US Fish & Wildlife Service FieldNotes

REGION 8: Lahontan Cutthroat Trout Stocked Into Fallen Leaf Lake

By Stephanie Weagley, External Affairs

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Approximately 8,000 Lahontan cutthroat trout were stocked into Fallen Leaf Lake on August 5, 2010, a mile south of Lake Tahoe, as part of the continuing effort to reintroduce the native species to the Tahoe Basin. This trout once thrived throughout the area, but disappeared by the 1940’s due to overfishing, destruction of habitat and the introduction of nonnative fish.

It was a warm, bright, blue sky morning and the last day of a four-day stocking release effort for the 8 to 10-inch Lahontan cutthroat trout, raised by Service employees for about one year at the Lahontan National Fish Hatchery (NFH) Complex in Gardnerville, Nevada. The day’s release brought the year’s total fish reintroduction at Fallen Leaf Lake to approximately 36,000. It is a sight that can only be observed a few days a year.

Two release site locations were chosen on the lake – Cathedral Road and the beach at the Forest Service Campground. The first stop was at the beach site. Once the stocking tanks arrived, about 20-25 people were enjoying the outdoors and engaged in various activities such as picnicking, birding, swimming, snorkeling, fishing, and skipping stones across the lake. But as soon as the hatchery staff started to set up for the fish release, the questions and excitement began; everyone was waiting in anticipation - locals and vacationers alike.

At the beach site, approximately 6,000 trout located in four separate stocking tanks were released through a 20-foot tube into the shallow waters from the shoreline. At the second site, called Cathedral Road, approximately 2,000 fish were released. The area was quiet and secluded, with only hatchery staff and two University of Nevada researchers under contract with the Lahontan NFH Complex, Mike Meeuwig and Jason Smith witnessing the trout stocking.

It takes multiple people to ensure that a stocking effort runs smoothly. The following staff from the Lahontan NFH Complex was on site to conduct the fish release and mingle with the public to discuss this stocking effort: Ed Kelly – maintenance mechanic and driver of the hatchery truck, James Hoang, Derek Bloomquist, David Miller, fish biologists, Stephanie Byers – senior fishery biologist, and Lisa Heki, manager.

The Lahontan Fish Hatchery distributes Lahontan cutthroat trout throughout its western historical range that includes the Tahoe, Walker, and Truckee Basins. Today, the trout has been successfully reintroduced into Fallen Leaf Lake and is currently maintained with a strain of the fish that originated from the indigenous Lake Tahoe population.

Research and knowledge gained from the reintroduction efforts at Fallen Leaf Lake has provided invaluable information to improve the survival and management of the Lahontan cutthroat trout. It has also served as an invaluable stepping stone leading up to the next phase of the management efforts - the implementation of a “Five-Year Action Plan for Lake Tahoe”, which has already been drafted by the Service-formed Tahoe Basin Recovery Implementation Team. This plan identifies opportunities to recover and restore Lahontan cutthroat trout populations based on the most complete biological, geographical, and hydrological information available for the Tahoe Basin.

Since 2003, the Fish and Wildlife Service in collaboration with various state, tribe, agency and university partners, have been stocking Lahontan cutthroat trout at Fallen Leaf Lake with hopes of having a healthy, self-sustaining population in the future while supporting recreational shoreline fishing for the enjoyment of the public. It has also
been working to develop conservation strategies intended to suppress impacts of nonnative species to a point where the Lahontan cutthroat trout – the only native trout to the Great Basin, are able to find a niche in their historic habitat and maintain a viable population.

Currently, the Lahontan cutthroat trout is a federally-threatened species, endemic within the Lahontan Basin of northern Nevada, eastern California, and southern Oregon. It is listed with a special rule under the Endangered Species Act that allows for harvest under state fishing regulations.

Occurring in cold-water habitats of flowing streams and lakes, it is a long-living species – may live up to 10 years, is highly predatory, and historically reached record sizes of 45 pounds in lake habitats. The trout prefers habitat with cover, patches of calm water, well-vegetated and stable stream banks, and relatively silt free, rocky substrate in riffle-run areas.

Threats to the Lahontan cutthroat trout include nonnative fish, such as lake, rainbow and brown trout and degradation of, or limited habitat.

For more information on how the Service is a leader in restoring our nation’s native fisheries and conserving the health of waters that are vital to both fish and people, please go to: http://www.fws.gov/cno/fisheries/

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