

Around the Northwest

News, Views, and Piscatorial Pursuits



PHOTO BY STEVE MAEDER

Blackfoot River, MT

By Michael Hamilton

In between oar strokes, Dan Shepherd, managing partner of Missoula's Grizzly Hackle Fly Shop, (406) 721-8996, www.grizzlyhackle.com, told me and my fishing partner, Steve Maeder, that the ongoing cleanup of Blackfoot River tributaries and the 2010 removal of the Milltown Dam, at the confluence of the Clark Fork and the Blackfoot River, have resulted in the redistribution of native species like bull trout and westslope cutthroat throughout the river.

As if on cue, my streamer disappeared in a swirl. "It's a nice cutthroat," I remarked somewhat indifferently. "Wait a minute. Holy crap, there's a huge bull trout trying to eat it!"

What happened next was pure pandemonium. With the cutthroat locked in its jaws, the bull trout took off across the pool, zigzagging like a sidewinder, charging for the cover of a logjam. Instead of going under the wood, the bully turned and ran right back at me. "Strip, strip!" yelled Shepherd. Tight line, less current, and a deep pool allowed me to coax the finned freight train to the net.

Shepherd reached over and netted the bull trout along with the 16-inch cutthroat now lodged halfway down its kidnapper's throat. "Well, that's a first," I exclaimed. And what I thought would happen once in a lifetime—netting a big bull trout with a confused cutt in its vise grip—occurred three more times, twice for me and once for Maeder, as we floated from River Junction, where the North Fork meets the main stem, through the high craggy canyon walls of pink



PHOTO BY STEVE MAEDER

and gray sandstone to the Russell Gates take-out. Add a brown more than 23 inches long and several native cutthroat to the net and it was a memorable day of streamer fishing in late October.

Arguably the most beautiful freestone river in Montana, the Blackfoot is undergoing a metamorphosis. Public agencies, nonprofits, private ranchers, and whole communities have joined together to help conserve, restore, and renew this blue-ribbon trout stream from top to bottom. For example, at the snow- and spring-fed headwaters, high up along the Continental Divide near Rogers Pass, about 20 miles east of Lincoln, the Mike Horse Mine is finally being cleaned up. "Every day, weather permitting, between 2,000 and 3,000 of the more than 800,000 cubic yards of mine wastes are hauled out to the

Upper Blackfoot Mining Complex Repository,” says Shellie Haaland, construction manager with Montana’s Department of Environmental Quality. A 1975 blowout of Mike Horse Dam sent a toxic stew of heavy metals downstream, killing aquatic life for miles. Haaland says removal and remediation efforts will take four years, or until “the water runs clean again.”

Throughout the rest of the river corridor, science, conservation, and boots-on-the-ground volunteers have achieved a remarkable slate of accomplishments. “Native fish are the real winners,” notes Ron Pierce, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) biologist. Much of Pierce’s work focuses on restoring the 50-plus tributaries that feed the Blackfoot River. With the help of the Big Blackfoot Chapter of Trout Unlimited (BBCTU), Pierce has spearheaded the removal of more than 600 miles of fish-passage barriers, renewed 2,900 acres of wetlands, installed 26 fish screens, and restored over 100 miles of in-stream habitat and 88 miles of riparian habitats along 41 streams that feed the Blackfoot.

“Native trout numbers have increased in the middle Blackfoot River nearly 800 percent since restoration efforts began,” says Ryen Neudecker, executive director of BBCTU. At the Blackfoot’s mouth, says FWP senior biologist David Schmetterling, native fish such as bull trout and westslope cutthroat, along with rainbows and some browns, began migrating upriver soon after the Milltown Dam was removed. “Right off the bat, these fish that had been trapped below the dam sensed their fidelity to historic spawning grounds in tributaries in the Blackfoot, and up they went. Pretty remarkable,” he says.

Standing at the take-out, after an unforgettable day of fishing, Shepherd remarked, “Every time I float this river I am reminded of a line from Norman Maclean’s novella.”

“What’s that?” we asked.

“Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it.”