

Remember when....



Taken in 1981, Ken Herrington of Fontana shows off a 4 1/2-pound brown trout caught at Lake Silverwood during the peak of the fishery.

There was a time when trophy browns prowled the waters of Lake Silverwood

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In the spring of 1978, Fred and Lou Albrecht of San Bernardino had caught over 80 brown trout from Lake Silverwood from the first of the year through mid-April during the retired couple's regular trips to the lake. The day I fished with them, several more came into their boat while we trolled. All of them were an honest two pounds or a little better, and Fred said their best fish to that point was a 4 1/2-pounder.

The news about the brown trout fishery at Silverwood was beginning to spread. And the fish just kept getting bigger and bigger.

In 1979, Bill Dobbs of Ontario landed brown trout that weighed in at seven-pounds, six-ounces in early March while casting a Thinfin shad imitation off

the rocks of the dam late in the afternoon. It was the lake record for a short time.

Del East, a toothless candy salesman who lived in San Bernardino, was Mr. Striper at Silverwood for a lot of years, co-holding the lake record for a time with a 25 3/4-pound fish. During the winter of 1979-80, East spent a little time targeting the brown trout, landing 22 between 3 1/2 and 6 1/2 pounds. But East admitted he didn't know much about browns compared to two of the lake's now-regular brown trout trollers, Ken Herrington of Fontana and Mike Orr of

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Lou and Fred Albrecht of San Bernardino fished Silverwood the winter and spring of 1979 landing over 80 brown trout to 4 1/2 pounds.

Pasadena. East explained all this the day I fished with him in February, 1981. At one point we saw an angler battling a fish, and East putted over to his boat. It was Herrington, and he netted a brown while we watched. He held up the 4 1/2-pound brown for photos. Later we bumped into Orr, and he and East talked for 20 minutes while their boats drifted together across the lake, sharing information and stories.

"I'm not good enough at browns," East told me after we finally pushed away from Orr and continued trolling. "I fish 'em because I like being out on the pond. Stripers is my game. But he's the best big trout fisherman on the lake. He trolls slow – none of the rest of us can stand it. He goes less than a mile per hour, but he catches the fish. He or Ken will break the lake record."

At that point in time, the record had climbed to 10-pounds, four-ounces. But it never fell. In fact, the winter I fished with East was the last year when brown trout showed up in any numbers. Before he passed away in a freak fishing accident, Orr told me that he landed 71 brown trout from three to eight pounds at Silverwood during those peak years.

During the winter and spring of 1980-81, the lake was pretty crowded with anglers hoping to catch a big

brown. It was a good idea to call ahead and try to reserve a rental boat on a weekend day, and the launch ramp was mobbed for the first hour after the gates opened to the Lake Silverwood State Recreation Area. The big fish were a phenomenon.

And then the browns were just gone, never to return.

The brown trout saga at Silverwood began in 1977 when nearly 60,000 Mt. Whitney-strain brown trout were planted by the Department of Fish and Wildlife in two stockings. The plants were a mix of catchable fish planted as eight to 12-inch fish in February and 36,000 fingerlings planted in August. All those fish skyrocketed in size with all the threadfin shad in Silverwood. It was likely that the two-pounders Albrecht was catching in the spring of 1979 were the fingerlings planted just two years before. The 4 1/2-pounder was likely one of the catchable browns.

Those were surplus fish from a big production year at the hatchery, and plants were not made again – in spite of anglers pleas to keep this fishery going.

The DFW finally responded to anglers after the browns had completely disappeared for at least three years. Brown trout plants were made again in 1984

and 1985, but the stockings were small – both in total numbers and size of the fish – and the browns just never held over in the same kind of volume and never grew to the impressive sizes again. The lake has received the odd brown trout plant since, including a couple of plants two seasons ago, but the fish have never transitioned into trophies again.

There are likely two complex reasons for trophy brown fishery never recovering:

First, in 1984 the entire Mt. Whitney fish hatchery was infected with whirling disease and the DFW destroyed all the fish in the hatchery, including all of the Mt. Whitney-strain browns, in a futile attempt to prevent the spread of the disease. This move would end up haunting the DFW because the Whitney-strain brown had proven to be an amazing fish that did well in the hatchery setting (most brown trout strains are difficult, to say the least), but when planted they reverted to their wild nature and grew prodigiously when there was a good food supply. Virtually all of the lake record brown in Eastern Sierra waters trace their roots right back to the Mt. Whitney strain. So it was no shock the browns became hefty, wild fish in Silverwood.

With no Whitney browns anywhere else in the DFW's hatchery system, the state tried bringing wild browns that were originally Whitney-strain fish back into the hatchery to restore the line. But these wild fish didn't have the same, easy-handling characteristics, even only one or two generations removed from the hatchery. The DFW gave up Whitney-strain browns, and it gave up on the Silverwood effort after using other

browns. Those fish in the '84 and '85 plants never produced any trophies and had very poor returns overall.

Second, the striper population began to explode in Lake Silverwood. Almost since it opened in 1971, there were always a few stripers in Silverwood, entering the lake by way of the California Aqueduct. But as water use ramped up, there was almost a continuous flow of water through the lake that allowed the stripers to spawn successfully and numbers skyrocketed. More and more stripers became bigger predatory fish that ate trout like candy, especially fingerlings and catchable-sized trout the DFW planted.

A second part of this equation is that as reservoirs age, they become less productive. All of the nutrients, from the flooded vegetation that decayed when the lake was first filled, were in decline. Combined with the glut of small stripers, the smaller food supply made it more difficult for the browns to survive and thrive like before.

To maintain a fishery today, it is likely the DFW would have to plant more brown trout than they did in 1977 – and far more than in 1984 and 1985 – to survive stripers' mouths and competition from other fish to become large enough to once again provide a trophy fishery. With the DFW's current aversion to non-native trout plants, no one is holding their breath.

For a fishery that lasted just four fishing seasons, anglers' memories and tales of the trophy brown trout of Lake Silverwood continue to live on forty years later.

END

This is one of a monthly series of outdoor stories by veteran Southern California outdoor writer Jim Matthews looking back at how hunting and fishing was in Southern California in the not-so-distant past. He remembers when....



Mike Orr of Pasadena holds up a four-pound brown trout he caught at Silverwood Lake in 1981. The lake record reached 10 3/4-pounds.