



## Wyoming outdoors: More money needed to save Yellowstone cutthroat trout

**BOB KRUMM For The Gazette | Posted: Thursday, February 23, 2012 12:05 am**

Did you fish Yellowstone National Park, more specifically the Yellowstone River from the upper falls through the lake and into the Thoroughfare, in the time period between 1960 and 1990? If so, what was your recollection? Did you see lots of cutthroat trout? How many did you catch?

Have you fished the same area since 2000? Did you see any cutthroat trout? How many did you catch?

Dave Sweet, Trout Unlimited's 2011 Distinguished Service Award winner, asked the above questions of the people who attended his talk Feb. 16 in Sheridan, Wyo. Sweet has been spearheading the "Save the Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout Campaign" and has been telling his message as fervently as an old-fashioned revival preacher.

He has managed to marshal the Trout Unlimited state councils of Wyoming, Idaho and Montana to join in the fight. Along with TU are the Greater Yellowstone Coalition and the National Parks Conservation Association. Individual TU chapters, such as the Little Bighorn Chapter, have helped out, too.

The Yellowstone cutthroat trout once numbered 3.5 to 4 million in the waters above the upper falls of the Yellowstone River. Nowadays, the number of cutthroat trout has plunged to less than 10 percent of what it was in the halcyon days of the 1950s and '60s. A weir was installed on Clear Creek back in the 1940s so that National Park Service biologists could count the number of trout spawning in the stream. In the 1970s the counts averaged 50,000; in the last three years 500! That's a 99 percent decline.

The introduction of lake trout into Yellowstone Lake is the No. 1 cause of the decline, although whirling disease and extended drought have had some impacts, too.

The first documented report of a lake trout in Yellowstone Lake was July 30, 1994, but there were undocumented reports from earlier years.

How the lake trout entered Yellowstone Lake is a matter of conjecture. One possible cause could be the illegal planting of lake trout by some nimrod. A second theory is that the lakera might have been uploaded by helicopter bucket loads while fighting the infamous 1988 fires. The lake trout from such a "plant" could have come from Lewis Lake.

Regardless, the lake trout have decimated the Yellowstone cutthroat trout population. A lake trout can consume up to 41 cutthroat trout a year. The latest population estimate of lake trout was upwards of 400,000.

Yellowstone Lake is huge, and it is ideal habitat for lake trout, so controlling them seems to be an insurmountable task. The National Park Service first sought to gill net the lake trout and had some success, but gill netting also caught cutthroats.

In 2011, Yellowstone contracted a commercial fishing company, Hickey Brothers from Wisconsin, to double the efforts in Yellowstone Lake with two commercial boats. (The NPS ran 11 miles of gill nets in 2009 and 2010 using two boats).

The Hickey Brothers managed to catch 120,000 lake trout in 2011. In conjunction with the NPS, the total haul was 220,000. If the lake trout population estimate is correct, then this catch amounts to more than half the estimated population.

One of the tools that the Hickey Brothers used was a trap net. The trap net utilizes wing structures that are up to 300 meters long that direct the trout into a central enclosed net with a funnel opening. The trout are trapped live so that any cutthroat trout can be released alive.

The main advantage of the trap net is that it can be employed in shallower waters where the cutthroats are and where the lake trout venture in search of the cutts.

Another development in the battle has been technological. In order to locate where the lake trout are in the lake, biologists have been implanting transmitters into some lake trout. These "Judass" trout are released back into Yellowstone Lake. A grid of receivers has been placed in the lake that can record the individual lake trout as it swims past the receiver.

With this information, researchers are hoping to be able to pinpoint where lake trout spawn. Unlike cutthroat, brown, brook, rainbow and golden trout, lake trout don't spawn in pairs; they spawn in swarms. Their spawning areas are underwater reefs and gravel bars in shallow waters. The spawning areas are quite compact — some are only the size of two regular meeting tables.

Knowing where the lake trout spawn will enable the netting efforts to be more efficient. Also, it will enable park personnel to try to destroy the eggs.

This technological battle has drawn Dave Sweet into the fray. The transmitters are fairly costly — \$400. The receivers are \$700 apiece. Through Sweet's efforts and those of the East Yellowstone Trout Unlimited chapter, \$27,000 has been raised for 73 tags and the NPS raised \$25,000 for an additional 68 tags.

The transmitters and receivers were placed in the lake in August. There are 141 transmitters and 40 receivers now in Yellowstone Lake. The main problem is that there is a wealth of data that needs to be analyzed. The Park Service has come up with \$100,000 for analysis of the data. The study will go on for three more years.

More transmitters and receivers are needed so that a comprehensive grid can be placed in the lake. According to Sweet, at least 300 tagged fish are needed along with 52 receivers. A different type of transmitter that can also indicate depth is needed, but it costs \$750.

While lake trout suppression will go on for many years, there is already hope that the Yellowstone cutthroat can be saved. One encouraging sign is that the lake trout that have been netted in the past two years seldom have cutthroat trout in their stomachs; scuds have become the primary forage. Another sign is that there are some large cutthroat trout (six to seven pounds) showing up in the trap nets. Also, the spawning redd counts have started to increase in the tributary streams. Finally, if continued netting efforts show a removal rate of 50 percent or more, then the lake trout population can be suppressed.

The campaign to save the Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout needs your help. They are about halfway to their goal of \$85,000. If you can, please donate to: Save the Yellowstone Cutthroat; c/o East Yellowstone Chapter of Trout Unlimited, P.O. Box 3008, Cody, WY 82414.