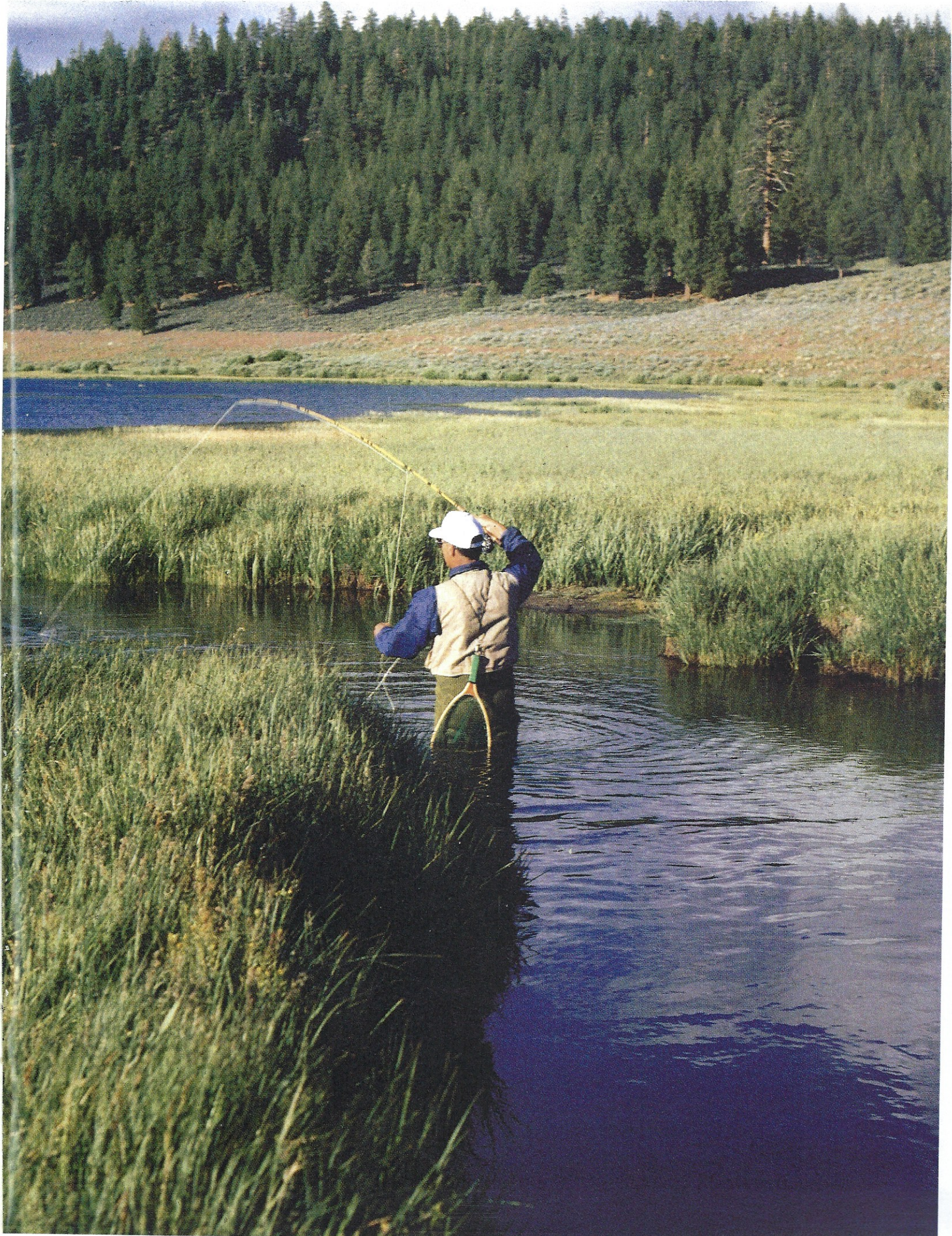
My sons used to practice their casting skills on these stunted bream for hours at a time. A small protected cove tucked behind a jutting peninsula gave us a personal hint of the brown recovery in June, 1982. Twelve-year old Matt was knee deep in water, flicking short casts and hauling in one sunfish after another while I was chatting with a ranger a few feet away. Suddenly, frantically scattering sunfish created a surface commotion and a menacing wave submarined toward his moving Black Gnat, violently intercepting it in the shallows. The two-pound, bronze-hued battler eyed us ominously as we unhooked it, seemingly more intent on returning to dinner!

Several times since, we have observed sizeable "pigs," as they are referred to locally, chasing baitfish, practically driving them onto shore.

Rainbows became increasingly more common in catches as they too built up their numbers. Chris and Matt have each taken memorable bows well over two pounds in subsequent seasons, attesting to the steady takeover.

Facing page: The moving water of the inlet channel is always a good choice.







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Most Martis 'bows currently average between 14 and 15 inches.

Putting their managerial *faux pas* behind them, the DFG decided to make good on what was available, continuing the catch and release regs while focusing on a quality theme. In January 1988, the Lahontan Cutthroat Trout Program at Martis was officially abandoned and a program for the development of a trophy rainbow trout fishery began. In the spring of that season 1,920 rainbows ranging from one half pound to a pound and a half were released into the lake. Half of these fish were English Ladies, the other half Coleman strain.

Ongoing studies are being conducted comparing the success of these two strains to determine which will be best suited for future development in Martis Lake. While some native rainbows currently range over two pounds, recent lake censuses reveal most implanted specimens averaging between 14 and 15 inches. Some of the larger browns will push four pounds (over a half-dozen of these behemoths washed up dead during the spring of '90, the reason for their demise unknown). According to Deinstadt, trout in the two to five pound range are the ultimate goal.

In an attempt to improve quality fishing here, the DFG is experimenting with English Ladies. Already quite popular overseas, these female rainbows are unique in that a heat shock is applied to their eggs shortly after fertilization, rendering them sterile. "The rationale behind this tactic is that the triploid trout will grow to large proportions quickly and live longer since they will not be developing eggs" explained Deinstadt.

Judging from the smiles of those surveyed, these rainbows are beginning to exhibit anticipated portly tendencies.

Though surrounded by pine shrouded hills, Martis' azure waters nestle near 6,000 feet in an open, high desert scenario devoid of shoreline trees. Extremely high in nutrient content, the lake is rimmed with a prodigious variety of aquatic growth, attracting nearly every type of insect relished by trout.

The key to fishing Martis effectively lies in understanding and replicating its bountiful insect life. Predictable hatches include damselfly, callibaetis mayfly and caddisfly throughout the season. When these emerge, usually by 10:00 a.m. or early evening, various sized, albeit wary, rainbows cruise the fringes of the weedy growth. While size 14-16 Adams, Cahill, Elk Hair Caddis and Quill Gordon patterns are suitable dry imitations, Parachute, Paradun and Pale Morning Dun are also quite productive when accompanied by feather-light casts.

Often, I find that rise forms are not reliable indicators of surface feeding. When feeding trout repeatedly ignore dries, tiny nymphs worked subsurface will often be just the ticket. A June '91 morning found me wading the shallow, flooded meadow near the inlet tributary. Feeding trout frequent this three to five foot deep, vegetation-infested flat since they are only a fin flip from the nearby creek channel bisecting this locale.

Carefully maneuvering toward a pair of trout, bulging ever so lightly as they fed in a circular pattern, I flicked a size 14 Gold-Ribbed Hare's Ear near the moving water, let it break film and commenced twitching it. After several weedy foulups, I sensed a definite tug and raised the rod overhead in a slow-motion, sweeping arc. Exploding airborne twice, the thrashing



silver missile stressed two-pound tippet to the max before I coerced it, plus a handful of anacharis, into my grasp. Early morning light caromed off its pinkish lateral line as the plump 15 incher, which amply filled my palm, rolled its eyes incredulously toward the nymph that betrayed it.

Besides the ever-popular Hare's Ear, other productive nymphal imitations include Pheasant Tail, Caddis Larva, Caddis Pupa, Caddis Nymph and Mosquito Larva in tan to olive shades.

During midday, the 'bows commonly retreat to the sanctuary of the flooded creek bed where they seem to prefer light-brown to black-shaded Marabou Leech, Woolly Bugger and Woolly Worm patterns on size 10-12 hooks. A high-density, sink-tip line comes in very handy when presenting these, and heavier leaders enable one to horse and fish away from cover. Since healthy numbers of freshwater shrimp also inhabit these depths, size 14-18 Scuds, retrieved with a sink and draw action, have provided jolting takes for me.

When dry fly or nymph angling here, I prefer a light action fly rod with four to six weight capability. To dupe the leadership citizens, offerings presented on 12- to 15-foot leaders matched with 6X tippets are generally necessary. This setup allows for accurate and effortless medium length casts without sacrificing a sporty battle.

Though actively feeding on naturals, the burly inhabitants quite often exhibit a high degree of wariness and sophistication, suspiciously declining almost all imitations. Randy Johnson, a reputable and knowledgeable area guide, has refined his own tackle and techniques to successfully fool these super-scrutinizing trout.

Since hardly a day goes by without some sort of chironomid emergence, he feels anglers who can successfully master midge presentations will consistently take Martis trout. "A very slow, steady retrieve with occasional pauses to imitate the slow rising and falling motion of the natural is deadly," he confides. "This is strictly long leader angling. Since strikes are usually very subtle, intently eyeball the indicator or fly line."

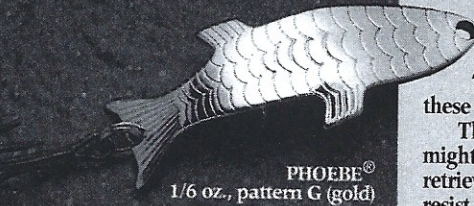
Proper midge fishing here commonly requires nine-foot rods with tip sections delicate enough to cushion strikes, 15-25 foot, thread-thin leaders and a variety of size 16-24 chironomid look-alikes.

Johnson's standbys are blood midges, an order of minuscule tendipedids preferring the shallow, mucky bottomed portion of Martis. Chironomid Pupa, Chironomid Larva, Chironomid Adult and Mosquito Larva in light to dark colors resemble this highly sought after food form.

Since keen eyesight is a must when working nearly microscopic midges, Polaroid glasses are a valuable asset.

(Continued on Page 47)

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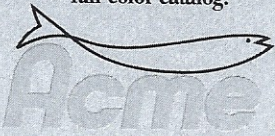


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## Martis Lake

(Continued from page 39)

For those who prefer hardware, a light action spin rod and reel loaded with four-pound line is sufficient. Rainbow- or brown-finished Rapala or Rebels worked parallel to shoreline weedbeds or trolled along deepwater drop-offs seem to entice larger fish.

While early season shore anglers can easily reach beyond herbaceous fringes, late season bloom almost necessitates some type of floating craft. Since no motorized boats are allowed on the lake, float tubes, prams or canoes are very popular, especially for efficiently working the underwater flora from deeper water.

Besides the inlet area, several springs gurgles into the lake, offering well oxygenated hangouts. Barren areas and sandy bottoms along the weeds or periodic bubbles on the surface are reliable tip-offs.

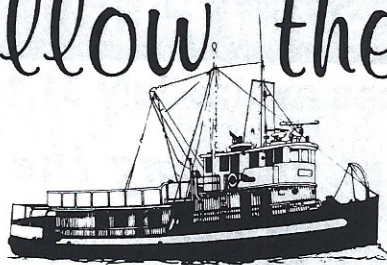
While the lake often appears mirror calm during early and late day periods, it is often disrupted by afternoon gusts which can make casting an effort in futility. Thunderstorms, common in this mountainous region, also signify time to leave the lake since graphite rods make good electrical conductors.

## Matching the hatch and stealthy casting will increase success

Big browns can frequently be stalked when they are noisily pursuing concentrations of sunfish. Working size six to eight silver- or green-tinted streamers among them is a good tactic. When autumn paints the surrounding hills yellow, these fall spawners will begin gathering to ascend Martis Creek on procreative missions. Since the creek and its tributaries are closed to angling, plying the inlet channel from mid to late October is a logical choice. Meaty streamers bounced upcurrent along the sandy bottom will often entice a hefty bruiser into taking a pre-spawning meal.

Similar to nearby stateline casinos where odds remain with the slight of hand artists, this eutrophic lake gives up its trout grudgingly. However, by paying meticulous attention to trout feeding habits, matching the hatch and stealthy casts, chances for success will increase. With special regs to protect populations, a solid food base and large, well-educated trout, Martis will most certainly further its reputation as one of the finest still-water fisheries in California! □

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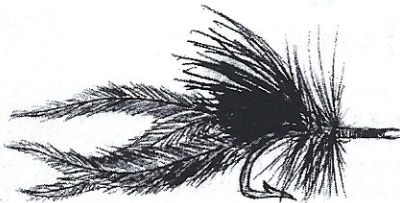
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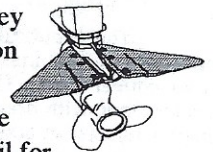
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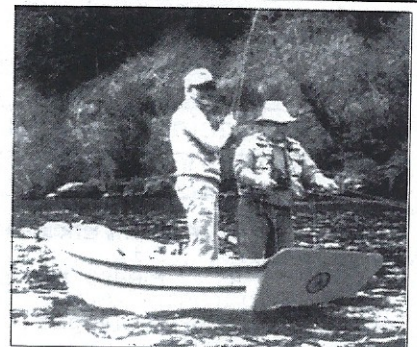
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