



Dan Seely, Western Native Trout Challenge Expert Caster #100

Interview by Tyler Coleman

The Western Native Trout Challenge (Challenge) invites anglers to help celebrate our western legacy by catching native trout and char in their native or historic range in each of 12 participating Western states, at their own pace. With three completion levels, participants can enjoy the adventure of a lifetime! Since the program's launch in May 2019, almost 1,000 people have registered to tackle the Challenge. As of August 9, 2021, our 100th angler officially completed the Expert Caster Level of the program - catching six species across at least four states- and was the last person to receive the special edition "First 100" hat. That lucky and determined individual is Dan Seely and to celebrate we reached out to Dan for a quick interview in which he shares a little about how he became involved in the program and a few tips from his travels.

"It's not just about the fish, it's also about the locations they take you and the company you take along."



Dan Seely with an Apache Trout

Tell us a little about you and how you started fly fishing.

I was born and raised in Utah where I currently reside with my wife, Amber, and three children. I grew up near some accessible open space adjacent to a creek where I was able to roam and explore freely. Our family trips involved fishing, hunting, and prospecting. I was lucky enough to marry a girl who also fly fishes, something we continue to do as a family. She is game for just about any outdoor activity I can conjure up, and I come up with some good ones.

My first fly fishing experience was in 1987 on the East Fork of the Bear River of the Uinta Mountains. I was at a Boy Scout camp and had a leader who let me ditch some of the merit badge classes so he could teach me the basics. It was a great stream to learn to fly fish as the back cast was clear and the fish were unsophisticated enough to let me catch a few on a dry fly. I wasn't an exclusive fly fisherman right away, but the seed was planted. Thank goodness for rebellious Scout leaders!

Is this your first Trout Challenge program you have completed? If not, what are others you have done?

My first trout challenge was the [Utah Cutthroat Slam](#) which I completed with Amber in 2018. We caught the Bear River Cutthroat in 2018 on the East Fork of the Bear River where I had my first fly fishing experience. Both Amber and I are working on the [Nevada Native Fish-Slam](#) and have both registered for the [Western Native Trout Challenge](#). We plan to start the [Wyoming Cutt-Slam](#) next summer.

Why did you want to complete the Western Native Trout Challenge?

This is sort of a long story. Back in 2000, Amber found and bought me an out-of-print edition of Patrick C. Trotter's book, *Cutthroat: Native Trout of the West*. I read the book cover to cover and dreamed of catching each of the subspecies presented in the book. I discovered the existence of the Apache Trout and Gila Trout shortly after and I remember thinking I would never be able to pull off a trip to catch them. Shortly after the release of the Western Native Trout Challenge, my friend Mark Wilson (one of the first 100 Expert Caster completers) sent me a link to the Challenge along with a little nudge. This was the motivation I needed to go visit the native ranges of the species I thought I'd never see in person. I guess you could say it's been over 20 years in the making!

What has been your favorite Western Native Trout Initiative focal species so far?

My favorite subspecies so far is the Lahontan Cutthroat Trout. It was the first subspecies Amber and I went after for the Nevada Native Fish Slam. She caught a very nice Lahontan on a dry fly, and I got skunked (unless you count shiners!). I returned within a couple weeks with my middle daughter, and I got skunked again. One year later I was able to successfully catch a Lahontan on a different body of water and apply it to the WNTC. These fish are beautiful and live in some of the most remote and rugged country you can find in the lower United States. The story of the Lahontan Cutthroat is similar to that of my home-water subspecies, the Bonneville Cutthroat. They both diversified in isolation within massive closed-basin glacial-fed lake drainages which both began to desiccate at the end of the last ice age. I recall reading the point from which the trout originally entered the basin is unknown; I like the mystery. There's just something unique about catching trout in the desert.

Looking back on all the places you visited and species you caught, what was your most memorable experience?

That's a tough one to answer. Generally, the pursuit of a native trout in or around the Basin and Range Province would be my answer but if I had to choose one species and its surroundings, it would be the Gila Trout. The genetic lineage/geographic distribution is still something I'm trying wrap my head around. The locations where I was able to catch the Gila were stunning and are attractions even without the fish. The

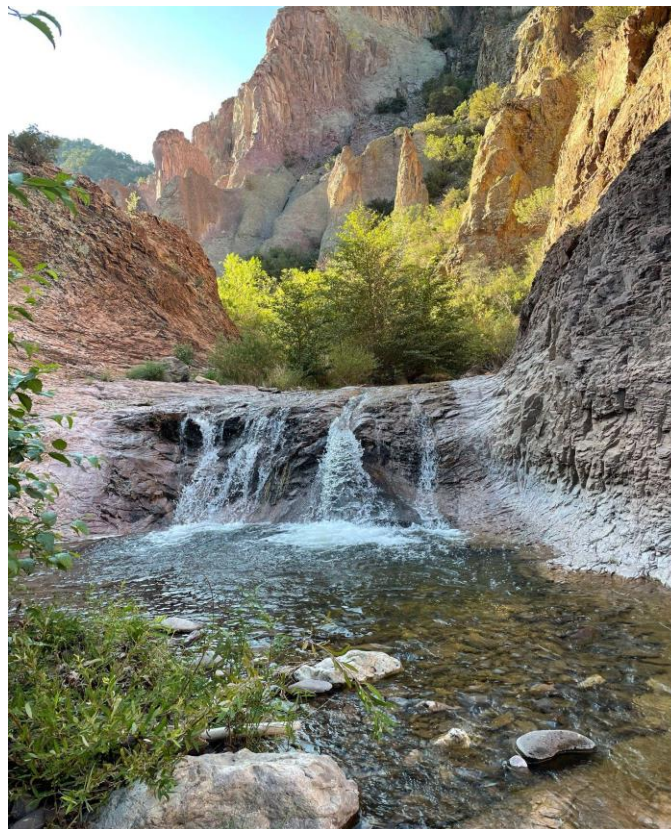
area Mark and I fished has a rich mining history, which made the surroundings even more interesting and attractive to me. The Gila Trout pursuit was part of a trip to also catch the Apache Trout and as a bonus, the Rio Grande Cutthroat and Colorado River Cutthroat. The entire trip was memorable and made it possible for me to submit my application for the WNTC without using any species or subspecies from my home state.

Do you have any tips to share with people currently working on their Challenge or wanting to get started?

My best tip would be to engage the species biologists and specialists from the Division of Wildlife or Fish and Game for the state you plan to visit. Our tax dollars and license fees help pay for these professionals so use them! I have been able to get in contact and start conversations with biologists from Utah, Nevada, Arizona, and New Mexico who freely gave me advice and information which helped me pull together trips and be successful with my precious time. It pays to have a biologist friend at Trout Unlimited, Paul Burnett, who helps with connections and semantics! These folks seem to all know one another and are passionate stewards of the fish and habitat. My experience is that they are more than willing to help.

Be prepared for inclement weather, flat tires, no cell phone reception (if you're lucky), and even a giant boulder blocking your path. I would recommend you start with a small list of fish to target and go for it. Try to get a couple species or subspecies on each trip. I work full-time, teach at a university part-time, raising three children, training a new hunting dog (not very well), and I'm currently pursuing a PhD, so if I can make time, anyone should be able to make time. The Challenge *is* the excuse. Don't get discouraged or in a rush, there is no time limit. Set a goal for one or two species a year and go for it!

It's not just about the fish, it's also about the locations they take you and the company you take along.



Gila Trout country



Roadblock!



Dan Seely with a Lahontan Cutthroat Trout from Nevada