

Coastal Cutthroat Trout Transcript

Hey to all you fish enthusiasts out there. Whether you're an avid angler or just curious about fish, we'd like to welcome you to Fish of the Week! I'm Katrina Liebich with the US Fish and Wildlife Service in Alaska,

and I'm Guy Eroh, a fish aficionado.

It's Monday, March 15 2021 and we're excited to talk about all the fish.

This week's fish is the coastal cutthroat trout. They're not ruthless murderers, like their name might suggest, but they do have a red marking under their lower jaw that looks like a cut. And that's what inspired their common name. The genus, which is *Oncorhynchus* tells us that there are Pacific trout in the family Salmonidae and their scientific species named *Clarkii* is a nod to the explorer William Clark who co-lead the Lewis and Clark Expedition. So that was something new I learned about their name. And I mean, it must have been maybe one of the more prevalent fish they caught since that's what the scientific name has in his last name. So yeah, I would be curious what kind of fishing gear they were using back in the day to catch them out in the West.

Yeah, I think they from what I've read, which is limited, they did eat them. They did bring some back. And yeah, later on, I forget the guy's name. I think it may have been Richardson, who officially named it after Clark.

So Alaska has got coastal cuts from about Prince William Sound south through the panhandle of Alaska, so Southeast Alaska, but they also range all the way down to the coast into Northern California. And to put things in context and really nerd out slightly there's a number of other cutthroats right?

There are and it varies. A lot of sources that you'll go and find you'll find that there's 14 recognized subspecies of cutthroat trout.

Oh, whoa.

Yeah. So of those two are extinct. And then actually I got a list here I prepared today. So we got the coastal, the westslope, Yellowstone, Snake River fine spot, Lahontan Paiute, Humboldt, Alvord, Bonneville, Colorado River greenback Rio Grande Yellowfin Willow Whitehorse. And then there's also the state of Utah recognizes the Bear River cutthroat trout, which I believe was traditionally grouped in with the Bonneville cutthroat. But recent genetic analyses suggest that might be more closely related to the Snake River population. But that's not officially recognized it and then also, they used to recognize the Lake Crescent species, but that's been subsumed into a different species. I forget different subspecies. I forget which one.

My gosh, and they've all got that cut under their throat?

Yeah, so these fish can look quite different. I mean, there are similarities between all them, but they do all have that cut, for the most part. It is fainter on some and it can be different colors, ranging from a

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kind of a golden yellow to a really distinct red. The coastal cutthroat species, which is the one that the only one that you can find in Alaska, it actually all in all, when you look at the whole fish, very much resembles a rainbow trout. Whereas most cutthroats have relatively few spots for a trout, and they're going to be mostly on the posterior the tail end of the body kind of dense down there. The coastal cutthroat has spots throughout the body has a whole lot of them. It's got the same sort of reddish rosy midline that rainbows have. And making things even more challenging some coastal subspecies of rainbow trout also will have slightly reddish markings underneath. And there is overlap in the range, of course, Rainbow and cutthroat trout. And they do produce fertile hybrids as well. So you can have cut bows, as they're called, that are hybrids between rainbows and cutthroats. And those oftentimes have colored marks so sometimes it can be hard to tell if you're dealing with a rainbow that has some slightly cutthroat look and markings, coastal cutthroat or a cut 'bow.

Man. So what I have learned about those cut 'bows, so this is kind of interesting. I mean, if you're looking to identify between a coastal cut a rainbow trout, and a cut 'bow Guy mentioned the spots so that's kind of one clue. They're really, you know, tons of spots on them. But the cut 'bows, like you said, are hybrid, and what biologists will use to kind of tell the difference between a rainbow and a cutthroat or the presence of these small teeth at the base of the tongue. And that's a way to distinguish between the two. So rainbows don't have those, they're called basibrachial teeth. So you know, it's something that we can all be happy, I guess we don't have when we're going to the dentist, there's teeth way back there and your throat like that. But that's I mean, if you want to kind of look in the fish's mouth, that's one way to kind of figure out that Id if you have a question about it.

Yeah, I've also heard about if you look at the maxillary bone the kind of the fish mouth that sort of extends back beyond the eye that in rainbow trout that is usually a little bit shorter. And in cutthroat trout, it can be longer, but I don't know exactly how that manifests itself in cut bows. And those teeth that you're talking about, though, those are actually on the tongue then right, Katrina?

Yeah, it said it's on the back of the tongue.

Yeah, definitely not a good species to try lipping

No. Yeah, so that's really interesting that there's so many you know, we've focused on Alaska for the most part, but the species in particular is really interesting just due to all the kind of variation down in the lower 48 as well. Just wanted to give a quick shout out to our friends there at Fish and Wildlife Service and the western native trout initiative who are working to conserve all those other cuts.

So in Southeast Alaska coastal cuts will use everything habitat wise from the smallest headwater streams to deep lakes to brackish estuaries and fully marine shoreline environments. Some of them are residents, so they'll spend the entire year even within a really small section of a given stream. All you fish nerds out there probably know how important that there's undercut banks and large woody debris are going to be for making those deep pools that fish need at certain times a year, especially ones that are spending most of their time and kind of one area of a stream. That stuff's really important for overwintering too. Others that are residents so they're not migrating to sea they prefer lakes and ponds.

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And Guy there's also you know, the sea run coastal cuts, so kind of those two major classes, the residents and the sea run. I don't know if you want to talk about those a little bit too for folks.

Yeah, kind of muddles things even a little bit more. We talked about this diversity in life history. But yeah, you do have like many coastal trout populations. You see it with the coasters up in Alaska with the brook trout. And of course sea run brown trout, and most almost more famously, the steelhead, steelhead rainbows.

Cool. So in terms of fishing, I know that you're a big cut fan. So I was wondering what you like about fishing for them. Is that like the habitat, just kind of what draws you to that species? And then we can get into more of the technical details about actually fishing for them I guess.

Yeah. So I grew up fishing for cutthroat trout in Utah. And I lived there for the first 16 years of my life. And as a great kind of back country fish, where if you want to catch these guys, they don't stock them a lot. More recently, people have begun stocking cutthroat trout for conservation measures. But generally, you're not going to find you know, the stockers the stock, like stock cut throats like you would rainbow trout or brown trout or something like that. So to find these fish, you really have to go out and catch wild cutthroat and as of course, beautiful areas where you find that, you know, there's that old saying that trout only live in beautiful places. And that's definitely the case for cutthroats. And so whenever you go out into the back country, that's what you're catching. And they are gorgeous fish, you know, just really distinctive cutthroat markings. They're just gorgeous fish, and lots of them. Usually when you start finding these fish, that's usually in places where there's not a ton of pressure, and you'll usually be able to do really well and catch a whole bunch of them.

That sounds super fun. So I'm going to be honest, I've been mostly meat fishing the last 10 years since moving up here to Alaska, so I actually don't fish for trout, really at all anymore. I used to fish browns in Michigan and steelhead that were coming in from the Great Lakes. But you know, what are some take homes for folks who are interested in fishing for cutthroat trout?

Well, they are really your typical kind of trout, they tend to be pretty hungry. But in the wintertime, we know that the waters cold, the metabolism of cold blooded animals like fish and other invertebrates that they're feeding on the water really slows down, and they're not gonna be very active. That doesn't mean that they're not feeding, they are still feeding, but they're going to be conserving energy, they're going to be in slower moving waters, a lot of times if you can find like a deep hole, or off side pool or at something where there isn't a lot of current, but they can still get food, that's probably where they're going to be. And they're not going to be coming after stuff you can't really just like pull a stream or something through there, they're not going to chase things to catch a trout in the wintertime you're gonna have to drop something right in their face. So if you're fly fishing, we're talking a lot of nymphs, a lot of dead drifting, usually, you're gonna probably want to use smaller flies, smaller nymphs. That's because a lot of the species they're active, might be hatching or something that time of year. And then also your lot as I mentioned, we have these fish that aren't moving a whole lot. And so whereas in the springtime, summertime, when they're moving, you might be able to make a few casts along a run. And if you're not getting anything move on, I would be more tenacious during the wintertime. And really try and hit it several times because you might be missing that fish just by an inch or two. And yeah, hitting

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it again, you might be able to pull it out of there. Yeah. And in general, I hate to say lower your expectations. But winter fishing is tougher, and you're not going to have the same kind of productivity that you'll get, say like come summertime, so just keep that in mind. And then also, you know, normally when you're fishing it's important to get out there in the early morning and Really try and get that that morning bite. But when it comes to winter trout fishing, I would say you don't need to get out there until later in the day when it warms up focus on warm days if you want to, because that's when the fish are gonna be more active.

Okay. And like you said, I mean, some of these habitats that they're found in a really beautiful, especially in Southeast Alaska. So even if it is a little bit slower, it's still really nice to get out and get on the water and learn a little bit about the fish and their behavior. So that's that sounds like a lot of fun.

Yeah, but come summertime, it's, everything's a go.

Hey there everybody. One thing we want you to always keep in mind, regardless of what it is that you're fishing for is safety. Every week, we're going to give you a tip that you can use to stay safe while you're fishing. Depending on where you're ice fishing, you may find it appropriate to use a snow machine to haul yourself in your gear to your destination. Of course, as we have mentioned in the segment before, you should always make sure that the ice you're traveling on can support the weight of you and your machine and you should inform yourself of areas where there may be anomalous thin spots in the ice. In addition to this, today's tip is to make sure that you don't travel too fast for your line of sight. That is to say, you should make sure that the distance that your machine travels once brakes are applied is shorter than the distance that you can see in front of you. This rule is especially important if you find yourself traveling at night when visibility can be limited to your machines headlights. Occasionally, there are stories of people who are motoring along and see a rock tree or hole that has developed in the ice, they slam on the brakes, but because of the high speed at which they're traveling, they're unable to stop for crashing. Again. This rule is especially relevant when traveling at night. I would even go as far as to recommend not snow machine at night if at all possible and making sure that your headlights are both clean and powerful.

Let's get into the eating portion. I have never actually eaten a cutthroat trout before although I've eaten other species of trout and I'd venture to guess that they taste trouty like the others. I don't know if you've tried any.

Yeah, I'm sure I have. So what I would do is if you're out this is a nice recipe that you can either make it home in your oven, or you can do it when you're out and have a campfire and get down to the coals. Take the fish hopefully so have some aluminum foil with you bring it out when you're camping. Take a piece that's a couple inches longer than the fish now you're going to get it leave the head on just kind of eviscerate it take out the guts wash it out a little bit, sprinkle some water into the aluminum foil that's going to help keep it moist. Well you're gonna want to do is basically take some salt and pepper and and spice it in there and just cover the internal cavity with the salt and pepper and you're going to chop up some butter pats and stick it in there. If you want to get fancy and you have this stuff out with you then I'd recommend taking some finely sliced lemon wedges putting it in there as well as some chopped onion. And then you basically you wrap it up and you get that aluminum foil as tight as you

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can make it airtight if possible. You can wrap it in a second piece if you like. And then you're going to put it down and you're going to get a spot to kind of bury it in the coals and bury it for about 20 minutes. And then you'll know it's ready when the when the meats coming off the bone when the skin is able to kind of move away from the meat and pull off and then that just tastes really good. It's a pretty simple way to prepare the fish and really easy view materials and tastes really good.

So that's a wrap. Or should we say cut? Get out and enjoy all the fish guys.

Thanks for listening to fish of the week. My name is Katrina Liebich and my co host is guy hero. This show is produced by David Hoffman, of Citizen Racecar, assisted by Garrett Tiedemann and Kelsey Kohrs. Fish of the Week! is a production of the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Alaska Region Office of External Affairs. As the Service reflects on 150 years of fisheries conservation, we honor thing and celebrate the whole community, individuals, tribes, the state of Alaska, our sister agencies, fish enthusiasts, scientists and others who have elevated our understanding and love as people and professionals of all the fish.