

Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes

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Cutthroat trout on the Flathead Indian Reservation, Part 1

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The westslope cutthroat trout is one of at least 10 subspecies of cutthroat trout, and a century ago it was the most widely distributed and abundant of them all, native to parts of Montana, Wyoming, Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and the Canadian provinces of British Columbia and Alberta. Similar to many other fish native to the Northern Rockies, it was a staple in the diet of the Salish, Pend' d'Oreille, and Kootenai people and it provided a dependable and toothsome source of protein. Today, however, this wonderful and diverse fish—this shimmering jewel left in the wake of the last ice age—has declined to the point that it is no longer present in most of its former range. This is the story of that fish, how it declined, and how the tribes are working to ensure that it will still be here 100 years into the future.

Westslope cutthroat trout are one of two native trout occurring in waters of the Flathead Indian Reservation. The other, the bull trout, is a member of another group in the trout and salmon family, a group called the chars, which includes two introduced species—brook trout and lake trout. Mountain and pygmy whitefishes are also salmonids that are native to the reservation.

All subspecies of cutthroat trout, which evolved in western North America and are recognizable by the distinctive cutthroat mark beneath their jaws, have undergone large-scale reductions in abundance and distribution. The cutthroat trout group includes the Yellowstone cutthroat trout, the only other cutthroat trout native to Montana. Sadly, this fish, which once inhabited much of the Yellowstone River drainage of southwest and south-central Montana, is now limited to a fraction of its former range and is facing a grave threat from illegally introduced lake trout in its Yellowstone Lake stronghold. Two of the other cutthroat trout subspecies, yellowfin cutthroat trout from Colorado and Alvord cutthroat trout from two small streams in the Oregon and Nevada border area, are now extinct, both from the introduction of nonnative species.

Unfortunately, the status of westslope cutthroat trout populations on the Flathead Indian Reservation is similar to that of other cutthroat trouts—most genetically pure (not interbred with introduced trouts) populations now only exist in very small isolated populations upstream of physical barriers to fish passage. Barriers, like waterfalls and perched culverts at road crossings have, often protected westslope cutthroat trout in these areas from introduced fishes, but these small stream populations represent a minor fraction of the former diversity and abundance of this species. Nonetheless, these remaining fish have great conservation value and represent an important and unique part of our ecological and cultural heritage. Westslope cutthroat trout are a natural legacy that should be safeguarded and passed on to future generations.

Historically, westslope cutthroat trout had three life-history types that allowed them to exploit a variety of habitats from waters like Flathead Lake, the largest natural freshwater lake in the western United States, to the small, steep cascading streams found high in the Mission Mountains. The three life history forms—resident, migratory, and lacustrine or lake-dwelling—all thrived on the reservation. Resident forms of cutthroat trout lived in small streams and rarely exceeded 10-12 inches in length. Migratory cutthroat trout moved between smaller streams, which they used for spawning, and rivers, such as the Flathead River, where they spent most of their adult lives and grew to much larger sizes. Lacustrine or lake-dwelling cutthroat trout, spawned in streams, but spent most of their lives in lake habitats where they grew to great sizes (up to several pounds).

As flows receded during spring, fish of all three life history types returned with faithful precision to spawn in the clean gravels of their home streams. This homing instinct, acting in concert with natural selection over time, resulted in each stream having a population of cutthroat trout that were uniquely suited to the stream's

physical characteristics. Currently, most pure cutthroat trout within reservation boundaries are of the small stream resident form; these fish exist in approximately 20 small streams or stream segments, which are generally unproductive and very restrictive habitats, and many are compromised by past and ongoing land management actions. The average length of the small streams currently occupied by pure cutthroat trout populations on the reservation is only about two miles. The smallest stream containing cutthroat trout on the reservation is a tributary to Flathead Lake, and the reach of stream occupied by the fish is only about 400 yards long. The largest stream is eight miles in length. Unfortunately, the cutthroat trout still existing in these very small reaches are at risk from the same kinds of human activities that caused the loss of the other populations on the reservation.

Declines in the abundance and distribution of westslope cutthroat trout are the result of many factors, including the introduction of nonnative fishes and habitat alterations brought about by land uses such as poorly managed grazing, logging, irrigation, and the construction of roads and bridges and other parts of our transportation system. Introduced fishes are a particularly grave threat. Nonnative fish compete with, prey upon, and hybridize (cross) with westslope cutthroat trout. For example, brook trout, a species native to eastern North America, have been widely introduced—both legally and illegally—in smaller stream systems across the range of cutthroat trout and have caused the decline or loss of many native trout populations. Westslope cutthroat trout also readily hybridize or cross with introduced rainbow trout. Rainbow trout have been widely stocked in mountain streams and lakes throughout the West, including the Mission Mountains. Hybridization causes the loss of locally adapted cutthroat trout populations, the product of thousands of years of natural selection. What remains is a trout, but not westslope cutthroat trout, the fish of this place, the fish that the ancestors of today's Salish, Kootenai, and Pend d'Oreille people knew and depended on.

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