

## **“Hardy and Handy Cutthroat Trout”**

**by Dallas Cross**

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*Oncorhynchus clarki* is the scientific name designated for the cutthroat trout. When referring to the coastal or sea-run cutthroat trout the species name doubles to *clarki clarki* which I suspect signifies its dual life in salt and fresh water. These spunky members of the trout family have been native to Western America for many thousands of years. They have long provided a tasty meal cooked on many campfires and wood stoves.

There are many subspecies of cutthroat trout in the Rocky Mountains and western rivers. We have stocked some Washington lakes with Lahontan cutthroat that are native to Idaho, Utah and Wyoming. There are also Westslope cutthroat trout that are native to our beaver ponds, lakes and streams. The sea-run or coastal cutthroat trout live and spawn in rivers, streams and lakes that usually have access to salt water from California to Alaska. Our local sea-runs forage nearby along shores in the salt waters of Puget Sound.

An unusual characteristic of coastal or sea-run cutthroats is that they seem to have an unpredictable life cycle. Coastal cutthroats may choose to live part of their adult life in salt water and spawn in fresh water; and then produce offspring who live their entire life in fresh water like Lake Sammamish. All cutthroat spawn in creeks on very shallow gravel beds away from competing species such as steelhead.

Although venturing out to salt water seeking more plentiful food gives some cutthroat a growth advantage over their stay at home relatives, this travel takes its toll. Biologists have found that spawners from salt water shorten their life spans by as much as 20% each time they make the salt-fresh water transition.

Some cutthroat have been designated as a threatened species, so one must read regulations carefully to determine whether to keep or release them. Today, cutthroat caught in Puget Sound must be released but those caught in lakes Sammamish or Washington may be kept within limits.

The stomach contents of cutthroat in Lake Sammamish show biologists that they mainly eat aquatic insects and small invertebrates until about 12 inches long. After exceeding that size they quickly switch to a diet mainly of minnows, preferring small salmon and kokanee fry passing through or residing in the lake. Our cutthroat trout have recently become one of the dominant predators of salmon fry in Lake Sammamish, replacing the Northern pikeminnow in this role.

You can fly fish for “cutts” in the lake but you need to find actively surfacing fish that are feeding on chironomid or midge insect hatches. And as the stomach contents predict, you generally connect with smaller sized fish with insect-imitating flies. Our lake cutts are quite sensitive to warm and cold water temperatures, and also to low oxygen content. Thus, you must troll deeper, between 15 and 30 feet, to bring lures within their feeding range. Small needle fish lures, minnow imitators, spoons and even worms on a wedding ring lure will work. To find them vary your depth and speed until you get a strike.

I used to be the camp planner for a group from work who went to British Columbia every year for a week in June to fly fish Lake HiHium for Kamalooops rainbow trout at the Lake HiHium Circle W Fishing Camp. Wayne Crill had started this annual exposition with his

family and expanded it with his colleagues to the extent that one year I had to plan meals for fourteen fishermen in one large cabin.

In the glow of Coleman lanterns, during fish story time of the evening, I noticed that Wayne had another curious metal button on the crown of his fishing hat. I remarked to him that they seemed to increase in number each year. Wayne informed me that they were Field and Stream Magazine annual awards for catching the largest cutthroat trout in the state.

So the next year in February I put on my fishing companion demeanor and caged a fishing trip on Lake Washington with Wayne and his son in their Livingston boat. Wayne's method was to use a very small fly-rod flatfish with trout coloration and troll 20 feet deep at a speed where there was moderate pulsing action from the size 00 dodger flasher hooked about 24 inches in front of the flatfish. We caught some nice cutts while Wayne regaled us with stories of occasional hook ups to something big in the lake that just kept on running until break off.

I have fished Lake Washington since then catching a large cutt or two on occasion. Curiously, none reached the sizes with which Wayne won his awards, but he may not have told me everything. Wayne can't fish now, but his generosity of angling experience and of fellowship is alive in others, as it should be.