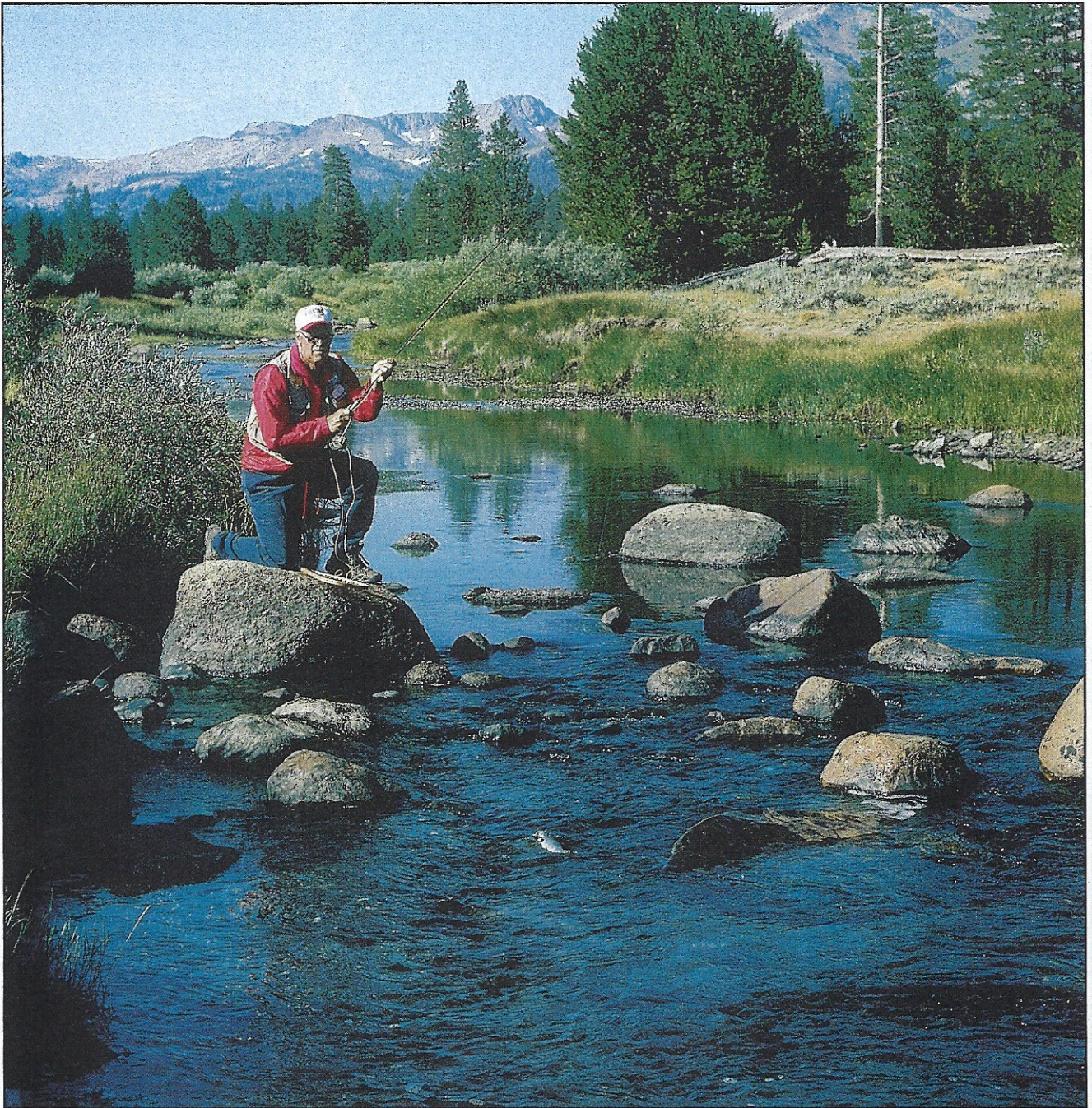


California's

Once on the brink of extinction, the "world's largest trout" is making a slow but definite comeback in parts of its historic California range.



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Lahontan

by Don Vachini

Cutthroat Comeback

Nothing against the gleaming 14-inch rainbow trout I had just caught-and-released, but a 14-inch rainbow wasn't the object of my desire.

I had romanced the thought of working this meadow stretch of the West Carson River in Hope Valley some 160 years earlier, when native Lahontan cutthroat trout weighing between 20 and 30 pounds were the norm. I had even silently pondered the bend a 20-pound stream trout would put on my fly rod, so the relatively diminutive rainbow was somewhat of a disappointment.

Two events came to mind that helped me gain perspective of the size of this ancient subspecies. During a July 1979 trip, I watched my son, Matt, then 13, strain to lift a hefty 5 1/2-pounder from the frothy flows of the East Carson River, which quite literally filled his net. The second occurred in 1982 at Martis Lake, the state's pilot catch-and-release lake, where then 10-year-old son Jason skillfully landed a monstrous 6-pound, 25-inch leviathan that looked more like a salmon than trout. While both were exceptional specimens, I was captivated by the knowledge that both were virtual minnows compared to their broad-shouldered ancestors.

According to Eric Gerstung, an associate biologist with the Department of Fish and Game's Inland Fisheries Division and the statewide coordinator for threatened trout, the Lahontan is an incredible subspecies. "Fast growing and long-lived, they are unique in tolerating highly alkaline waters where other trout fare poorly," he said.

Historically, the Lahontan cutthroat was the only trout species found in the Truckee, Carson and Walker river drainages in California and the Humboldt and Reese river systems of Nevada, which form the rough boundaries of pre-historic Lahontan Lake. Scientists believe they gained entry into this vast inland sea via the Snake River system during an unusually high water period. About 8,000 years ago, the lake began to recede, depositing populations in various drainages throughout east central California and northwestern Nevada. Now referred to as the Lahontan Basin, lakes Tahoe, Walker and Pyramid are tiny present-day remnants of this ancient lake.

Remaining in harmony with their arid climate and harsh ecological environment, these cutthroats used the bountiful and intricate arteriole river systems to maintain their genetic integrity for centuries. Documented vividly by explorer

The East Carson River and its numerous tributaries are home to populations of mostly 6- to 10-inch cutthroats. Photo by Don Vachini.

John C. Fremont on his 1844 expedition through the region, his first-hand journal accounts compared them to Columbia River salmon and refers to them as "salmon-trout." Incredibly, reports of Lahontan cutts to 60 pounds were recorded.

As western Nevada and east central California were settled in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a host of impediments brought the species to the brink of elimination within five decades. While pollution, commercial fisheries and habitat degradation did much to devastate populations, dams blocking spawning access, displacement by non-native trout and hybridization were major factors in its near demise.

Gerstung mentions that as recently as 1850, *Oncorhynchus clarki henshawi* was estimated to be present in lakes that covered more than 300,000 acres and 3,500 miles of stream. However, by 1915, the species was present in only 2 percent of its native California range. Today it is estimated that Lahontans inhabit about half of 1 percent of their former lake habitat and 10 percent of the streams."

THE RECOVERY PLAN

Thanks to the efforts of Trout Unlimited, Cal Trout, the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the California Department of Fish and Game and the Nevada Division of Wildlife, brood stock refuges were established in Heenan and Pyramid lakes. In addition, the trout was granted threatened status under the Endangered Species Act in 1970, and in 1995 the official recovery plan for the Lahontan cutthroat was published.

According to Gerstung, a swath of California waters from Lake Tahoe south to Lake Crowley are being managed under DFG's Heritage Trout program and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's recovery plan. "The multi-faceted plan focuses on planting trophy-sized specimens, stocking 7- to 10-inch catchables and fingerlings with the intent of establishing self-sustaining populations," Gerstung said. "Its main purpose is to allow angling yet re-establish fisheries throughout parts of their historic range."

PUT-AND-TAKE WATERS

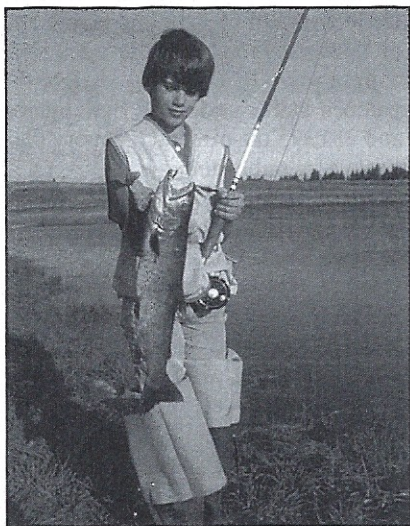
Courtesy of a 1968 agreement with the South Tahoe Public Utilities District, which provides additional financing for Alpine County, roughly 300 to 500 surplus cutts from Heenan Lake are distributed annually in Markleeville area waters from early to mid-summer. Brood stock cutts, ranging from 17 to 24 inches and 3 to 8 pounds, are strategically deposited along roadside stretches of the East and West Carson and West Walker rivers, plus Silver, Wolf and

Markleeville creeks. They provide a trophy catch-and-keep fishery for lucky anglers.

While a few of these fish scatter up or downstream, most are found within a few hundred yards of the location they were initially released. Rather than blindly casting, I target individuals from a higher vantage point, using polarized glasses or binoculars, and then plan a stalking approach. Most often they will be hiding against secluded undercut or languidly finning just out of the pull of the stream's main current.

The brawling flows of these waters are best worked with a 6- to 7-foot, light-action spinning rod and reel with a smooth operating drag and thin-diameter 6- to 8-pound monofilament. Small Rapala, Bingo Bug and Rebel plugs or slow-action Panther Martin, Rooster Tail and Uncle Larry's spinners in red, bronze and gold worked deep through slower fringes of pools, along undercut banks or zigzagged through eddies often entice huge Lahontans while red salmon eggs or worms bounced along the bottom are also effective.

Popular fly tackle includes a 4- to 5-weight, 9-foot rod with a sinking line and fluorocarbon leader used to present size 8-10 patterns in slow, stop-and-go retrieves. The best patterns are the Marabou Muddler, Matuka Olive, brown, black or olive



This 25-inch, 6-pound Lahontan cutt was caught and released at Martis Lake by the author's then 10-year-old son, Jason. Photo by Don Vachini.

Woolly Bugger, Beadhead Egg and San Juan Worm. For tight-lipped cutts, I prefer to go extreme and large in an attempt to aggravate them. Size 6-8 Bunny Leech, Egg Sucking Leech and Woolly Buggers in red, orange or chartreuse worked near bottom on a dead drift then retrieved slowly upstream with occasional twitches or side-to-side wiggles will sometimes provoke a strike. Since battling these bruisers in fast water is akin to flying a kite in a hurricane, a medium-sized landing net is a definite must.

MID-SIZED STILLWATERS

While not intended to replace existing rainbow, brook or brown trout populations, Upper and Lower Blue, Red and Fallen Leaf lakes plus Kinney and Indian Creek reservoirs are stocked with 7- to 10-inch cutts at various times of the season. Gerstung says the put-and-grow philosophy employed at these waters is control factor to see how the fish fare alongside competing species. "Hopefully, resident populations will establish overtime and offer a broader base of species to the angler," he said.

Blessed with deep, cold water and abundant nutrients, most of the fish surviving the initial six months will fall into the 10- to 13-inch range while highly sought holdovers will near 16 inches.

The most feasible way to ply these waters is from a boat with minnow-patterned Krocodiles and Rebels, orange broken-back Rapalas and orange, white and green Bingo Bugs top-lined contour to the shoreline. Frog Needlefish, red-spotted Triple Teasers, gold and silver Humdingers and red Crippures trolled along fringes of deeper water channels are likewise successful.

HEADWATERS & LIL' CRICKS

Somewhat of a creek freak, I am enamored with the extreme upper courses of the East and West Carson rivers, plus myriad tiny feeder streams, most of which range between 3 and 6 feet wide and 2 to 4 feet deep. Don't be fooled by the Lilliputian sizes of the Upper Truckee River plus Silver, Wolf, Willow, Red Lake and Forestdale creeks, all of which emanate from the Sierra Nevada's granite-ribbed

LAHONTAN CUTT INFO

Billed as the "World's Largest Trout" in a 1914 *Ripley's Believe It or Not*, it's no secret that Lahontan cutthroats once grew to enormous size.

While the International Game Fish Association's all-tackle world record recognizes a 41-pound Lahontan caught from Pyramid Lake in 1925 by John Skimmerhorn, the cutthroats' numbers were in deep decline by then. Artificial propagation saved the species from extinction, but saving them came with a price, according to Eric Gerstung, an associate biologist with the California Department of Fish and Game. "Though taxonomically identical, today's survivors lack the genetic structure to produce the really large fish of the original Pyramid strain," he said.

Statistics show that Lahontans achieve maximum growth potential as the sole trout species in a specific water. — *Don Vachini*

escarpment before gurgling under Jeffrey and lodge pole pine, Douglas fir and spruce canopies. Despite their size, these streams house fair to excellent self-sustaining populations of diminutive Lahontan cutts. These, plus a few more "secret" waters, are all undergoing some form of habitat enhancement to further establish Lahontan footholds.

Cutthroats in these areas receive far less fishing pressure than other locales, and yet prolific summer Callibaetis mayfly, yellow stonefly and caddis hatch provide parades of food most flyfishermen never see. More important than insect identification, anglers must learn to recognize characteristics of trout-holding water and be creative (and non-consumptive) in their approaches.

While meadow sections offer plenty of room for backcasts, tight, brushy sections with their tiny pools, pockets and seams put a premium on cat-like stealth and fetal-position casts. I favor scaled down versions of tackle on these intimate waters. A 6-

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LAHONTANS...Continued

to 8-foot rod of 0 to 3 weight matched with a fine 6- to 7-foot leader of 6X-7X is perfect for dap-ping size 14-16 Madam X, Humpy, Irresistible or Quill Gordon patterns on top, or moon walking size 14-18 weighted Flashback Pheasant Tail, Bird's Nest, Serendipity, Midge Larva, Chironomid Pupa and Brassie nymphs over a cobblestone bottom.

BACKCOUNTRY BONANZA

Approaching Round Top Lake, tucked away near 9,400 feet, my anticipation elevated as numerous concentric rise forms dimpled its surface. Within minutes, 12 inches of bronze-hued, streamlined body with perfectly round black spots wriggled in my hand. Flaming orange mandibles confirmed the cutthroat's identity. More and more of these Lahontans are adorning selected Sierra backcountry lakes guarded by stiff climbs or long hikes. Upper and Lower Kinney, Round Top, Greenhorn and Fourth of July lakes, among others, contain self-sustaining populations of pan-sized fish.

Since cutts are notorious cruisers, I explore the littoral zones first as the vast majority of aquatic trout food lives there. Trying to determine trout cruising circuits, I cast and allow the fly to settle on the bottom. When my quarry approaches on its return route,



A brown Rooster Tail dredged deep against the current by the author's son Matt when he was just 13 produced this hefty cutt from the East Carson River. Photo by Don Vachini.

PYRAMID LAKE CUTTS

Pyramid Lake, named for a triangular rock formation off its eastern shore, sits north of Reno in Nevada's arid high desert. To the casual observer, this 10-mile by 30-mile fragment of ancient Lake Lahontan lacks complexity, and yet few other places grow trout as big as you will find here. Resident Lahontan cutthroats average 14 to 18 inches and 3 to 8 pounds.



Because these fish feed near shore, the most reliable fishing technique is to wade as far out into the water as is safe — some anglers use stepladders — and cast toward the break bordering shallow and deep water. Allow the offering to sink and then begin a slow, steady retrieve along the bottom.

Anglers here use 8 1/2- to 10-foot, 7- to 8-weight fly rods with plenty of backbone to cast heavy sinking lines against fierce winds. If you have a Spey rod, use it. Reels should have plenty of backing and smooth drags.

These fish are seldom leader shy. Short, 10- to 15-pound tippets are best to prevent tangles on long casts. Size 4-8 streamers or minnow-imitating flies, Clouser minnows, Woolly Buggers, Articulated Leeches and basic leech patterns in white, black, purple or olive shades are best, and anything with silver that sinks quickly and is retrieved rapidly can also be effective.

Spin anglers prefer heavy Tor-P-Do plugs, spoons made by Kastmaster, Thomas Buoyant and Z-Ray, or Panther Martin and Vibrax spinners.

Top west-side locations include the Nets near Sutcliffe, North and South Nets, Windless Bay and Warrior Point. The east shore is far more isolated and challenging but a bumpy road follows most of its shoreline. While Dago Bay and the area near the pyramid formation are productive, always search for sandy bottoms and avoid snag-filled areas.

A Nevada fishing license and a special tribal permit are required to fish at Pyramid, which is open from Oct. 1 through June 30. — Don Vachini

I impart action to attract attention without the risk of a cast spooking them away.

While inlets are always productive, I have found that insects and other aquatic organisms concentrate at the outlets funneling out of a lake, from deeper water toward the surface. Although size 18-20 Parachute Adams, Parachute Black Gnats or Griffith's Gnats will cover most hatch possibilities, other productive back-country patterns include Damsel, Gulper Special, and Gold Ribbed Hare's Ear nymphs and grasshopper, ant, cricket and ladybug terrestrials.

Another cutt trademark is following for long distances before deciding to strike. A fly/bubble setup with an ultra light rod and reel loaded with 2- to 4-pound monofilament lets anglers achieve lengthy casts and keep the offering available for a longer period. A deadly rig for me is a size 14 tungsten beadhead nymph tied 2 to 3 feet behind a foam-bodied Rubberlegs. I give it a twitch every 10 seconds or so.

A float tube is perfect for plying

productive shelf lines of notable trophy destination lakes Secret, Roosevelt and Lane of the West Walker drainage, which maintain thin densities of robust 14- to 18-inchers and are governed by limited-take regulations. Five summers ago, Roosevelt Lake yielded a 2-pound, 2-ounce cutt to me, which established the National Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame's Unlimited tippet class world record.

Rainbow and cutthroat patterned Thomas Buoyant, bronze/blue Kastmaster and fire tiger Needlefish spoons are best worked ticking the bottom and retrieved slowly while white, red or yellow jigs yo-yoed above drop-offs will also provide hefty payoffs.

Fly gear and water release best protect stocks at Independence, Martis and Heenan lakes, which operate under zero limit, special closures and barbless hook guidelines. □

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