

Bull Trout

It's the water that captures me. It enchants. I cannot look away. I walk along the river, six-weight rod in hand. An observer might wonder what has happened to this wandering soul, who walks the river cobble in his wading shoes, staring at the water as if struck daft by the big, wild country, the crystal river, the grizzly tracks on the sandbars.

Red, yellow, aquamarine, and white—the submerged river rocks are a crayon box of colors. The water revealing the multihued substrate far below is so clear I am tempted to lie face down on the riverbank and dunk my head in its chill and just drink until I cannot swallow another drop.

Then, in a pool that goes from crystal to aqua to midnight, deep down there in the depth, it fins. All two and a half feet of it. Just hanging there in that deep hole. My eyes adjust, sweeping away all else until I can see it clearly, not just a shape as long as my thigh, but a shape that is a fish. I see fins edged with white, and the black back. It's alone.

I have been swinging big streamers all day, walking the cobble, stopping at likely bends in the river. It's more like hunting than fishing.

There is only one river in Montana where you can legally hunt for bull trout, and only for a short time each summer. On the South Fork of the Flathead, deep in the Bob Marshall Wilderness, miles from civilization, bull trout numbers are healthy enough, and anglers few enough, to allow this.

Listed as threatened nationwide more than 20 years ago, bull trout require something that is getting rarer and rarer these days: cold, clean water in consistent abundance. Its historic habitat has been logged, burned, mined, polluted, dammed, and diverted. But here on the South Fork, the habitat is protected by thousands of acres of wilderness, the water cold and obviously clean, and the fish are here. Never many,

MY SALMONID SEARCH

An angler's quest to catch every one of Montana's nine native coldwater species.

BY TOM REED
ART BY STAN FELLOWS

though. Sometimes only a single large bull in a pool.

As before, this fish is having nothing to do with me. For three days it has been like this. Walk and stalk. Find and fail.

But tonight, for the first time this trip, I'm staying out later, hunting in the witching hour.

That, it turns out, is the secret. A mile below camp, in the fading light of the day, I finally feel a fish take my streamer.

The bull fights deep and strong, using the current. But I pressure it, trusting the tippet, the rod. Then it is by my side, a dark shadow without color in the twilight. I kneel in the shallows, one hand cradling the bull trout's belly, the other around the base of its tail. The fish never leaves the water, and, after removing the hook, I gently hold it there for several minutes until it regains its strength and swims off. I return

to camp in the dark, guided by my headlamp, like a successful elk hunter. I'm tired and sore, and by the light of the campfire I tell my comrades the story of the hunt, of what finally worked.

Without realizing it, I have found myself on a quest: Catch all of Montana's native salmonids from native water. I did this accidentally at first, but then purposefully as the goal became clear. Montana is home to 15 salmonids. Nine are native, fish that were swimming here when mammoths and short-faced bears still roamed this land. I wanted to taste just a bit of what it was like "back then." To catch a native fish in its native water is to catch a bit of history.

Sadly, too, it is an increasingly rare experience. Habitat loss, drought, invasive and non-native fish species stocked intentionally and unintentionally, global warming—it's the same old mantra that threatens native coldwater populations across the country.

Yet some special places still hold these special fish. Simply being there is more than half of it.

Arctic Grayling

I'm standing in the middle of the Big Hole River in August. Spruce moths flutter down from the conifers along the shore, landing on the shallow, cold water all around me. The river surface is dappled by Arctic grayling sipping moths struggling in the surface film.

These sail-fin beauties dart and dash beneath the surface, looking like underwater versions of the violet-backed cliff swallows that do the same in the air above the river. They snatch those very same spruce moths, birds and fish mirror images of each other.

These days fluvial (river) grayling are even more scarce than bull trout. Here on the Big Hole where—thanks to collaboration among ranchers, anglers, and others—the water stays cold and flows remain sufficient, a significant native population remains.



As I bend to the water to gently one-hand what is probably my 20th eight-inch grayling of the day, I think about the rare experience of catching rare fish in native water. The fluvial grayling is at extremely high risk of disappearing from the lower 48 states. It's legal to fish for them on the Big Hole, but I think about that fragility and stop fishing. I don't need to catch any more.

Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout

Most of the cutthroat trout that anglers catch across so much of the West aren't actually natives. They are Yellowstone cutthroats, raised and distributed from stock originally from Yellowstone Lake in Yellowstone National Park. As was the case with elk, the park held the last great stronghold of this cutthroat subspecies, which became the preferred "natives" stocked by state agencies. But today, on a stream draining into the park's famous Slough Creek, I'm finally catching Yellowstone cutthroats in their native range.

As with other natives, one cannot separate the land, the drainage, or the water from the fish themselves. Yellowstone cutthroats whisper of grizzly bears on high whitebark pine slopes, wolf tracks on a sandy trail. The sides of this yellow-slabbed fish are peppered as if rolled in cinders of the great volcanoes that made this land. Downstream in Slough Creek, anglers are no doubt catching bigger fish than my friend and I are in this tributary. But we are up here with the eagles and the grizzlies. We spent half a day riding horseback to this spot through a brush-choked, barely perceptible route, in all likelihood last used at least half a century ago. We finally found a good trail to follow for the remainder of our camping trip, and now we're catching these lovely native trout. All is right with the world.

Mountain Whitefish

Being a Western kid, raised on public land and tanned beneath a wide sky, I've caught my share of mountain whitefish, usually when

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fishing rivers for trout. Whitefish are delicious when smoked and are good fighters, too.

Mountain whitefish live in clear, cold rivers in the state's western half. Usually they take a nymph drifted naturally in the current. But once, at the mouth of Big Creek on the Yellowstone River, I caught a trophy whitefish over 20 inches on a 'hopper fly. They are a symbol of the Wild West, a pure native fish that evolved side-by-side in Montana with westslope cutthroats and have far more business swimming in a Western river than newcomers like German browns, Eastern brookies, and Pacific Northwestern rainbows.

Yes, whitefish are drab colored and slimy and have a face only a mother could love. But for me and most other trout anglers, they have saved many an otherwise fishless day. What's more, because they need clean, cold rivers to survive, mountain whitefish can be indicators of water quality. Populations appear down in some rivers. That has me and many others worried—not only about this true-blue native Westerner, but also about all the other fish—native and not—that swim where the mountain whitefish lives.

Westslope Cutthroat Trout

Except for the mountain whitefish, Montana's most widespread native is the westslope cutthroat. It's also a favorite of mine.

The westslope thrives in waters running through the larch forests of the Flathead and Seeley-Swan and the dry sagebrush parks of southwestern Montana, and in the flinty streams along the Rocky Mountain Front. It thrives in varied landscapes, and so do I.

Sadly, pure-strain westslope cutthroats today live in less than 10 percent of their native range. Populations declined after relentless logging and hard-rock mining degraded streams, while overfishing by anglers denuded populations. The combined toll prompted stocking programs of other trout species across the cutthroat's range in the early 20th century. Competition from and hybridization with these non-native rainbow, brown, and brook trout further dimmed their prospects.

My home place for westslopes is a tiny stream in Madison County beneath big peaks that remind me of Alaska. There's a trail here, but the stream is so small that few people stop along the banks to cast into its tiny pools. Many don't even know the creek exists.

In late summer it actually dries up downstream. But walk up the drainage for a mile or two, and you'll start to see more and more water. When you cross the creek for the sixth time, you might start to see small fish dart in the shallows. From here on upstream, find a pool, part the willows, and carefully dap a dry fly onto the surface. Almost surely a west-

slope will take it. The fish will be hungry because the summers here are short. Cutthroats in this creek spend more than half the year under a rime of ice and snow in this tall country. There's a wilted old cabin along the creek's banks, the dwelling of a trapper or prospector. He's gone now, but offspring of fish that were here remain.

Columbia River Redband Trout

Years ago I worked for the legendary hunting and fishing guide Tim Linehan guiding ruffed grouse and dusky grouse hunters behind my setters. Today, Tim and I are in the deepest woods imaginable looking for a tiny native trout called the redband. It looks a lot like a rainbow, but unlike a rainbow, it's native to northwestern Montana and now is found here only in the Yaak Valley.

When Linehan left his native New Hampshire several decades ago and found himself in Montana, he was immediately drawn to forests similar

to those of his home. Northwestern Montana's Yaak country drips with water. In the fall, the climate requires thick wool and rubber boots. In the summer, like now, it's a bit warmer, but still wet. The forests are dense. As someone raised in open sagebrush country, I find it claustrophobic.

But then Tim and I see up ahead a tiny stream lit by a shaft of sunlight, like something out of a fairy tale. In a golden pool surrounded by larch and hemlock and other greenery unlike what you find in most of Montana, swims a little fish left over from the retreat of the great ice sheets. It's the redband trout, a pocket comb-size relative of the mighty steelhead that thousands of years ago swam up into this region during annual spawning runs from the Pacific.

For decades, Montana stocked coastal rainbow trout from California stocks in streams containing native redbands. The two species hybridized, making genetically pure redbands increasingly rare. This stream, with barriers downstream that prevent rainbows that aren't redbands from moving upstream, is one of the few where the pure-strain natives exist.

Kneeling to stay hidden, and with only a few feet to backcast without snagging the trees behind me, I manage to sling a tiny Adams dry fly onto the water surface. The current quickly grabs my floating line, dragging the fly. I try again, and this time the Adams floats without drag just long enough for a fish to sip it. I gently lift and the trout is on, dancing against my ultralight rod. Soon I have my first native redband in hand. Tim claps me on the back, and we sit back in the shade of these deep woods, happy to be in such a magical place.

Lake Trout

When the great ice sheets retreated from this region, they stalled just enough in a few places to leave a nice lake or two. Four of those lakes—two in Glacier National Park

and two in southwestern Montana's Centennial Valley—are the only waters in Montana where lake trout are native.

On one of the Centennial Valley lakes, in a strong tailwind, I am trying to slow the boat enough to get a good drift for trolling. We've been fishing all day, going from one end of the lake to the other, again and again, trolling deep. Somewhere down there is a lake trout, I promise my partner. She sits in the bow, patiently dealing with the kids, a spinning rod with 100 feet of line out, and my boating skills in this wind. We make another circle. Once, a rod tip dips down, but when we lift up, there is nothing there. Maybe the lure just ticked bottom.

Lake trout have been stocked legally in several large, deep lakes and reservoirs, like Flathead and Fort Peck. They were also illegally stocked in Yellowstone Lake in Yellowstone National Park, where they have devastated the native Yellowstone cutthroat trout population. Here on this lake, where the fish have always been, I want to catch one badly enough to row all day. At the boat dock at day's end, I tell the lodge manager what we are doing. Ah, he says, you are here at the wrong time. Come back in the spring right after ice-out, when they are up in the shallows and much easier to catch. Now he tells me.

Pygmy Whitefish and Lake Whitefish

These last two native salmonids have also eluded me. I fished for pygmy whitefish for hours in a river where I'd heard they swim. I later learned that these rare, five-inch cousins of the mountain whitefish live in deep, cold lakes. No wonder I whiffed.

Then there's the lake whitefish. I recently learned that these larger cousins of mountain and pygmy whitefish are native only to two lakes—St. Mary and Upper Waterton—found in the small portion of the Saskatchewan River watershed that dips into Montana at the northeastern corner of Glacier National Park. Apparently they can be caught from the shore of St. Mary at the lake's outlet using dry flies, or small spoons with spinning gear.

Look for me there this summer. 🐟

