

Trout Site -- Gila Trout

Horned Toads and Gila Trout
By Bob Willis

The drive from Alpine, Arizona to Glenwood, New Mexico takes a couple of hours and moves from the mountains to what looks like a scrub desert. It is hard to believe that trout live in this area because it is obvious that there is not much rainfall and very little water. I could tell that the place didn't get much water because there were Horned Toads basking in the sun beside the road.

My search for Gila trout had brought me to an old mining in the very western part of New Mexico. Gila Trout are one of the rarest trout in North America. All Gila Trout areas were closed to fishing until 2007. The New Mexico Game and Fish worked for many years in cooperation with the National Forests of New Mexico to improve habitat and save the Gila Trout from extinction. Gila are still listed as threatened and endangered, but the Game and Fish opened a portion of six streams that contained Gila's to fishing, and also began stocking Gila's. Only three are open prior to July 1, and those were the three I was targeting. I was there in late June.

I knew the rest of the road into Willow and Gilita Creeks was not going to be very good, and that was a substantial underestimation. I had a flat yesterday in Arizona and knew that 4-ply tires do not cut it in this part of the country. This road was worse than any I had encountered with many boulders protruding in the road and lots of sharp rocks. I was going to be very lucky not to have another flat or two. I went slow (20 mph) and still had a rough ride. It was about 25 miles on this road to reach Willow Creek. There weren't many cars, but there were a few so I figured that I might be able to catch a ride if flats happened. The road is steep with switchbacks, rocks, and drop-offs. It is possible to drive 20-25 miles an hour on this road so it takes a while to get to Willow Creek.

Willow Creek was 5-10 feet wide and inches to a couple of feet deep. It was a high mountain stream, very clear, with limited access to the water for casting. It is the kind of stream that has to be waded, and fished with some stealth. It was easy to spook the fish and hard to get a good back-cast in most places. It also required a short leader (6-7 feet), and creative casting. It is the kind of stream you have to hide behind trees and bushes and drop the fly gently on the water. I generally start with nymphs for all trout water, because I have just caught more fish using that method. I will switch to a dry fly if there is a hatch on the stream, but there was nothing hatching on Willow Creek about noon that day. I started with a #14 will bug (my favorite nymph pattern-tied somewhat like a prince nymph) and immediately got hits. These were aggressive fish picking the fly up in fast water. That led me to believe that they were rainbow, and soon I found out.

I fished the meadow stream for about an hour and caught several small trout that were really different. They reminded me of the Apache Trout I had caught in Arizona the day before, but they were not as yellow and had very small spots. It appeared that I had caught my first Gila and it was something for which I was not prepared. They had dark backs and yellow fins. I examined the first little trout and had to wonder if this was really a Gila? They were in the fast water of this little stream and I had many hits and several fish. It was difficult fishing with willow trees overgrowing the banks with no room to make a back cast. The stream also required stealth fishing so the fish would not be spooked. Standing in the willows was good cover, but I must have looked a little odd. I was excited about the first fish and after catching several of the small ones decided to look for some larger holes in downstream.

Part of the problem with fishing Willow Creek is that where you access the stream leaves nothing but a downhill walk. This is fine for walking, but not fishing. I had to hike downstream and then turn around and fish back upstream. Downstream fishing just wouldn't work in the small stream with clear water and good visibility.



This is my first Gila of the day and was quickly released.

I decided to try a little farther down the road and see what the stream looked. What was a challenge in the meadow became a stiffer challenge in the steep valley. The water is fast and you have to select the pools that are likely to hold fish. Stepping across the stream and not getting your feet wet was not a problem in many places. Most of the deeper pools held fish, but you have to be quick to catch them and they are not very big. I fished for another two hours and caught a brown and several more small Gila's. It was a good day and even the flat tire on the Jeep was too upsetting. Of course, walking the 70 miles back to Alpine would have been bad.

To learn more about the day with Gila Trout and all of the other North American Trout species read the stories in **Trout Adventures – North America**. The book will be in book or e-book form and available from Wilderness Adventures Press at www.wildadvpress.com.