

Special Reprint

# *Opening week brown trout from Sierra brings out the catch-and-release snobs*

By **JIM MATTHEWS**  
**Outdoor News Service**

The biggest trout reported this past weekend for the Eastern Sierra Nevada trout opener was an 11-pound, 13-ounce brown trout caught by Alysa Torres of Upland while fishing with PowerBait from shore at Lower Twin Lake just out of Bridgeport. The big trout had a big, trout-like plug still in its mouth from an earlier encounter with another angler, who is telling the big-one-that-got-away stories this week.

On Thursday, an even bigger brown trout – this one weighing 13-pounds, five-ounces – was caught by a float-tubing fly-fisherman on Bridgeport Reservoir. Ron Petersen of Carson City, Nev., was using a six-weight fly rod and stripping a Doc's Twin Lakes Special streamer.

Both fish were kept by the two anglers. Both were probably trout catches of a lifetime. But one stirred up a storm on social media, mostly driven by the catch-and-release snobs of the fishing world. The fly angler was a target of ridicule and reprimand.

Let me preface what I am about to say by first telling you that I have been a fly-fisherman since before my teenage years. I learned to flycast, flyfish, and tie flies before my 12th birthday. I have been an advocate of catch-and-release fishing for over 50 years, especially where it can impact a resource. As a young man, I was on the Board of Directors of California Trout, Inc., back when it was a fledgling organization of volunteers who went to bat for trout resources in California. I even won the group's coveted Streamkeeper Award for working to get special regulations on Bear Creek in the San Bernardino Mountains after helping the Department of Fish and Game (back then) gather data to document the quality

of that small-stream trout fishery. One of my fly-fishing mentors was Dick Dahlgren, founder of the Mammoth Flyrodders who – along with fly-fishing attorney Barrett McInerney – won the David-and-Goliath court battle with the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power to restore permanent flows and the trout fishery back into Rush Creek, Walker Creek, and Lee Vining Creek – an act that also saved Mono Lake (regardless



of how the Mono Lake Committee will tell you how water was restored). I was one of the three founding members of the Deep Creek Flyfishers, today one of the largest flyfishing clubs in the West. I tell you this so you understand I have some chops when it comes to arguing about resource conservation and catch-and-release fishing.

When I was a kid, my bent toward resource conservation and catch-and-release was still an idea that had not matured. One of my Dad's best fishing friends, Karl Angel, used to say when we'd pull up to a fishing spot, "Why, there's fish in there that's never been caught." He'd whoop and howl with laughter at his humor. Of course it was true: If they HAD been caught, they would have been kept, killed, and eaten. That's why it was so funny. That was still what all fishermen did in the 1960s. But I was one of many young anglers who followed the Lee Wulffs and Lefty Kreh and Al McClains of that era. It was the leading edge of the angler conservation and catch-and-release fishing that has blossomed into a movement that is followed almost with religious fervor today.

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I was taken aback the vitriol of some and the ignorance of others. None asked the circumstances of the catch. They just wanted to tell this old, veteran, fly-fisherman how he should have released the fish. I found it amusing that none of the comments were simply, "I would have released it." They all wanted to tell someone else how to behave.

Looking at the fish, and knowing what I know about brown trout and trout resources in the Eastern Sierra, I'm not sure I would have released it either. I may have, if I could have got a picture of the fish (with my reputation, no one would have believed the catch without evidence). There's a black and white photo that is the background image on the opening screen of my computer. It is of a brown trout I caught at Lake Crowley a long time ago. My brother-in-law, R.G. Fann, nearly strangled me with my camera strap and about tipped me over in my float tube, but he managed to get the Nikkormat from around my neck and take four or five quick photos of that trout before it was let go. I don't think my face is in any of the images, but the trout shows up very well. It was five or six pounds and it might still be the biggest trout I've ever caught. But Petersen's big brown is even bigger, a real monster. It was that once-in-a-lifetime catch, so I can't say for sure I would have released it, even if RG was there to take photos.

I know a lot of my fly-fishing chums would have slipped it back into the lake without a thought (RG for one), but they are also the same kind of guys who wouldn't tell Petersen what he should do.

Isn't that a personal choice, if you are not breaking any regulations by keeping the fish? The comments didn't say, "I would have released that fish." They said, "He shouldn't have kept that fish."

Or they said something even more ignorant, "He should know better [as a fly-fisherman] than to keep that trout." That statement is implying that there is some moral, biological, or environmental reason not to keep a huge brown. So I suspect that some facts might be in order here:

First, brown trout are not native to the East Walker River drainage where both Bridgeport Reservoir and Lower Twin Lake sit. They are not native to North America. They are a European import, a dreaded non-native species. There is a growing contingent, including some wacko anglers and extreme environmental types, who think the entire system should be poisoned out and restored with native Walker River cutthroat trout (the Byday Creek-strain, which are the native Walker River trout).

Second, naturally-spawned trout make up a very tiny percentage of the fish that are caught in Bridge-

port Reservoir. Trout are river spawners, and there is limited accessible spawning habitat in the East Walker and Robinson and Buckeye creeks. [In Crowley Lake, which has more and better natural spawning habitat in its tributaries, the DFW says less than 20 percent of the fish in Crowley are attributable to wild-spawned fish.] So Bridgeport Reservoir is managed with a regular five-fish limit, with no size or gear restrictions. The Bridgeport Fish Enhancement Foundation (BFEF), Mono County, and the Department of Fish and Wildlife all combine to plant a significant tonnage of trout into the lake each year to make it a great fishery. Many of the trout planted each year survive more than a single season and get bigger. So it's also a great trophy trout fishery. The DFW and BFEW have intermittently planted fingerling or subcatchable brown trout into the lake over the years, so there's really no way to know if this particular brown was a wild, naturally-spawned fish, or one that was hatched in a hatchery eight to 10 years ago.

Third, the number of big trout this size in Sierra waters is minuscule. The odds of one surviving this long are tiny. Trout this size eventually are forced to survive by eating other fish, including freshly planted rainbow trout up to 12 or 14 inches long and probably a significant number of those tiny, naturally spawned trout that come down into the lake out of the tributaries. Keeping that big old fish isn't going to hurt the fishery one bit, biologically. In fact, you could argue keeping it was good for the health of the fishery as much as the opposite. The impacts either way are not great when "fishery production" is based on what man does.

Fourth, we don't know the circumstances of Petersen's catch. I have caught enough decent-sized trout on streamers to know they sometimes engulf the fly and they become hooked in one of the gill slots in the throat. During the course of fighting the fish to the net or hand, the hook tears up that gill and the fish is bleeding when landed. Those fish always – always – die. It is like a human taking a bullet to the lungs. [This is an object lesson: Never put your fingers into the gills or gill plate of a fish you intend to release. That will damage the gills and kill them. This is proven science. You might think otherwise when the fish swims off, but it will die later.] Did anyone ask Petersen if the fish was bleeding? Or maybe it was just exhausted and didn't revive? This is also something most of those who ridiculed Petersen apparently didn't consider.

Lastly, and perhaps the overriding consideration, what right does anyone have to tell him what he should have done?

I don't begrudge anyone having an opinion about this. I used to be a pretty vocal proponent of catch-and-release



*Jim Matthews caught and released this brown from Lake Crowley a long time ago, but he's not about to judge Petersen.*

fishing, and I still am when it is a resource issue. But Bridgeport Reservoir is a recreational fishery. It's not the East Walker River below the lake, which has special catch-and-release regulations, and does not get planted with trout on any regular basis. Harvest on this heavily fished river would destroy the fishery pretty quickly (which past history proves). Bridgeport Reservoir is a fishery managed so anglers can catch and keep trout to eat. The fact this brown was able to get that big in a lake where most anglers keep their catch is pretty amazing. So I guess I'm asking the catch-and-release snobs what would have been accomplished by releasing this fish?

If you want to argue to manage Bridgeport Reservoir as a wild trout fishery with only catch-and-release fishing, I might be willing to entertain that idea and support you.

Or maybe, manage it more like Crowley Lake, which is managed as a put-grown-take fishery part of the year with a catch-and-release trophy trout fishery part of the year, I could get behind that. But to ridicule a guy who caught the fish of a lifetime, well, you just lost me.

All I can say to Petersen is that I'm jealous. My dear old friend Dick Dahlgren has a wonderful self-illustrated book called "In Search of Old Mo." It is a slightly fictionalized story about how Dick, and all of his fly-fishing friends including me, haunted the big fish waters of the Eastern Sierra when we were younger men. We were all trying to catch Old Mo, a giant brown trout that apparently had the magical ability to move between waters and watersheds. In my mind, Petersen hooked and landed Old Mo, and I'm jealous.

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