

The Survivor

PHOTOS BY KIRK DAHLE AND MIKE EBINGER



In a word, the Bonneville cutthroat trout is majestic.

Big. Colored in dull hues of rose, orange and silver. Aggressive. A survivor in a parched and barren landscape. The Bonneville is all of that and more. But the story surrounding its demise, rediscovery and reintroduction is what is truly amazing.

Long before European settlement, the fish helped feed the early white explorers, Mormon settlers and native populations, including the Goshute, who referred to the Bonneville as *Ainkai Painkwi*—"red fish." In the mid 19th century, lakes, small mountain streams and rivers—including the Weber, Bear, Logan, Jordan, Sevier, Beaver and Provo—teemed with the muted, crimson-shaded cutthroat. And the fish were big back then. In Patrick Trotter's seminal book *Cutthroat: Native Trout of the West*, he notes that historically the trout were large, "averaging 3 pounds in weight but with larger ones reaching several times that. [They] were so plentiful that the Indians could obtain an ample supply by simply walking the shore and spearing them."

But that ample supply quickly dwindled. Overfishing by settlers—including commercial netting—water diversions and the introduction

of nonnative trout caused populations of the fish to plunge like a boulder dropped into still pool of water. By the second half of the 20th century, pure populations of the Bonneville were thought to have disappeared forever, gone the way of the silver trout, the yellowfin cutthroat and the passenger pigeon.

Luckily, after a two-year search, Don Duff, a Bureau of Land Management biologist and TU member, found a remnant population of genetically pure Bonneville high in the Deep Creek Mountains in western Utah in 1974. That discovery put in motion a frenetic effort to save the fish and to help it reclaim its rightful place within the Great Basin.

TU volunteers, led by Duff, took the leadership role to get a Bonneville recovery program in place. First the tribes came on board. They were quickly followed by state and federal agencies and later yet, landowners and water right holders. TU volunteers have spent the last 30 years nursing the partnerships along. The coalition's members built brood ponds and spawning channels

to help transplant the fish back into the Deep Creek Mountain Range. They designed innovative streamside incubation boxes. They created fish barriers—natural and handmade—to prevent rainbows from migrating up stream into Bonneville waters. They constructed weirs and fish ladders to help the fish to get back up into its historical mountain streams.

While its populations are still fragile and in need of nurturing, the Bonneville is on the rebound. Today the fish occupies approximately 2,500 miles of stream in Utah, and elsewhere within its native range.

For the angler lucky enough to find one and look into its eyes, the experience will never be forgotten. But it's about more than just the joy of catching and releasing such a magnificent fish—a lot more. To hold a Bonneville is to hold onto the hope, the belief, that other species of imperiled native fish can also survive and flourish if just given the chance. 

—SK, Editor