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## SPORTS

# In Montana, Cutthroat Trout Are Hungry Trout

By CHRIS SANTELLA APRIL 8, 2014

WEST GLACIER, Mont. — When “A River Runs Through It” was released 21 years ago, moviegoers who had never seen a fly rod descended upon tackle shops. Once outfitted, they made a beeline to Montana for a chance to cast to oversize brown and rainbows like those Brad Pitt seemed to land on every other cast. Those anglers probably did not realize that like themselves, the browns and rainbows were relatively recent arrivals, shouldering into the historical domain of Montana’s state fish.

Westslope cutthroat trout, or cutts, are among western Montana’s original salmonid inhabitants; more celebrated species like rainbow, brown and brook trout were introduced to the state in the late 1800s, at least in part because settlers from the East were accustomed to fishing for them. Westslopes were first described by Captain Meriwether Lewis after a member of Lewis and Clark’s expedition, Silas Goodrich, caught several specimens in the Missouri River below the site of the present-day town of Great Falls in June 1805.

In the vernacular of the times, Lewis wrote: “These trout are from 16 to 23 inches in length, precisely resemble our mountain or speckled trout in form and the position of their fins, but the specks on these are of a deep black instead of the red or gold colour of those common in the U.’ States. These are furnished long sharp teeth on the pallet and tongue and have generally a small dash of red on each side behind the front ventral fins; the flesh is of a pale yellowish red or, when in good order, of a rose red.”

Lewis vividly captured the cutthroat’s beauty. Although genetic markers are the only true distinguishing feature for trout species, westslopes (as well as

the other 13 subspecies of cutthroat) can generally be identified by the “small dash of red” beneath their jaws. (In a nod to the expedition’s discovery, westslopes are formally recognized as *Oncorhynchus clarkii lewisi*.)

“Westslope cutthroat are a big part of Montana’s cultural heritage,” said Bruce Farling, the executive director of Montana Trout Unlimited. “The big migratory fish that moved from lakes to rivers were an important food source for Native American peoples as well as early settlers. From a sporting perspective, they have a number of appeals. Not only are they beautiful fish, but they’re fun and family friendly. If you start a new angler with brown trout, which are harder to catch, they might not stick with it. Cutts are willing. Plus, there’s the satisfaction of connecting with the native fish that have been here and evolved through the millennia.”

Westslope cutts’ eagerness to take a host of dry flies has earned them a soft spot in many anglers’ hearts. They can be a great ego boost after casting to trout that refuse the tiniest, most delicately presented fly patterns.

“Some people say that cutts are dumb, but they’re actually quite smart,” Farling said. “They’ve evolved at the margins of ice, in fairly sterile rivers where there isn’t a lot of food. If something that looks like food floats by, they’re going to hammer it. It’s a survival trait that makes cutts easier to catch.”

Mike Cooney, the lead guide with Glacier Anglers, based in West Glacier, added: “You really don’t need to worry about matching the hatch when you’re fishing for cutts. I’ve had trips where I’ve gone through every fly in my box trying to find one that wouldn’t work.”

Modern times have been hard on westslopes, which require cold, clean water to thrive. Habitat degradation — in part from poor logging, grazing and mining practices — has compromised some cutthroat waters.

“The biggest threat to genetically pure westslope cutthroat is hybridization with rainbows,” said Wade Fredenberg, a fishery biologist with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, based in Kalispell. “People like to catch rainbows, as they grow larger than the cutts. But when the rainbows breed with the native cutts, the resulting progeny” — called cutt-bows — “are not as well adapted to the ecosystem, and less likely to survive in the long run. Having rainbows and cutt-bows in these rivers is like finding feral pigs instead of

mountain goats as you drive the Going-to-the-Sun Road in Glacier.”

Although no exact numbers are available, populations of genetically pure westslopes are diminishing and occupy a minute fraction of their historical range.

One stronghold of westslopes is the Middle Fork of the Flathead River, a serpentine stream that glides through the Great Bear Wilderness along the southwest border of Glacier National Park. The Middle Fork fulfills the promise that the phrase “Montana trout fishing” holds: unbelievably clear water; jaw-dropping scenery, with stands of lodgepole pine extending thousands of feet up glacier-carved valleys; abundant, free-rising cutts; and few people. Glacier Anglers leads four-day trips on the river’s wilderness section south of Bear Creek. Anglers must hike four miles to reach the Middle Fork; rafts and provisions are brought in via mule train.

Whether I cast Chernobyl ants into the riffles, Stimulators against granite walls bordering deep pools or Elk Hair Caddis in the seams of faster runs, the fish were often ready. Most I caught were small by Montana standards, 10 inches to 12 inches, though I found several eclipsing 18 inches. All were native, with a bloodline going back to the fish that Silas Goodrich found below the falls two centuries ago.

“On the Middle Fork, a competent angler can expect to catch and release 40 to 50 fish on an average day,” Cooney said. “I once had a client land 138 in one outing.”

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