

The Clearwater valley's native fishery is truly world class

By Jay Kolbe

The ice is quickly coming off the chain of lakes and, given the scant winter snow pack, it won't be long until our rivers and creeks will begin to recede and clear. For many of us at this time of year, thoughts turn to tuning up the boat motor or trying to find the fly box and wading shoes buried beneath the hunting gear unceremoniously piled in the garage last fall.

And why not? I can think of nowhere else in the state where an angler has such a variety of world class fishing opportunities within a half hour of home. Whether its double hauling a golden stonefly on the Clearwater, roll casting a nymph on a spring creek, trolling deep on the chain of lakes, or watching bobbers with the kids on Saturday afternoon, our valley's waters offers something for everyone. In all, Montanans spend over 25,000 angler days on the Clearwater's lakes and streams.

With all this right in our back yard, it's easy to overlook how unique our fishery really is. The following table includes a partial list of fish commonly found in the watershed. You'll notice there are roughly equal numbers of native and non-native species and therein lies the rub—as unique as the Clearwater is hydrologically, what makes our fishery nationally important is not the presence of those introduced sport fish but the relative health of our native fish populations.

Although there remain healthy populations of both bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout in many parts of the Clearwater drainage, this is not the case elsewhere. Both are considered *species of special concern* by the state of Montana and the bull trout is listed as *Threatened* under the federal Endangered Species Act. Westslope cutthroat trout have disappeared from over 30% of their historic range. Because cutthroat readily interbreed with introduced trout where the species overlap, genetically pure stocks are especially imperiled. Today only 10% of occupied westslope cutthroat habitat supports genetically pure fish stocks, some of those pure populations occur here in our valley.

Bull trout are truly spectacular fishes—they are long lived and generally don't even begin to breed until age five. They're also large, commonly growing to over 3 ft. in length and weighing over 20 lbs. Bull trout have declined dramatically in both range and number in recent years for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is their complex life history and specific habitat requirements.

Some of the Clearwater's bull trout are residents, spending their entire lives in a single stream. Other bull trout have migratory life histories, either living in major rivers as sub-adults and adults and then migrating into smaller tributaries to spawn (fluvial) or living in lakes as sub-adult and adults and migrating into tributaries to spawn (adfluvial). Some migratory bull trout travel over 150 river miles to spawn in the fall.

Bull trout are also extremely sensitive to changes in water temperature and water quality. Adult bull trout require cold water temperatures, clean cobble/boulder substrates, and overhead cover. Spawning redds (a trout's "nest") are only constructed in stream reaches where upwelling ground water is available to aerate the buried eggs. Siltation caused by poor land and wetland management, easily smothers eggs and can kill fry before they mature.

Competition with introduced species, particularly northern pike, can be especially harmful. Pike are now well established in the Clearwater (I have it on good authority that FWP fish biologists caught a 28 pounder while sampling Lake Inez this week) and as much as I enjoy stalking hen pike in the spawning shallows with a snorkel and spear, the damage they're doing to our native fishery is undeniable.

Although catching and killing a bull trout is the legal equivalent of, say, shooting a grizzly bear or bald eagle, it is disturbingly common. For example, at least 20% of the bull trout fitted with radio transmitters in 2006 here in the Clearwater drainage were poached by anglers within 6 months. Not all of these bulls are killed intentionally—FWP has some great trout ID pictures and description in the fishing regulations. If you happen to catch one, carefully remove it from your line and turn it loose. The opportunity to see a mature bull is one of the things that makes this valley special.

FWP is working hard this year to learn more about our native fishery. It's completing a 2 year project to survey all lakes and streams in the valley and is evaluating the fish barriers and dams currently in place on the Clearwater to see whether they are still needed and, if so, how they might be modified to better accommodate native fish passage. Bull trout research will continue and this new data will allow FWP and others to better plan conservation and restoration projects designed to ensure our native trout will be here for future generations to enjoy.

Species composition in major lakes and streams throughout the Clearwater River Drainage (MT FWP).

Native Fishes	Exotic (Introduces) Fishes
Bull trout (<i>Salvelinus confluentus</i>)	Brook trout (<i>Salvelinus fontinalis</i>)
Largescale sucker (<i>Catostomus macrocheilus</i>)	Brown trout (<i>Salmo trutta</i>)
Longnose sucker (<i>Catostomus catostomus</i>)	Kokanee (<i>Oncorhynchus nerka</i>)
Mountain whitefish (<i>Prosopium williamsoni</i>)	Largemouth bass (<i>Micropterus salmoides</i>)
Northern pikeminnow (<i>Ptychocheilus oregonensis</i>)	Northern pike (<i>Esox lucius</i>)
Peamouth (<i>Mylocheilus caurinus</i>)	Pumpkinseed (<i>Lepomis gibbosus</i>)
Redside shiner (<i>Richardsonius balteatus</i>)	Rainbow trout (<i>Oncorhynchus mykiss</i>)
Westslope cutthroat trout (<i>Oncorhynchus clarki lewisi</i>)	Yellow perch (<i>Perca flavescens</i>)
Longnose dace	Brook stickleback
Sculpin spp	Central mudminnow



A mature bull trout recently fitted with a radio transmitter by FWP fisheries biologists. This research will give us a window into this rare species' complex life history.

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