

NEVADA DESERT SLAM

The Snake Range offers a unique chance to score a trout slam in one place. **BY DON VACHINI**

The quest to add yet another cutthroat subspecies to my personal list had, quite literally, brought me to my knees. In front of me, a vibrant, snow-fed creek tumbled down the steep face of Mt. Wheeler, coursing through an almost impenetrable jumble of dense timber and thorny brush. While my only option was to crawl on hands and knees to reach its guarded pools, the thought of a face to face encounter with a rattlesnake coming out of hibernation was also a bit disconcerting!

The Bonneville cutthroat trout I was pursuing had survived over the eons, adapting to the aridity of the Great Basin environment. Always looking for a trouty challenge, I became intrigued while researching this rare strain. While populations remain sequestered in a few isolated headwater streams in Wyoming, Idaho and Utah, I targeted a small geographic locale where they have been re-introduced to their original native habitat in a Nevada mountain range and made plans to try for them. Happily, there were four other trout species available nearby.

AREA HISTORY

Oncorhynchus clarki utah is one of the last living remnants of Bonneville Lake, the freshwater precursor to the



Thanks to a well-organized restoration program, the resilient Bonneville cutthroat is currently making a strong comeback in its historic Snake Range habitat. • Photo by Don Vachini.

far smaller Great Salt, Sevier and Utah lakes. The largest Pleistocene pluvial lake in North America, Bonneville was most likely created by a volcanic dam on Idaho's Snake River nearly 30,000 years ago, causing it to overflow into Utah and Nevada and bringing its cutthroat trout ancestors with it. Evolving into a separate subspecies characterized by a short, stumpy body with sparse but distinctive black spots, the unique Bonneville strain spread into superabundance throughout this vast inland sea.

Slowly draining and evaporating, Bonneville's eventual death knell came with the final retreat of glacial ice. Even with the desiccation of this lake approximately 8,000 years ago, these hardy cutts maintained their genetic in-

tegrity, stranded for centuries in the high mountain streams draining the east slope of the Snake Range. The only trout species native to Eastern Nevada, they were able to tolerate high water fluctuations, wide temperature variances and poor water quality while flourishing in this harsh environment. However, during the late-1800s, white settlers introduced brook, brown and rainbow trout into these watersheds and the "non-native newcomers" drastically outcompeted and nearly hybridized the originals to extinction over a short 70 years. Thankfully, stream surveys during the late 1970s revealed pockets of pure-strain populations surviving in the headwater sections along the range's eastern escarpment.

CURRENT STATUS

Beginning in 1980, the Bonneville Cutthroat Restoration Program was initiated by the Nevada Division of Wildlife (NDW) and Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest and joined by the National Park Service in 1999. Shortly after, the Bureau of Land Management, Great Basin National Park, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, Trout Unlimited and numerous landowners became involved in the primary goal of restoring Bonneville to the streams they once inhabited within their historic range.

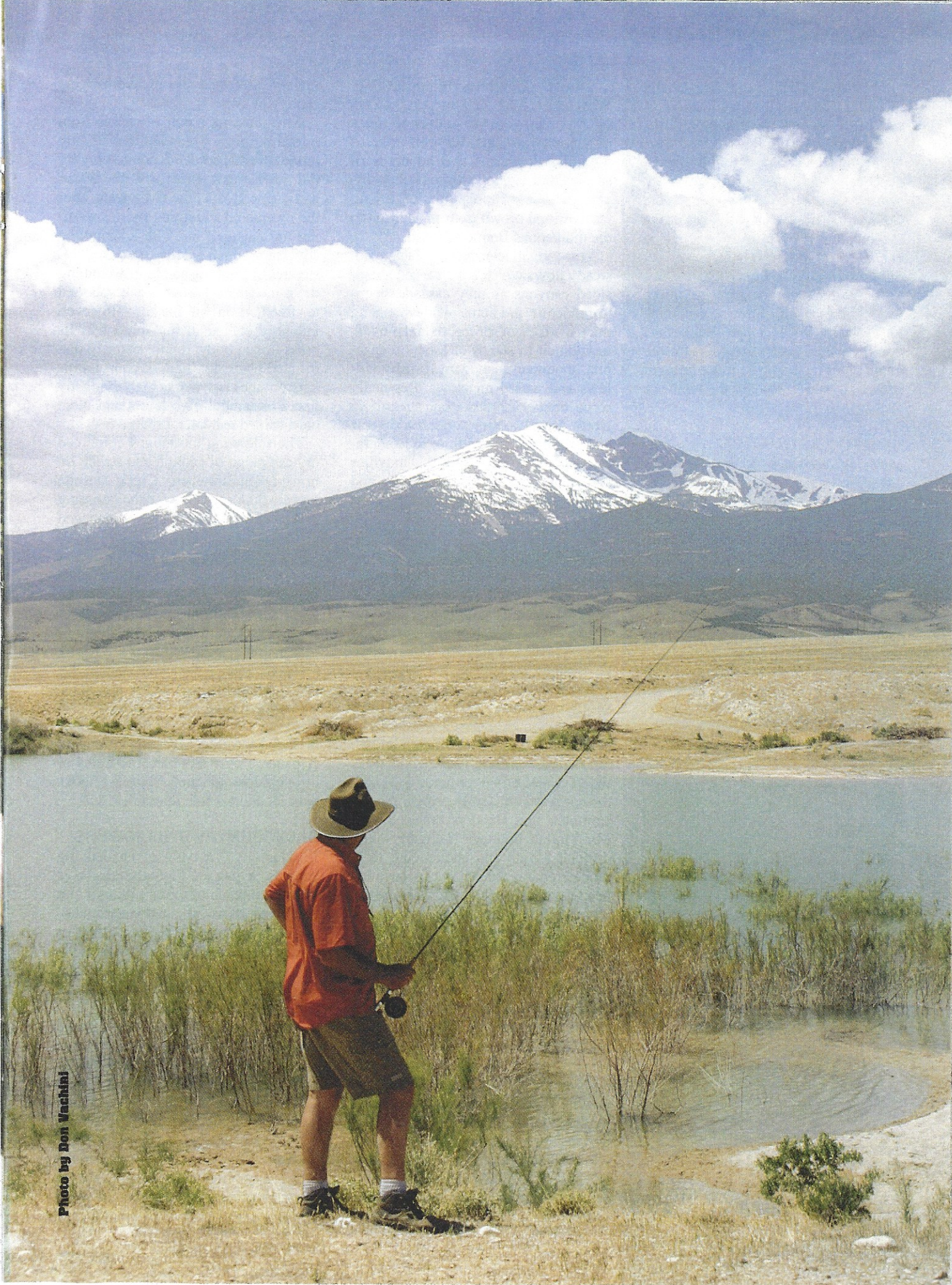


Photo by Don Vachini

The multi-step process initially included chemically eradicating a stream of all fish species, monitoring the stream to ensure the success of the eradication and, lastly, re-introducing genetically pure specimens. As a result of this 10-year implementation, Bonneville trout currently reside in approximately 30 miles of reclaimed habitat in 11 different streams of the Snake Range. As of June 2009, healthy, self-sustaining populations are firmly established in Mill, Strawberry, South Fork of Big Wash, Upper Snake and South Fork of Baker creeks, with ongoing plans including 11 more miles of stream to be treated over the next two years.

DESERT DESTINATION

Motoring eastward across Nevada's Great Basin via Highway 50, one encounters hundreds of miles of desolate sagebrush and windswept sand dunes — a landscape seemingly unfit for habitation by man or beast — let alone harboring trout. Yet, approaching the Utah border, a pair of lofty, white-capped mountain peaks dominates the Snake Range, their green timbered slopes a stark contrast to the desert drabness.

Tucked along the east-central border of Nevada, this small mountain range is home to Great Basin National Park and the neighboring Mt. Moriah Wilderness.



Thick growth can make movement a little tricky along places like Baker Creek. It is slightly more open through the campgrounds. • Photo by Don Vachini.

Glaciers along the north slopes of Mt. Wheeler (13,063 feet) and Mt. Moriah (12,067 feet) give life to over 60 miles of perennial streams, 100-plus miles of intermittent streams and hundreds of springs that continue to house healthy, yet truncated populations of brook, rainbow and brown trout in addition to the indigenous Bonneville cutt.

Year-long glacier melt sustains cold, steady flows which have carved sharp-sided canyons as they cascade steep-to-moderate gradients while coursing thick blankets of spruce, fir and pinyon, in addition to stands of aspen, manzanita, mountain mahogany, brushy willows and grassy meadows. Reputedly some of the shortest trout streams in North America, they support a diverse and prominent spectrum of food sources, including caddis flies, mayflies and stoneflies plus scuds, leeches and snails, before vanishing into the desert floor.

BONNEVILLE STRATEGIES

While anglers are allowed to fish for this rare salmonid, all caught must be released. However, pursuing the cut-throat leg of the “desert trout slam” isn't an easy endeavor. Indeed, anglers intent on adding the Bonneville cutthroat to their catch list must be sturdy taskmasters since the best locations exist in the upper reaches of Big Wash, South Fork of Baker, Upper Snake, Strawberry and Mill creeks within Great Basin National Park and the upper sections of Deadman, Smith, Hampton and Hendrys creeks of the Mt. Moriah drainage. Lengthy hikes, difficult terrain and challenging techniques remain the status quo on these headwater sections, which are generally 2-5 feet wide, often braided and with scaled-down pools, pockets and runs measuring 2-3 feet deep.

Driving for 7 miles along a lightly-used, 4-wheel drive road to approach the Upper Snake Creek trailhead, my search began in earnest. Ascending a sketchy trail, I weaved in and out of forest, thigh-high juniper and mahogany thickets for about a mile before a welcoming gurgle pinpointed the partially hidden stream. Finding trouty habitat on the briskly-stepladdering rivulet was not really a problem but negotiating casting room was a nightmare as every diminutive pool or enticing eddy

seemed protected by an overhanging canopy of brush.

After missing a pair of strikes from a fetal position, I crawled to a slightly more advantageous lie, pointed my fly rod downstream, parallel to the water, and stripped out line. Moments after the fly entered a foaming swirl, a slashing tug engaged me with a wriggling adversary which I deftly derricked upstream. Unhooking and briefly cradling the 8-incher in the current, it splashed to freedom in an instant. However, indelibly etched in my mind was its brass-tinged body, round, sparsely-distributed black dots and, of course, brilliant orange slash marks identifying my first Bonneville! Two hours and three hard-earned fish later, I retired to camp.

The following morning, I continued my campaign of caution and stealth on brush-laden Strawberry Creek. Despite repeatedly spooking fish, missing strikes and fouling tippets, I managed to release a pair of healthy and vibrant *Clarki utah*, neither of which surpassed nine inches. Overall, stream residents appeared very hungry and not at all picky about fly type. On the other hand, sloppy presentations scattered them.

A 7-foot, 2-3 weight fly system, matched with a 4-foot gossamer tippet is more than up to the challenge of dapping size 14-18 Bird's Nest, Pheasant Tail, Black Ant or AP nymphs or dry Mosquito, Adams or Madam X patterns over cumbersome limbs or through dense thickets. Barbless hooks help facilitate a safe release.

BACKCOUNTRY STILLWATERS

In addition to a bevy of challenging streams, a pair of high-altitude lakes are within reach of those willing to put in a bit of effort. Attained via stimulating hikes from either Timber, Baker or Snake creek trailheads, they are made to order for adventuresome anglers who savor aesthetic alpine settings, pan-size trout and solitude.

The winding, 3-mile-long Snake Trail brought me to Johnson Lake (10,400-foot elevation), which sits in a moderately-timbered, glacial cirque and is the only stillwater in the range harboring Bonnevilles.

Twitched slowly, my fly/bubble set-up formed a widening V-wake, slightly rippling the image of 11,000-foot

Continued on page 49...

Pyramid Peak reflected on its mirror-surface. As it approached a drop-off, a flashy resident intercepted the trailing size 16 Beadhead Caddis, battling mightily but in vain against 2-pound mono. Identical in shape to its stream counterparts, the stubby 8-incher displayed the same black dot and vivid slash characteristics but its body tone was decidedly more silvery.

After lunch, I ascended a large talus slope, skirted an open ridgeline and contoured an additional mile to Baker Lake, the headwaters of its namesake creek. While planted with Lahontan cutthroat as a control factor, it also harbors a solid brook population.

Shallow shorelines on both lakes require lengthy, well-placed casts although fish tend to cruise the shallows during low-light periods. Since no floatation devices are allowed in either water and anglers are restricted to bank endeavors, fan casting helps exploit structure from varying angles. Polarized glasses not only aid in spotting fish but also locating transition zones, lake margins and submerged points jutting into deeper water.

At Baker, I found inquisitive brookies enthusiastically accepting size 14-16 Adams, Elk Hair Caddis, Foam Beetle and Black Gnat or Scud, Copper John, Zug Bug and Prince Nymph droppers right near the top. Tiny, size 0 Panther Martin, Rooster Tail and Vibrax spinners in bronze, yellow and orange shades were subject to lengthier scrutiny but still proved deadly on the deeper-dwelling Lahontans.

OTHER TROUT SPECIES

Introduced rainbows, brook and brown trout continue to flourish in the lower portions of the park, probably reaching their pinnacle on the broader, more voluminous sections. Baker and Lehman creeks have developed campgrounds on their banks and support healthy numbers of 10- to 12-inch trout while Snake and Strawberry creeks offer numerous primitive sites, providing a degree of solitude not often found in national parks. According to NDW stream surveys, Baker and Lehman shelter more than 2,000 brown trout per mile along with mixtures of brookies and 'bows!

At roughly 15 to 20 feet wide, the cascading waters on their lower cours-

es possess more defined pockets, pools and a somewhat gentler gradient while meandering through less-wooded terrain. When flowing somewhat high and slightly cloudy during early season melt-off, the advantage shifts slightly in the angler's favor.

Wet-wading and meticulously short-lining dark-hued, weighted nymphs or bottom-bouncing red salmon eggs or worms into suitable structure are effective tactics on the abundant and willing rainbow and brook trout. Whether using 8- to 9-foot fly or 6- to 7-foot ultralight spinning rods, strive to maintain a slight tension on the offering that allows for both control and efficiently detecting strikes.

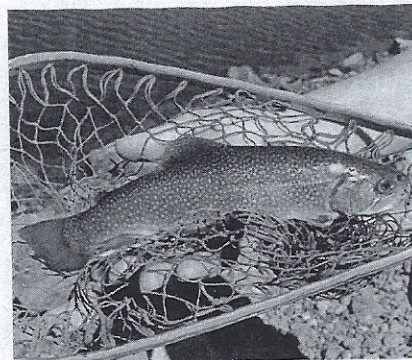
The abundant, hard-to-target browns often prove to be the wild card, preferring the sanctuary of undercut banks, heavy cover and low-light conditions. Repeatedly stripping a meaty, olive Matuka alongside a Baker Creek log pile in the dwindling twilight finally coaxed a small brown from the dense cover, enabling me to complete my slam.

ROADSIDE CREEKS/ RESERVOIRS

Regularly stocked with catchable-sized rainbows, nearby Silver, Negro, Williams, Shingle and Willard creeks are road-accessible and offer additional opportunities. Best times to visit these out-of-park waters remains early to mid-summer before their flows drop and fish plants cease.

For those seeking a respite from probing miniscule mountainside rivulets, a pair of nearby, drive-to stillwaters offer more traditional opportunities. Situated on a short spur road off Highway 50, desolate, 5-acre Silver Creek Reservoir offers an open shoreline, unobstructed vistas of towering Mt. Wheeler and planted rainbow trout. Flinging noisy Vibrax spinners along the moving water of its gravelly inlet channel produced a pair of sleek, 11-inch rainbows for me during an hour-long visit while stationary chair anglers soaking Power Bait accounted for a brace of like-sized stockers.

Located within sight of a rest stop along Highway 50, spring-fed Sac Pass Pond is encircled by a thick curtain of reeds, which prevents easy casting and often hides its presence from travelers



The brook trout from Baker Lake are healthy, hungry and plentiful. ■ Photo by Don Vachini.

seeking a break from driving. As conditions permit, the 1 1/2-acre water is planted with pan-sized rainbow trout by the NDW.

RESOURCES

Remote and lightly-visited, the Great Basin National Park houses the Lehman Caves, Nevada's only glaciers and a grove of 3,000- to 5,000-year-old Bristlecone pines. The park entrance is located in Baker, which has lodging, restaurants, groceries, fishing licenses and gasoline. The nearest cities are Ely, Nevada (70 miles west) and Delta, Utah (100 miles east) via Highway 50. While admission to the park is free, fees are charged for camping, cave tours and the RV sanitary station. For additional information, you can phone (775) 234-7331 or visit www.nps.gov/grba.

In addition to sturdy, proper-fitting footwear, backcountry travelers are strongly advised to carry raingear and plenty of water, and to possess a quality topo map and register their route with park headquarters.

A Nevada fishing license and trout stamp are required to fish any of these locales. For updated fishing information, contact www.great.basin.national-park.com or NDW fisheries biologist Chris Crookshanks at (775) 289-1655, ext. 25.

While the Great Basin is not a typical fishing destination, it does provide casual recreational trout angling plus a five-species grand slam opportunity in an uncrowded setting. It also allows adventuresome anglers to seek an audience with a rare trout in the same formidable habitat it has pervaded for centuries! □