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Field & Stream



Ked Grauer



Roaring and foaming white, Llewellyn Falls marks the downstream limit of Piute trout.

SECRETS of the Silver King

By COLIN FLETCHER

The small stream hidden in a high valley
of the Sierra Nevada held rare and
beautiful trout — but could they be caught?

IT WASN'T until I came to the second beaver pond that I found what I was looking for. It was about time. For the last hour I'd been wondering if the California specialty I'd come to find was only a myth. Half a day's casting into the headwaters of Silver King Creek had made me doubt everything I'd heard and read.

"Probably isn't a fish within miles," I muttered as I pushed through the aspens. Then I stopped in my tracks.

A side creek fed the beaver pond. Above its smooth gravel bed, suspended in less than a foot of water, hung a shape that was not quite motionless. As I watched, the shape eased to one side and gulped down an invisible morsel. Its side showed briefly. A shaft of sunlight, slanting down through the trees, glistened on tints and hues I'd seen on no other trout. And then I knew.

I eased down out of sight and slipped off my heavy pack. The fly rod quivered in my shaking hand as I crept ten feet downstream, and looked again. The fish still hung suspended over the gravel bed. It wasn't big, not over 9 inches, but that didn't matter. What mattered was that subtle lavender sheen glistening in the sunlight.

As I made my first cast I was still trembling. The fly rapped against an upstream sapling—and snagged. I lowered the rod, pulled directly on the line, and prayed. The 2-pound leader snapped at the fly and catapulted back to me. The trout didn't flicker a fin.

Fumblingly, I unclipped a small Pheasant Tail from my fly box and knotted it to the leader. This time the fly flicked accurately under the sapling, sank instantly, and swept down over the gravel bed. The trout eased to one side, opened its mouth, and moved back into place. I tightened.

There was a furious rush upstream, a check, then a dash down toward a submerged log. For a moment I just

held on. Then the fish turned, and I knew I'd won. Seconds later I was kneeling and staring at its quivering scales. It was even more beautiful than I'd imagined.

Ever since I'd crossed the 10,000-foot pass the evening before, my mind had been set on that fish. Even then I was dreaming of catching that special kind of trout. Below me, timbered slopes plunged down to the V that held Silver King Creek. Two miles downstream, a meadow showed bright green through tall trees. Beyond, peak after Sierra peak stretched away northwards to the horizon. There was no single sign of man.

I walked down through the trees. A small doe stared at me from the far side of a clearing, uncertain whether to be frightened. Giant junipers began to appear among the pines and firs. The spiraling bark of their bright orange trunks reached up a hundred feet and more. And when I came down to the first shrill waters of the creek I walked through dense beds of sunflowers and lupines and scarlet Indian paintbrush. I began looking round for a campsite.

I was making a six-month trip on foot from one end of California to the other. Early in March I'd headed north from the Mexican border. Crossing 600 miles of desert, I'd climbed the White Mountains and skirted Mono Lake. Now, in mid-July, I was in the Sierra Nevada.

When I planned the trip early in the year, I knew I'd find it difficult to linger long in any one place. With well over a thousand miles to cover, I'd have to avoid temptations to stop.

It was Herb Pintler of the California Department of Fish and Game who found the chink in my armor. "Guess you'll be passing through Alpine County," he said over the phone. "I know a place up there just made for you. Wild, untouched country. And some special trout that not too many people know about. They're called Piutes, after the local Indians." Herb pronounced it "Pie-oots."

"They're cutthroats," he went on, "but they don't look much like it. Beautiful little fish. Would you like some literature on them?"

"Surely," I said. "I'm not certain I'll be able to spend any time there, but—"

Herb laughed into the phone. "Once you get up there," he said, "you'll *make time*."

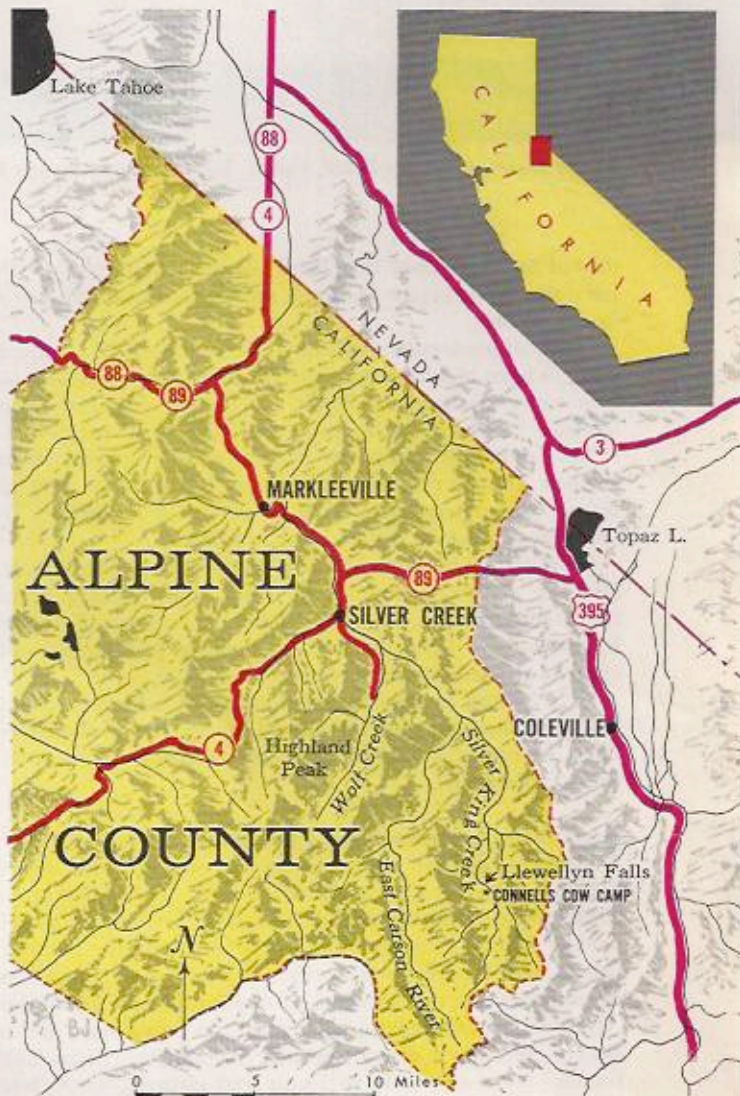
The literature began with prosaic ichthyologist's stuff: "In the headwaters of Silver King Creek in Alpine County exists a distinct subspecies of the Lahontan cutthroat or black-spotted trout. This isolated variant, known as the Piute trout, is readily recognizable by the absence of spots on the body, by parr marks carried throughout life, and—above all—by its purple coloration, somewhat reminiscent of the golden trout. It is segregated from the original stock by the barrier of Llewellyn Falls. The segregation occurred long ago, and through the centuries the Piute has developed its own distinctive pattern of coloration."

But as I read on I realized that the Piute was something more than a mere scientific oddity. Even the ichthyologists got carried away. They talked of "an iridescent sheen like the play of colors in a Mexican fire opal." And they named the fish *selenis* after Selene, Greek goddess of the moon.

And now, as I knelt beside the little side creek among the aspens, I understood. That 9-inch trout was a picture. Out of the water, its subtle lavender sheen had become brilliant purple. A golden tint underlay the purple and flamed almost to red on the cheeks. The lower jaw carried the scarlet slash of the cutthroat. A few black spots



Two cowboys, and earlier two Forest Rangers, were the only persons Fletcher saw during his week on Silver King Creek



Home of the rare Piute trout is the small part of Silver King Creek above Llewellyn Falls, over 7,500 feet high



In the mazes of beaver-felled aspens, landing a fish involved acrobatics

dotted tail and anal fins. And along each flank ran the parr marks, a series of black smudges like a full set of fingerprints.

I moved upstream and flicked the Pheasant Tail into an eddy, where it sank from sight. For a moment the greased line hung motionless. Then it plucked forward. Soon another beautiful little trout was kicking at my feet.

This one was different. It carried the scarlet throat slashes, the parr marks and a few black spots. But the purple sheen was pale, with no red-gold underlay. The fish was almost as silvery as a rainbow.

I walked back down to the beaver pond. Three casts, and my strike sent another Piute cartwheeling across the placid surface. This was a bigger fish, an 11-incher. It was darker than the first—a deep, royal purple—and even more startlingly beautiful.

As I looked at its iridescent scales, I understood why Herb Pintler had said I'd *make* time to stay at the Silver King. Already I was determined to know more about these little trout.

I walked on downstream. Carved into the silver bark of several aspens were blackened names and dates: "Miguel Yuirralde, Juuo 27, 1912" and "Felix Larraneta, 1914." Basque sheepherders had once formed a colorful part of Alpine County's life. Even today the life is colorful, though in a different way. Its permanent population of under 300 is the smallest of any county in the nation. Alpine boasts no doctor, no lawyer, no policeman, and no barber, but has elected the only woman sheriff in California. Nowhere in it will you find church, bank, telephone exchange, movie house, or parking meter. There's only one year-round bar. For today Alpine subsists largely on sportsmen's dollars.

Yet when I camped that evening at the edge of a broad meadow, there might not have been another sportsman, or indeed any other man, within a hundred miles.

Next day I discovered in that one meadow just about everything a trout fisherman could want. At its head were beaver dams tailor-made for the man with perfect control of his backcast and balance enough to negotiate thin aspen logs. Down the middle of the meadow the creek formed a chain of runs and pools.

Eddies circled behind grassy tussocks. At sharp corners in the creek's meanderings, flood water had gouged deep holes. At the foot of the meadow the creek fell away in a series of rocky pools.

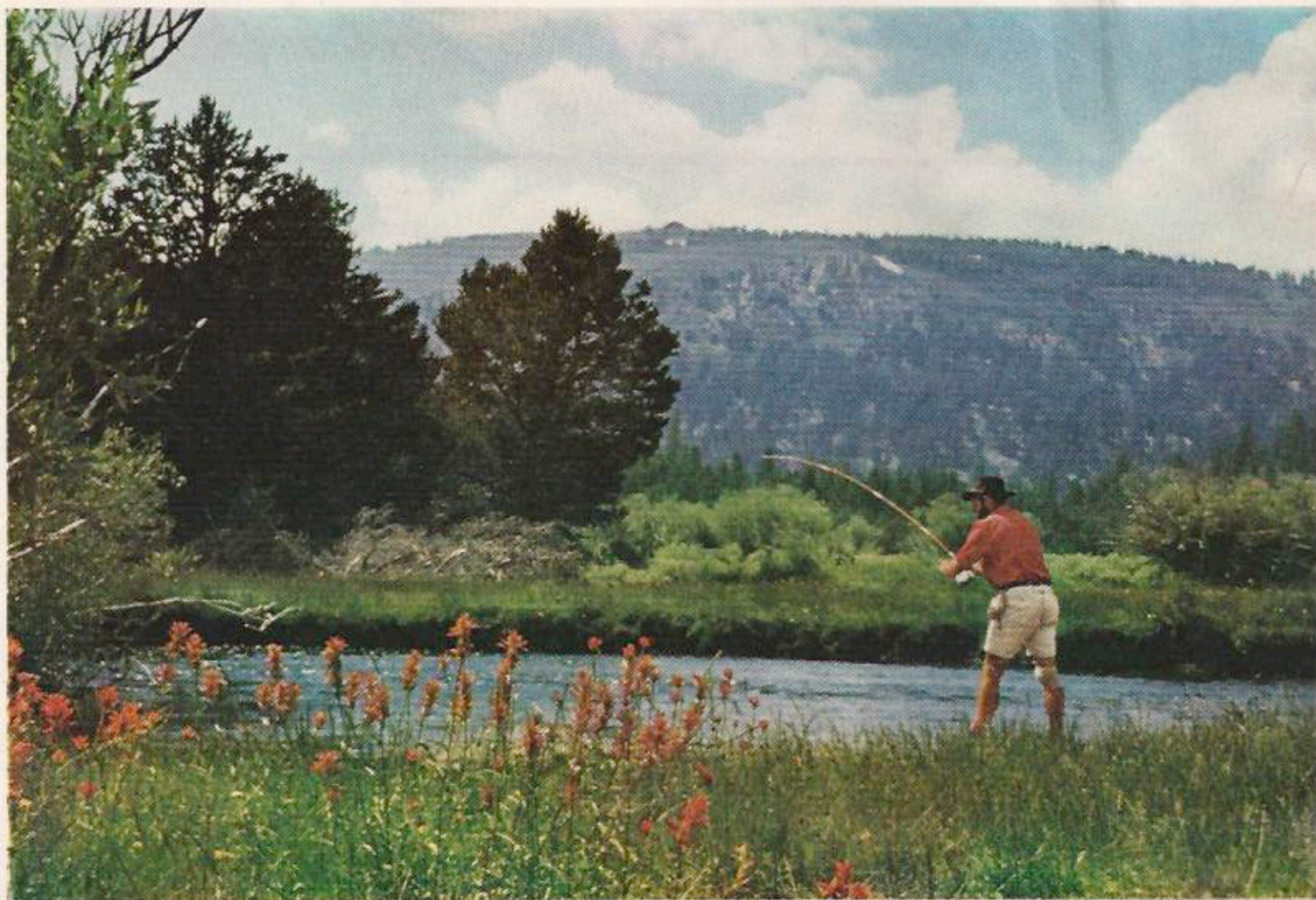
The trout rose to my flies all through the day. It was as if they had been fasting for a week, just waiting for me to arrive. In the beaver ponds they wanted wet flies, especially an ancient No. 12 Peter Ross with little dressing left beyond a few bedraggled strands of black hackle and teal feather clinging to the hook.

For three days I fished the upper meadows of Silver King in complete solitude. Each afternoon the clouds built up, black as bears. Often they drifted away northwards. Sometimes rain or hail lashed down like a whip for half an hour. But the trout didn't change. Those little Piutes went on feeding in sunshine, rain, or hail. Each day I caught many more than the 15-fish limit. I kept none under 8 inches and returned many larger, but every meal was fish. Piutes are tailored to fit fry pans; they don't seem to grow larger than 11 inches.

It's no use asking me whether they taste better than other trout. You don't bother about comparisons when you're cooking outdoors. All you remember is your ravenous hunger. You take the pan off the fire and put it on a flat stone and devour every one of those fish without pausing, right out of the pan, piping hot, and dripping with butter. All you can say at the end is that trout are the most perfect food man ever tasted. Those Piutes tasted like that.

Herb Pintler had mentioned hybrids that day on the phone. "I've never seen one myself," he said. "But you may run into one or two. Way back, a few rainbows and cutthroats were planted above the falls, and the Piutes crossed with both. I'd certainly appreciate seeing some color slides of hybrids."

That fourth morning I walked downstream and fished the meadow above Llewellyn Falls. For the first time since crossing the 10,000-foot pass I met people, two Forest Rangers on horseback. They said they only got up that far about once a year. And next day I met the only other two people I saw during my week in Silver King—two characters who might have stepped out of a western movie. They were hitching their horses to the



Beds of colorful Indian paintbrush lined the banks of the remote mountain stream where Fletcher fished. The area can be reached only by horseback or hiking

rail outside a log cabin identified on my map as "Connell's Cow Camp." Charlie Roberts lived east of the mountains, in Wellington, Nevada, where he owned several cattle ranches. The other man, Sid Henderson, was one of his best cowpunchers.

"How's about stopping over with us tonight?" asked Charlie. His face wrinkled up like a good-humored walnut. You can't say no to a man like that. I didn't want to anyway.

When I brought out the six fish I'd kept for supper, Sid Henderson grinned at me from under his enormous straw hat. "Like a mess of trout tonight, Charlie?" he said. "I'll go dig a few worms."

Near the cabin, the creek ran swift and turbulent. Until the snow water thinned down, I didn't fancy my chances. But I'd be interested in comparing fly and worm. In half an hour's fishing I squeezed out four mediocre trout. Sid, walking up the bare bank with no attempt to hide himself or his hat, killed ten good fish on worms.

Back at the cabin, Charlie had cooked two huge platefuls of macaroni. "Twenty fish, eh?" he said. "With this stuff they'll make a nice little snack."

Next morning I went on down to Llewellyn Falls, the barrier that had created the Piutes as a subspecies, and fished down below the falls. A (Continued on page 140)



The Piute trout (bottom) compared to the rainbow trout (middle) and brook trout (top) is strikingly beautiful. Piutes grow to about 11 inches, and the dark parr marks on their sides are permanent

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ing gear, especially when I heard Russ talking it up just as a fine dolphin grabbed his plug, raced away fifty yards or more, and came slashing into the air. A minute or so later I had one. I was battling it with a Di-jack, and as Old Man Mack had said, the battle was real nice. In fact, it was so nice that the fish decided to win it, and off he went, breaking the line at the leader on his way.

I have no idea how big that fish was. Later I brought one in that weighed 31 pounds, and he'd put up a flashy fight.

We battled dolphin for an hour and a half—until we ran out of mullet. Santiago tried chunks of sierra mackerel, but the dolphin didn't seem to care much for it. Sometimes fish can be as finicky as human beings about the kind of fish they prefer. We landed only eleven dolphin but we were fighting them all the time. The ones we took ranged from 12 to 31 pounds.

I realized that day that the Gulf of California probably offers the most fabulous dolphin fishery an American angler can hope to find. You can haul an outboard rig down there, and launch it anywhere where you find a sandy beach. Then, after a run of a couple of miles or so, in quiet water, you can unlimber your Di-jack and get set to do battle with dynamite.

Secrets of the Silver King

(Continued from page 63)

few Piutes might have been washed down there and interbred with other stock. But in four hours' hard fishing I caught only rainbows, not a single Piute, let alone a hybrid.

I got back up to the falls about noon. As I ate lunch below the roaring chute of white water, I wondered how long ago fishermen had learned about the little Piutes. I didn't know then that down in Markleeville a few days later I'd run into Walt Thornburg, the man who discovered them. Gray-haired and over 70 now, he lives on the outskirts of Alpine's little county seat.

When I asked him about the Piutes, he looked past me at the mountains to the south. "I was just a kid then," he said. "Must be sixty years ago. I found these trout up Silver King and knew they were different from anything else I'd seen. People had caught 'em before, but in those days a fish was a fish and nobody took much notice. Years later, about 1926, I told the fish and game people about them, and in '27 or '28 one of their men went up with me and a Mrs. Llewellyn. The falls are called after her. They took some of the trout down to the

Steinhart Aquarium in San Francisco. That was the first the scientists knew about them. And that's about all there is to it, I guess."

"Did the fish run big in those days?" I asked.

"No," said Walt Thornburg. "Never did see one more than 11 or 12 inches."

But as I ate lunch above Llewellyn Falls that day, I'd yet to meet Walt Thornburg. And my mind soon harked back to hybrids. After lunch I climbed back above the falls. Within sound of the roaring cataract, a little grassy basin nestled among bare rocks. The creek swirled through the neck, then widened into a deep pool. Halfway down the pool, where the water died into flatness, a fish rose.

I flicked a Black Gnat over the spot. It floated down, glistening in the sunshine. The fish rose, made a pass at the fly, but failed to take. Lazily, knowing I ought to change the Black Gnat for Piutes, I cast again to the same place. A dark nose broke the surface. The fly disappeared. Again I tightened into nothing. I cast once more, and this time the fish slashed wildly, showing silvery scales and gill plates. And then I woke up. Piutes were never silvery. Their gill plates always showed pink.

With shaky fingers I dried the fly and fluffed out the hackle. False casting twice, I dropped the fly three feet above the calm water. It bounced down attractively. The fish slashed again, silvery and furious. I counted three and struck. The rod arched.

Moments later I was kneeling in the grass, rejoicing over a slender, silvery trout. Measured by the kick I got out of it, it might have been 10 pounds instead of 10 inches. This fish bore no Piute purple, no parr marks. Black spots covered back and sides and spread down under the belly. I had to peer close to detect the faint pink cutthroat slash under each jaw. I didn't know exactly what it was, but it certainly wasn't a straight Piute, though it was up in Piute territory. It had to be a hybrid.

And suddenly, kneeling there over the fish, I realized regretfully that the time had come for me to head north again.

I stood up. "Guess that's the last secret for now," I said to myself.

I went back down to Llewellyn Falls, shouldered my pack, and hit the trail. Within a quarter mile the trees deadened the roar of the falls. The country didn't look much different, but I knew I'd left the Piutes behind. Yet as I settled down into my usual steady pace, I was sure that no matter how many miles I walked I wouldn't forget the secrets of Silver King.