



Lobdell Lake: Once California's only grayling fishery

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Grayling are like freshwater sailfish. They are adorned with a tall dorsal fin that radiates lavenders and



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violets with an overall color that is steely and bright, like the icy water where they live. Most grayling are found in Arctic climates, far above the 49th parallel. If you are wearing shorts when you see one you will shiver. They just look like fish of the cold.

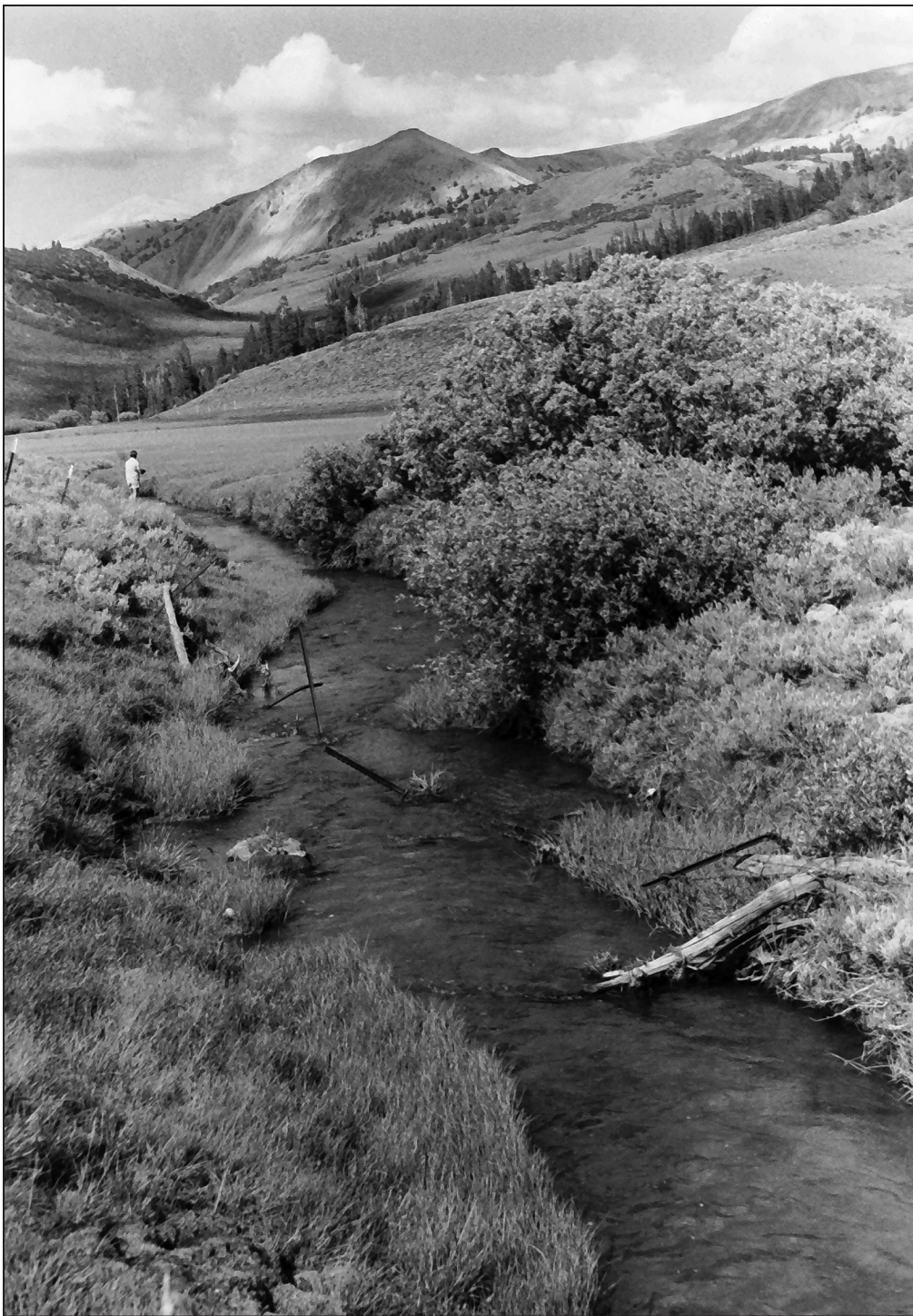
So to catch them in California out of a stream called – of all things – Desert Creek

while fishing in shirtsleeves seems to be a contradiction of all the ground rules nature has set around this fishes'

life. And if you want to further confuse the issue even more, the eggs from the stock that brought the fish here came from Arizona.

But these Arctic fish once abounded in Desert Creek and Lobdell Lake nestled in the Sweetwater Mountains north of Bridgeport in the Eastern Sierra Nevada. Yet, today they are gone again after thriving for nearly 30 years in those two waters.

I caught them first in 1968 after the late Rick Rockel, owner of Ken's Sporting Goods in Bridgeport, tipped me off on what was almost a secret. The four-wheel drive road to get there was enough to keep it a secret except for the most dedicated of anglers equipped with the right vehicles. So I wrote about it. The many variants of the story were published in a number of local newspapers in Southern California and several regional and national magazines, but the lake never saw many anglers.



Grayling survived in Lobdell Lake for over 20 years because they were able to successfully spawn in Desert Creek each spring, competing with the brook and rainbow trout also there.

In one of the newspaper stories, I wrote that I had “caught one fish that was 13-inches long – maybe 14 if you were to stretch things a bit – just below the lake in Desert Creek out of a pool that was stacked up with fish.” It probably was closer to 12 inches, and since I’d wandered off from my brother-in-law R.G. Fann, there was no photo.

The story went on: “The stream was loaded with fish down for at least the mile or so I fished. Grayling were the predominate fish close to the lake,

and then brookies and small rainbows dominating farther downstream. None of the fish was big but they all were fun, and they all are still there for you to catch someday.”

Well, someday came and went, but it was fun while it lasted. Jim Reid, the current owner of Ken’s Sporting Goods, did his quiet chuckle when asked about grayling in Lobdell recently.

“When I was in high school, me and my buddies would have a contest to see who could cast a little black fly out on the lake and strip it back to shore without catching a fish. You would catch them on every cast. They were all little fish, and it *almost* got boring,” said Reid.

“I never fished it when it was supposed to have bigger grayling, that was a little before my time. It’s too bad they’re gone, but it’s been 20 years. You’d think they would have come back by now if they were going to.”

The story about how grayling came to Lobdell actually begins in 1903, when the first stocks of grayling were made into California’s high mountain waters. The fish and game department tried again from 1924 to 1930, but there was only one place out of dozens of waters

where the fish were even moderately successful, and that was Grayling Lake in Yosemite National Park. But even there, the grayling fishery eventually died out.

The most recent attempts to stock grayling were in 1969 and 1970, when 26 waters high in the Sierra were planted with fish reared from eggs obtained from Arizona. The fish that spawned those eggs were native Montana stock.

Again, the stockings mostly met with failure – with one glowing exception – Lobdell Lake and one of

its tributary streams, Desert Creek. The high, exposed reservoir looked and felt almost arctic, and the fish prospered.

Lobdell had a long penchant for prospering fish. It was once known for its monster brook trout, according to Phil Pister, a long-retired Department of Fish and Wildlife biologist in Bishop told me back in 1968 when I spoke with him about the lake. Brookies up to six and seven pounds were taken regularly from this water in the late 1950s and early 60s, but now the brookies are smaller, competing with rainbows for the available food. There were also rumors of Dolly Varden in Desert Creek, remnants from a plant made by Nevada, but there haven't been any confirmed reports in decades of this species in either the creek or lake.

In the first few years after grayling were planted, some fish in the 14- to 18-inch class were caught, including one that set the 1 3/4-pound state record. That fish was landed in 1974 by Don Acton of Bishop. In any case, a 16-incher would have been worthy of mounting and hanging above the fireplace. Six to eight-inchers were the norm right until the fishery disappeared.

Lobdell is an unusual lake in that it has two dams and is situated in a high saddle below Mt. Patterson in the Sweetwater Mountains not far from Nevada. Deep Creek is diverted into the lake and one dam keeps the

water from spilling back into Deep Creek canyon, and another dam sits on the headwaters of Desert Creek. The lake is perched right out in the open surrounded by high sage meadow.

The grayling disappeared with a one-two punch that coincided with each other. First, there was a crack in one of the earthen dams that went unnoticed one fall, and it all but drained the lake. The pool of water that was left in the bottom froze solid that winter killing all the fish. By then, Desert Creek had been reduced to a trickle for much of the summer and fall and apparently the spring-spawning grayling were not successful for a number of years in a row.

And then they were gone.

A lot of us who remember the fishery can't believe a few didn't hang on in the deeper pools of Desert Creek and their offspring find their way back into the lake. So each year, a few older anglers go up and poke around and cast small flies diligently in both creek and reservoir, hoping to see a sail-like fin cutting through the cold water behind their fly. It's hard to give up on a good thing.

So there is always hope and there are always rumors, even though no grayling have been verified in over a decade.

Maybe this year, I'll catch one again.

END

This is one of a 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*....