

Tight Lines at Lees Ferry

It is hard to believe a place like Lees Ferry exists in Arizona, but this is one of the best blue-ribbon rainbow trout fisheries in the nation.

PICTURE YOURSELF IN WADERS waist-deep in crystal-clear water that glides by at a peaceful pace. You are surrounded by Navajo Sandstone cliffs jutting up some 1,000 feet that seem to change shades of red every 15 minutes. Your fly slowly drifts across the water — then, out of nowhere, a rainbow trout gracefully surges at your fly, looking for a meal. You reel her in, snap a photo, release the fish or save it for a tasty meal, and repeat. Fifteen minutes later, another strike. It is hard to believe a place like Lees Ferry exists in Arizona, but this is one of the best blue-ribbon rainbow trout fisheries in the nation.

Lees Ferry is located along the Colorado River in northern Arizona. The Arizona Game and Fish Department established this fishery following completion of Glen Canyon Dam in 1963. The fishery stretches about 15 miles from below the dam near Page, Ariz., to the Lees Ferry boat ramp in Marble Canyon. Now is a great time to fish the Ferry, whether you're new to the game or an experienced angler.

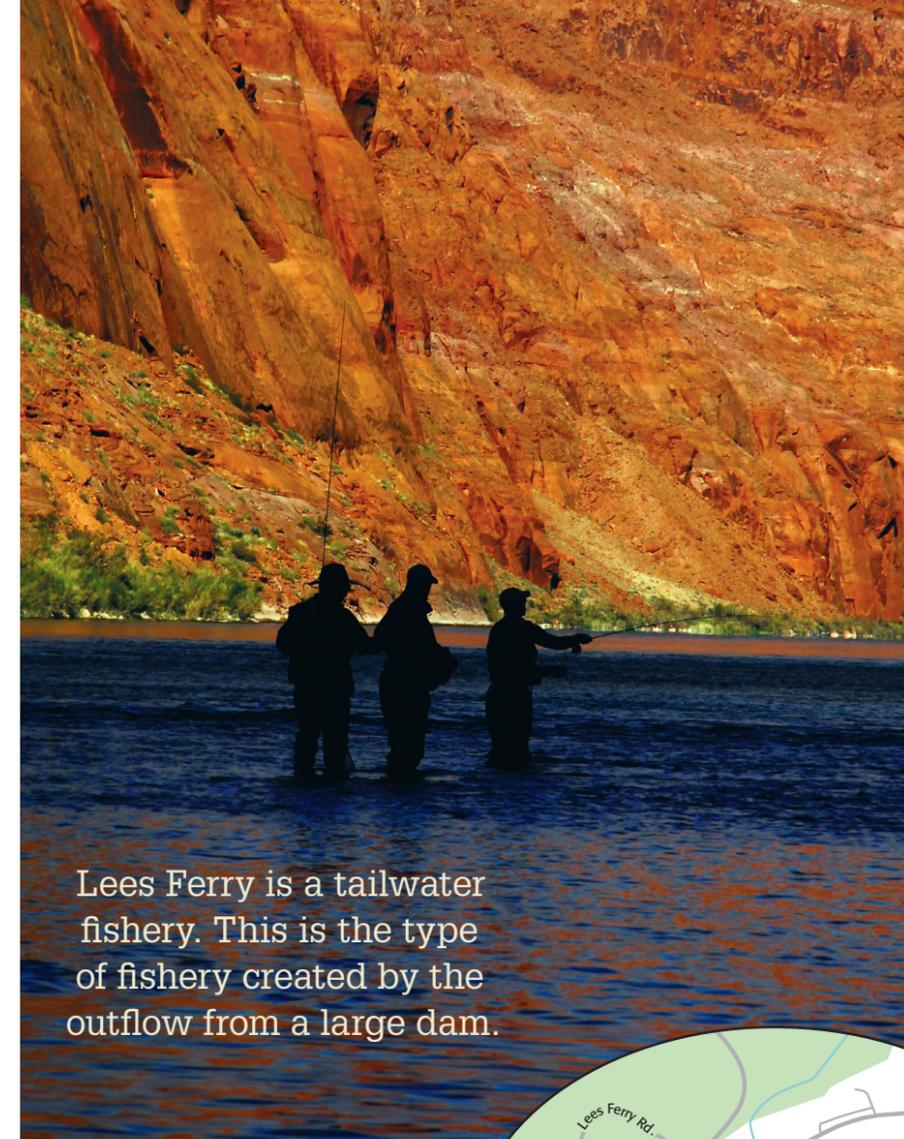
WHY THE FISHING IS GREAT

Lees Ferry is a tailwater fishery. This is the type of fishery created by the outflow from a large dam. Water in the Ferry is released from Glen Canyon Dam at a constant temperature: frigid. These conditions allow aquatic insects such as black flies and midges to flourish, providing trout with a reliable food source, which allows for great year-round fishing.

Dam operations play a major role in influencing tailwater trout populations.



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it a day trip, but you would be pressed for time and may not get the full experience. Those on multiple-day trips can stay at one of three lodges within minutes of the boat ramp, camp at the Lees Ferry campground or along the river at designated camp spots, or stay at a hotel in Page, 45 miles away.

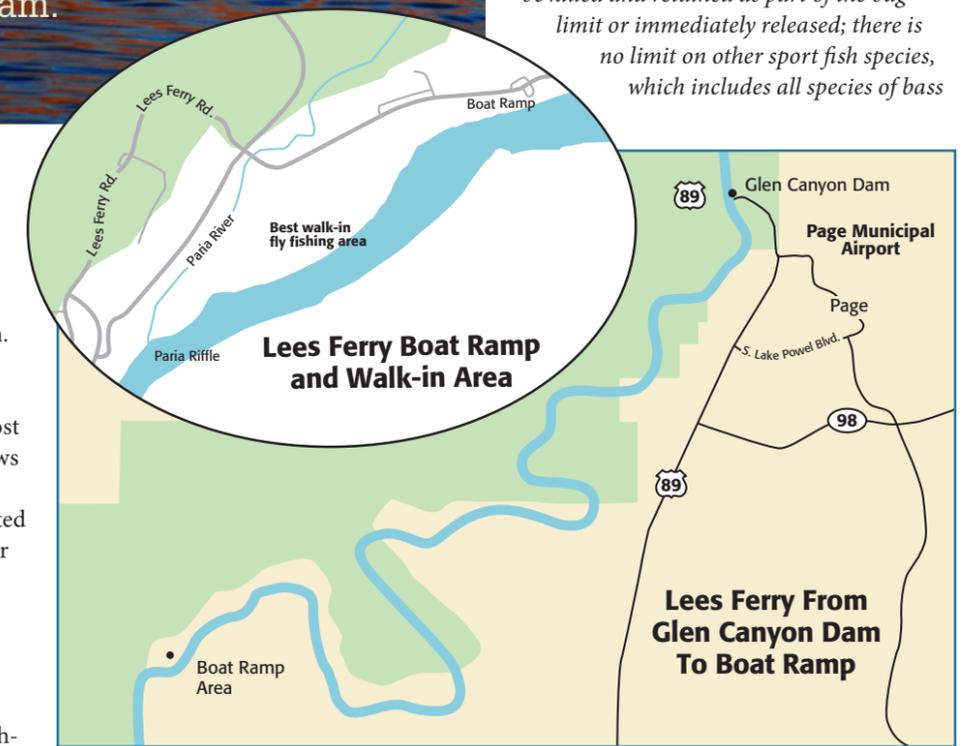
You need an Arizona fishing license and trout stamp before you wet your line. It is also important to know the fishing regulations, because they vary depending on what part of the river you are fishing. Current regulations from Glen Canyon Dam to the Paria riffle are:

Rainbow trout over 14 inches may not be possessed. The limit is four rainbow trout per day and eight rainbow trout in possession; artificial fly and lure only; barbless hooks only. Rainbow trout taken from this portion of the Colorado River shall be killed and retained as part of the bag limit or immediately released; there is no limit on other sport fish species, which includes all species of bass

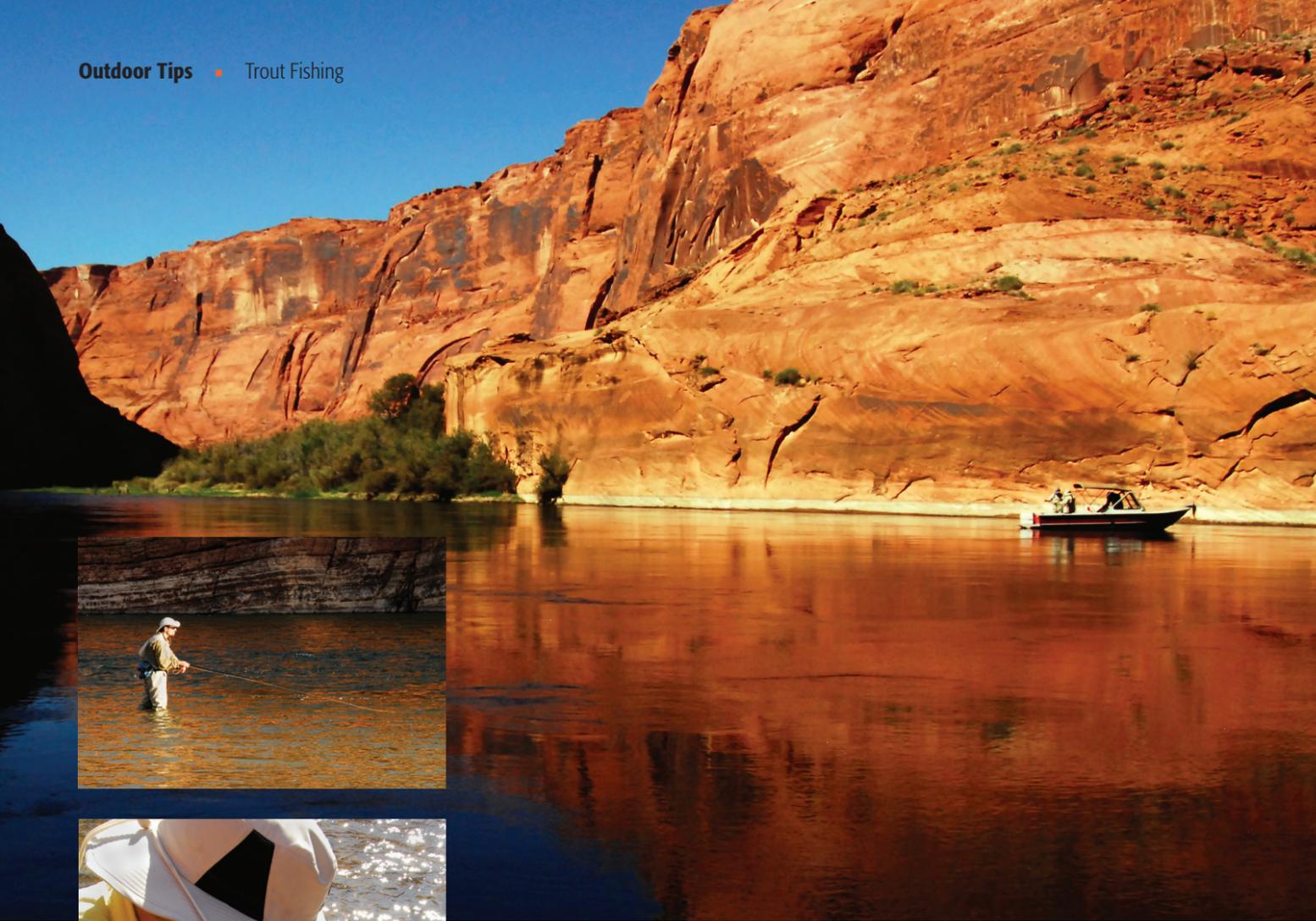
Prior to 1991, the Glen Canyon Dam flow regime was characterized by extreme fluctuation, which prevented or limited natural fish reproduction. Since 1995, the dam has produced modified low fluctuating flows intended to reduce flow variation. Other experimental flows have been tried, most notably the high-flow experiments conducted in 1996, 2004 and 2008. The most recent high-flow experiment, and high flows in 2011 following a very high snow pack in the upper Colorado River basin, have created a quality food base and ideal conditions for trout production.

HOW TO GET THERE AND WHAT YOU NEED

Lees Ferry is only a half-day's drive from Phoenix. There are multiple options for fishing it, but advance planning is a must. First, figure out how long a trip to take. Depending on where you come from, you can make



Lees Ferry in northern Arizona is accessed from the south via U.S. Highway 89 and 89A. There is walk-in fishing just below the Lees Ferry boat ramp, or anglers can bring their own boat or hire a guide.



Based on 2011 angler survey data, fishermen catch nearly twice as many fish when hiring a guide as when going it alone.

The rainbow trout are Lees Ferry's star attraction, but even non-anglers enjoy the area's spectacular red-rock scenery.

(including sunfish and stripers), all species of catfish, all species of trout other than rainbow trout, and walleye.

From the beginning of the Paria riffle to Navajo Bridge, the regulations change:

The limit is six rainbow trout per day and eight rainbow trout in possession. Rainbow trout taken from this portion of the Colorado River shall be killed and retained as part of the bag limit or immediately released; there is no limit on other sport fish species, which includes all species of bass (including sunfish and stripers), all species of catfish, all species of trout other than rainbow trout, and walleye.

Fly-fishing and spin-fishing are both good options, and you will likely succeed using either technique. Fluctuating flows caused by dam operations and seasonal hatch by various aquatic insects make checking the weekly Fishing Report (www.

azgfd.gov/FishingReport) or signing up to receive weekly updates (www.azgfd.gov/signup) a must.

FISHING THE FERRY

There are three options for fishing the Ferry: use the walk-in area, hire a guide or take a boat out on your own.

Option 1. Walk-in area

This is a great option for beginning and advanced anglers who do not have a boat. Most of the walk-in fishing is just below the Lees Ferry boat ramp and runs nearly a mile and a half downstream, just beyond where the Paria River joins the Colorado.

Walking in is an inexpensive alternative and will give you a taste of what Lees Ferry is like. You can park alongside the road leading to Lees Ferry or in the parking lot at the boat ramp. Remember to bring waders, as the water is very cold. Some

The History of This Outstanding Fishery

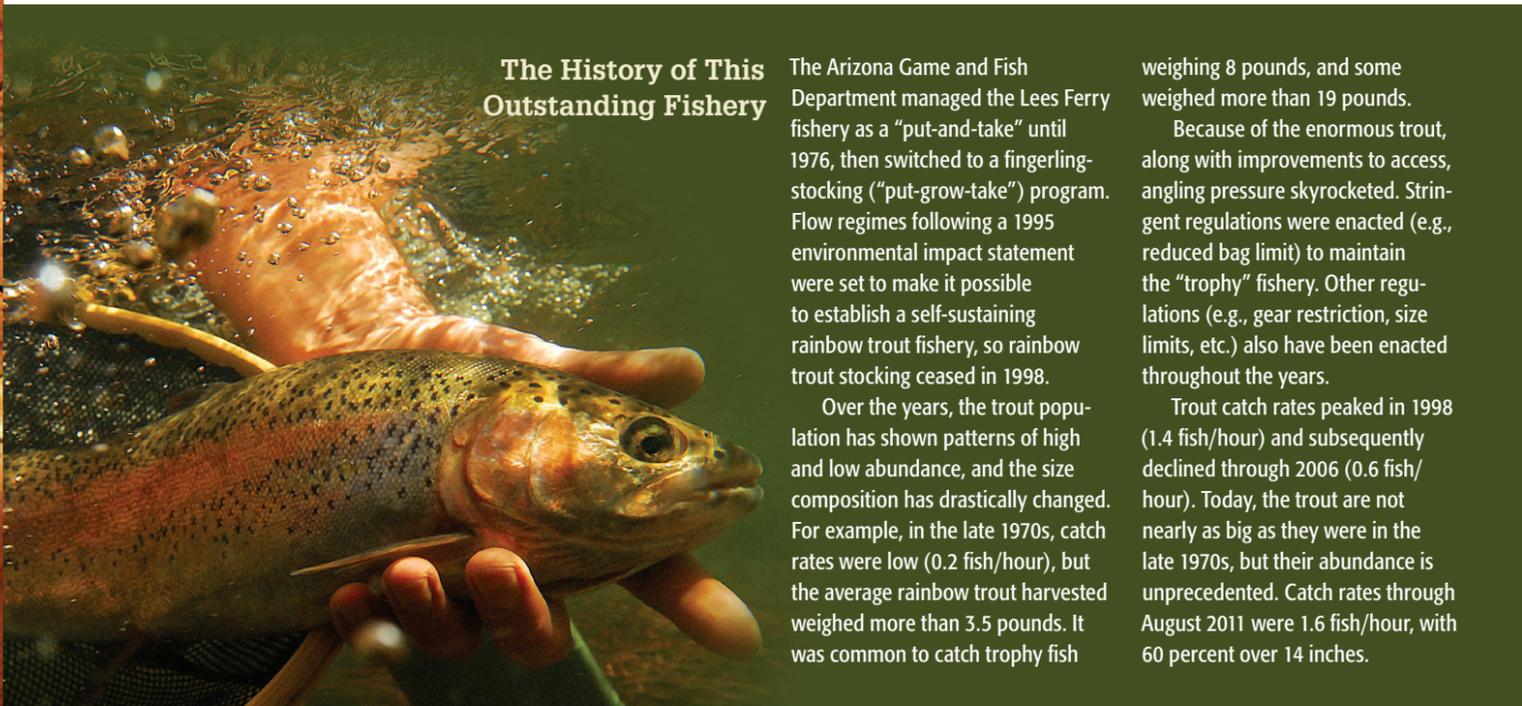
The Arizona Game and Fish Department managed the Lees Ferry fishery as a "put-and-take" until 1976, then switched to a fingerling-stocking ("put-grow-take") program. Flow regimes following a 1995 environmental impact statement were set to make it possible to establish a self-sustaining rainbow trout fishery, so rainbow trout stocking ceased in 1998.

Over the years, the trout population has shown patterns of high and low abundance, and the size composition has drastically changed. For example, in the late 1970s, catch rates were low (0.2 fish/hour), but the average rainbow trout harvested weighed more than 3.5 pounds. It was common to catch trophy fish

weighing 8 pounds, and some weighed more than 19 pounds.

Because of the enormous trout, along with improvements to access, angling pressure skyrocketed. Stringent regulations were enacted (e.g., reduced bag limit) to maintain the "trophy" fishery. Other regulations (e.g., gear restriction, size limits, etc.) also have been enacted throughout the years.

Trout catch rates peaked in 1998 (1.4 fish/hour) and subsequently declined through 2006 (0.6 fish/hour). Today, the trout are not nearly as big as they were in the late 1970s, but their abundance is unprecedented. Catch rates through August 2011 were 1.6 fish/hour, with 60 percent over 14 inches.



of the more popular walk-in spots for fly-fishermen are just below the boat ramp in the cobbles. Spin-fishermen like the sandy-rocky shoreline near the Paria riffle.

Up for a short hike? Cathedral Wash is a beautiful slot canyon that runs about 1.5 miles from near the top of the Lees Ferry road down to the river. If you decide to hike it, bring a friend, because certain parts can be difficult, but once you reach the river, you will likely have the place to yourself. Just remember regulations are different above and below the Paria riffle.

Option 2. Guide services

There are several excellent fishing-guide services at Lees Ferry to choose from. Many of the guides have fished there for decades, and know the area very well. In fact, based on 2011 angler survey data, fishermen catch nearly twice as many fish when hiring a guide as when going it alone. The guides are experts who know when to use certain fly patterns or spinning lures, where to go and how to catch fish.

If you are interested in learning from an expert and having a successful trip, they are happy to help. It is their job to put you in the best possible situation to catch fish, but it is ultimately up to you to hook them! Prices vary based on the number of anglers; how-

ever, expect to pay between \$375 and \$425 for two anglers and a full day of fishing.

Option 3. Bring your own boat

Boat anglers have the option of fishing from the boat or anchoring up and wading. Both can offer fine opportunities to catch fish. Look for flowing water over cobble bars, known as riffles. These areas are preferred by many anglers, and often produce good numbers of fish. Drift fishing is also a great option, and you can cover a lot of area.

The Glen Canyon National Recreation Area provides a boat ramp and ample parking that allow you to drop your boat in. It is recommended that you use a minimum of 25 horsepower to navigate the flowing water, but larger engines will prove more effective. The main thing is to avoid the many rock outcroppings, cobble bars and shallow areas in the river. Low water levels amplify these hazards. Prop Bar, near river-mile -12 (yes, river miles from Glen Canyon Dam to the ramp are negative numbers), gets its name for a reason.

Canoes, kayaks and rafts also can be used. Services are available to transport your boat and gear to the top of Lees Ferry, from which you can float back to the ramp at a leisurely pace. When using any type of boat, use caution and check weather condi-

tions, as it can become very windy.

Preparation is key: Bring plenty of gas (if using a motorboat), food and water.

One of the best aspects of Lees Ferry is the available camping areas along the river that also have restrooms. Please only camp in designated camping spots. These are first come, first served, and do not currently require permits.

GREAT FISHING!

Fishing at Lees Ferry is a unique experience for anglers of all ages to enjoy. Angler surveys conducted by Arizona Game and Fish biologists show that catch rates in 2011 were as high as they have ever been. This trend is expected to continue for the next year or two. In fact, 93 percent of anglers caught at least one fish during their trip. There also has been talk of 100-fish days. The incredible rainbow trout fishing and unrivaled scenery have established this fishery as one of the best in the nation. Enjoy Lees Ferry, be careful, and as always — keep your lines tight! 🎣

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