



## Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout

*Oncorhynchus clarki bouvieri*

**BY DR. ROBERT BEHNKE** | About a million years ago, the ancestor of Yellowstone cutthroat diverged from the ancestral westslope cutthroat in the Columbia River Basin. After glacial ice left the Yellowstone Plateau, about 7,000-8,000 years ago, they crossed the Continental Divide to establish themselves in Yellowstone Lake where their once great abundance gave rise to the common name of this subspecies. The history of the native cutthroat in Yellowstone National Park, and the lake in particular, reflects the gradual 100-year change in park service policies. The park was once considered a gigantic fish hatchery with nearly one billion eggs taken from Yellowstone Lake cutthroat from 1899 to 1976. Nonnative trout such as brook, rainbow, brown and lake trout were widely stocked in the park beginning in 1889. The early fishery took millions of cutthroat from the lake. Beginning in the 1970s, a change in National Park Service policy emphasizing the conservation of native species resulted in restrictive angling regulations, which successfully restored the abundance of the cutthroat to Yellowstone Lake. But an illegal introduction of lake trout proliferated in the lake in the 1990s and devastated the native cutthroats. About the



The Yellowstone cutthroat's historical range extended from southern Montana to northern Nevada.

same time, whirling disease spread to the lake basin. Now, cutthroats no longer successfully reproduce in the largest and most productive spawning tributaries. Thanks to intensive removal of lake trout and productive cutthroat spawning in smaller, high-gradient tributaries where tubifex worms and the whirling disease parasite are sparse, the cutthroat trout of Yellowstone Lake will not go extinct, but will exist at lower levels of abundance.

### You Can Help Bring Back the Natives

The East Yellowstone Chapter of Trout Unlimited is leading an effort to fund a research project that could help save Yellowstone Lake's native cutthroat trout. For more information, visit [eastyellowstonetu.org](http://eastyellowstonetu.org).