

Lahontan cutthroat trout

Last updated September 21, 2011

Lahontan cutthroat trout from Pyramid Lake, Walker Lake, Summit Lake and Lake Tahoe were a major food source for Northern Paiute, Shoshone and Washoe Native Americans. Caught and dried, the trout were stored and eaten during the cold winter months. Trappers, explorers and settlers also fished northern Nevada's streams, rivers and lakes for this black-spotted trout with red slash marks on the throat below the mouth and gills.



Lahontan cutthroat were plentiful in the mid-1880's. But as more people moved to Nevada and began to use the natural resources, what was once plentiful became depleted. Between 1873 and 1922 commercial fishing operations harvested 100,000 to 200,000 pounds of Lahontan cutthroat trout each year from Pyramid, Walker and Tahoe. Lahontan cutthroat trout supplied many of the kitchens feeding Comstock mining boom in Virginia City, as well as mining camps as far east as Austin and Tuscarora. Nevada's cutthroat trout were also popular in the markets of San Francisco and Salt Lake City. Overfishing of the lake populations, introduction of exotic fish and habitat degradation from pollution and dams caused the collapse of the commercial Lahontan cutthroat from Lake Tahoe by 1939 and Pyramid Lake five years later. The original Pyramid Lake strain of Lahontan cutthroat trout lived 10 years or longer and grew to 40 to 60 pounds. Current hatchery stocks in Pyramid Lake seldom grow over 15 pounds.

River and stream populations of Lahontan cutthroat didn't fare much better. While some streams supported trophy class fisheries as recently as the 1970's, the changes wrought by increasing settlement took a heavy toll. Water diversions and pollution from agriculture and industry reduced habitat and spawning opportunities. Improper grazing practices altered much of the riparian habitat along the stream banks. Unregulated fishing reduced many populations and indiscriminate introductions of non-native rainbow, brown and brook trout led to predation, hybridization and competition for food and space.

Cooperative efforts to improve the status of Lahontan cutthroat trout began as early as the 1940's with the salvage of a few large spawning fish from Walker Lake during the last runs up the Walker River. Stream surveys in the 1950's determined locations and abundance of the species. Since 1963 Lahontan cutthroat have been transplanted into more than 50 streams. Recent surveys have been completed identifying pure populations of Lahontan cutthroat and evaluating the condition of their habitat. Habitat improvement projects and livestock grazing exclusions were initiated as early as 1969. These projects identified some land use practices helpful in recovering trout and their habitat.

Restoration

One of the first projects to restore Lahontan cutthroat trout habitat took place in the Lahontan Cutthroat Trout Natural Area in the Black Rock Range in northwest Nevada. Portions of Mahogany Creek were fenced to exclude livestock grazing. Riparian conditions showed marked improvement after the fencing and the numbers of Lahontan cutthroat are increasing.

Numerous projects are in place to restore riparian and aquatic habitat health. Key to these efforts

is the modification of past management practices and working in cooperation and commitment of partnerships. In addition to increasing the numbers and distribution of Lahontan cutthroat trout, these partnerships are providing other benefits, better flood protection, and more opportunities for recreation.

Restoring habitat in stream systems where sub-populations of Lahontan cutthroat trout have the opportunity to migrate and interbreed is a recovery priority. These inter-connected networks of sub-populations, called metapopulations, make genetic exchange among stream populations possible. Greater genetic diversity allows the cutthroat trout to better adapt to changing environmental conditions. Metapopulations also allow natural reestablishment when events, such as a flood or fire, destroy a stream population. Mary's River and Maggie Creek both have existing metapopulations with a good potential for recovery. Projects are ongoing to improve habitat for cutthroat trout.

A project along the East Fork of the Quinn River, the largest tributary stream of the Quinn River system, is an excellent example of improving stream habitat while continuing livestock grazing. The grazing permittee cooperated to adjust the season of use and create a riparian pasture. With these changes, livestock grazing continues and riparian area conditions are showing all the benefits associated with healthy riparian and aquatic habitats: increased grasses, forbs and shrubs, clearer and cooler water in the stream, stable stream banks, more fish spawning areas and more forage for livestock.

Many Lahontan cutthroat trout streams have private land intermixed with federal land. Partners for Wildlife, a US Fish and Wildlife Service Private Lands Program, provides opportunities for cooperative activities to enhance habitat for Lahontan cutthroat trout and other wildlife species through a cost sharing program which provides benefits to wildlife, the land and the land owner.

Recovery Plan for the Lahontan Cutthroat Trout

The Recovery Plan for Lahontan Cutthroat Trout prepared by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was approved in January 1995. The plan outlines management actions necessary to eventually delist Lahontan cutthroat trout as a threatened species. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service coordinates recovery plan implementation activities among federal and state agencies, tribal governments and private landowners to:

- Improve, manage, and secure habitat for existing and proposed populations
- Develop and implement reintroduction plans;
- Regulate fish harvest;
- Manage self-sustaining populations to neutralize threats for their long term existence;
- Conduct population viability studies and other research to validate recovery objectives; and
- Revise the recovery plan in the future as necessary.