

About Catch and Release

By Mel Odemar, past VP Conservation

Catch and release is an almost universal practice among fly fishers and one that allows us to enjoy extended fishing days without having to worry about bag limits and it minimizes our impact on fishery resources. However, catch and release must be done carefully because depending on the species and conditions under which the fish were caught and handled, the practice in itself can be as lethal as if the fish were put on a stringer or into a creel.

A recent trip to Pyramid Lake with some GBF friends was a good case in point. We observed a fly fisherman fishing from the shoreline catch a number of Lahontan cutthroats, slide them on to the beach, remove the fly and toss the fish back into the lake. Those that didn't quite make it to the water were booted into the water. On a previous trip to Pyramid Lake my friends observed a fisherman catch a fish, carry it to his truck by its gills to take a photo, then return the fish to the lake.

I am confident that such behavior is not something that a GBF member would practice, but much less abusive treatment of fish can also cause mortalities. The fish we pursue are of two types: spiny rayed and soft rayed. The spiny rayed fish are so named for the presence of spines in their fins. These fish include black bass and striped bass. Spiny rayed fish are relatively hardy, usually having a more rigid body and they are more tolerant to handling and removal from the water. Soft rayed fish, such as trout and salmon, have no spines in their fins, have a relatively soft body and do not hold up as well to handling. This is especially true for large trout such as Lahontan cutthroat and the trophy trout we catch in Davis Lake.

The practice of catch and release requires that we minimize hooking mortality by using safe handling practices. These include the use of barbless hooks, quickly landing hooked fish, limiting handling stress by keeping hooked fish in the water as much as possible while removing the fly, and limiting or ceasing trout fishing during warm water periods. With the widespread use of cell phones many feel compelled to take photos of trophy catches. Best practices are to take the photos while the fish are in the net, on the stripping apron, or in shallow water at stream or lakeside. Fish caught on barbless hooks will often come unhooked while still in the landing net. Trout can be safely lifted from the water for photos, but extra care is necessary especially if the fish appears to be in a weakened condition.

We are very fortunate to live in a region with so many opportunities to catch trophy fish. It is incumbent on all of us to protect these resources by minimizing injury to released fish.