

Trout Site - Rainbow Trout

By Bob Willis

I caught my first rainbow in the 1960's and have discovered that they are pretty well everywhere. One of the largest rainbow trout that I have caught was in Missouri in lake Taneycomo (that stands for Taney County Missouri) and was one of the largest fish I had caught at the time. He weighted right at seven pounds. That was in the early 1970's and larger ones began to show up as I fished more and more out west.



This five pound Rainbow looked kind of like a football.

Rainbow are the true Cadillac of trout. They hit hard, and usually fight an aerial battle. I was tubing Hebgen Lake in Montana one afternoon and had one jump over me while I was in a tube. He was a good fish, but not a monster. I guessed the weight at 5 ½ to 3 pounds. Having a fish jump over you is a terrific experience. I have had them jump 5 or 6 times and the really big ones will also jump, and that is when it gets interesting. Lake rainbows seem to jump more than those caught in the rivers and streams. The river fish use the current to their advantage and will jump, but usually make a big run downstream. I have hooked steelhead in Alaska that will start downstream and just take all of your line. The point in time comes when you have to take off downstream after them. This happened to me on the Thorn River which is a big river located in the Tongass National Forest in southeast Alaska.

Steelhead are supersized rainbow that spend most of their life at sea and come back to freshwater to spawn. Steelhead use their size to beat you. They will jump, but that is unusual. They just try to break the line, and are not that interested in throwing the fly. They are the sumo wrestlers of the trout world but that is another story.

River rainbow are predictable. They like faster current and hang near the bottom and come up for the offering. They are quick and will bump a nymph in a blink of an eye. My favorite western river is the Madison below Hebgen and before you get to Quake Lake. It does get some pressure, but there is a hatch every evening in the summer time. There are not many places where you can dry fly fish with success every day. This stretch of River is full of good size rainbow and there are some big fish in the mix. One of the attractions for me is that the fish are brilliantly colored and when you see one the bright red sides tell you why they are called rainbow.

I have caught many Rainbow in the Colorado, Snake, and Henry's Fork of the Snake, Madison, Big Hole, Bitterroot, and Clarks Fork. The greatest thrill for river fishing with a fly rod is getting a big rainbow to take a dry fly in fast water. The interesting thing about that is that these large fish will take an incredibly small fly. You can be fooled when setting the hook if you think small flies only catch small fish. That is an easy way to break you leader. My favorite dry flies are female adams and parachute adams from a size 12 to 16 on the Madison when there is a hatch. I like to parachute adams because it is much easier to see in low light. Other flies also work. I have also used royal wulffs successfully on this stretch of river. I like them because they float like corks and it takes several fish to make them sink.



A great spot for Rainbow's on the Madison River, Montana.

While it is a thrill to catch rainbow on a dry fly, the window of opportunity is best when there is a hatch. In the west this is usually in the evening. There is a small stream just outside of West Yellowstone, Montana that taught me something new late one afternoon. It has some fast water and is hard to fish a fly directly upstream. You can do it, but it really limits the water that can be fished. The fish were taking small caddis flies that were zipping across the water. I watched several rainbows chase the flies across the current. This called for a change in tactics. I walked up to where the fish were chasing and make a cast across the current and brought the fly across the current with some pace rather than the standard dead drift. A fish not only chased it, but also was able to take the offering. I have used that system on several streams with there is fast water with limited casting opportunities, and it can really work. I got a real surprise on this same stream one night when I was letting a dry fly sink and hooked the largest brown I have ever caught. Once the hatch is about over there are many spent flies on or just below the surface. The trout will continue to feed on the spent flies for a while. I set the hook on what I thought was another 10-12-inch rainbow only to find out 10 minutes later that it was a six and a half pound brown. Life is full of surprises and that was a dandy. The Colorado River around Glenwood Springs, Colorado is a good rainbow river, but after the Madison my next favorite rainbow rivers are the Big Hole River in Montana, and the Bitterroot River also in Montana. All of those rivers hold the occasional monster.

If you want to catch the biggest rainbow you have to fish the western lakes or Alaska. The best way to fish the western lakes is from a tube or power tube. One of my favorite places to catch rainbows is Hebgen Lake just north of West Yellowstone, Montana. There is great rainbow trout fishing and the scenery is magnificent.

The Lake has always been a good producer of rainbow, and it is a natural population. Much of the western United States has been in a prolonged drought and this dry, hot weather has affected fishing. This drought occurred in the mid 2000's and many parts of the west are just now getting over that extended dry period. Many of the large western reservoirs have been drawn down to

minimum pool for several years in a row and the changing water level has yielded some tough fishing on many of the lakes in the Island Park, Idaho and Yellowstone, Montana area. The Hebgen Lake fishery has shown very little effect of the dry weather over the last several years, and the snowfall and runoff the last several years has been much better. Because the other lakes in the area have not been producing good catches, Hebgen has been fished a little harder over this period of time.



Another Rainbow that hit a Will Bug. This fish loved to jump and had several great leaps.

Rainbow will always be a favorite and I believe that one of the best if not the best place for large Rainbow is the Kenai River of Alaska. It is the only place that I have consistently caught big Rainbow on a dry fly. The largest was seven pounds and in the large Kenai the fish spooled me twice. I have never had that happen any other place. To learn more about Rainbow and all of the hybrids and subspecies try to book or e-book **Trout Adventures – North America**. The book will be available from Wilderness Adventures Press sometime in 2012. Their website is www.wildadvpress.com.