



Fine-Spotted Snake River Cutthroat Trout

Oncorhynchus clarki behnkei

BY DR. ROBERT BEHNKE | Early in my studies of western trout, I was baffled and fascinated by the situation found in the upper Snake River drainage above Shoshone Falls. Two distinct forms of cutthroat trout occurred: a large-spotted form, typical of the widespread Yellowstone subspecies, and a fine-spotted form restricted to certain parts of the drainage. With the assistance of graduate students, I initiated more intensive research on the fine-spotted cutthroat by examining growth, survival and diet. The fine-spotted cutthroat proved to be extremely adaptable to different environments with different forage. So adept is it at survival, it is the only cutthroat trout that maintained its dominance in its native range despite introductions of nonnative trout that commonly resulted in the elimination of other subspecies. I provided a description of the fine-spotted cutthroat in my 1992 American Fisheries Society monograph on western trout and referred to it as an undescribed subspecies. Three years later, M.R.Montgomery repeated my description but with a name—*Oncorhynchus clarki behnkei*—in his book “Many Rivers to Cross.” There is no doubt in my mind that the fine-spotted cutthroat is a biological reality. It has its own unique life history that allows it to maintain its identity while coexisting with populations of Yellowstone cutthroat. Although no consistent genetic differences have been found between the fine-spotted and Yellowstone cutthroat, there are similar examples where full species cannot be genetically differentiated from closely related species.



The known present native range of the Snake River fine-spotted cutthroat trout is from Palisades Reservoir to Jackson Lake in the main Snake River and in the tributary streams from the Gros Ventre River downstream to Palisades Reservoir.

You Can Help Bring Back the Natives:

Snake River fine-spotted cutthroat trout and Yellowstone cutthroat face essentially the same threats and benefit from similar restoration efforts. To learn more about TU's work to protect both species, go to tu.org.