

Kootenay River Bull Trout, British Columbia, 2020

By Michael Hamilton



Canadian Guide Curtis Lemay Kootenay River Bull Trout

photo: Michael Hamilton

I wasn't ready for what happened next. Looking back, I'm not sure I would be again. Surprised, startled, a bit confused, I watched a small fish hurtle out of the river, skitter along a rock wall, then fall back into a deep pool. "What the heck was that?" I exclaimed. Behind me, guide Curtis Lamey, [www. freestoneflyangler.com](http://www.freestoneflyangler.com), cut the engine and whispered back, "They're here."

Two hours before, we were racing up the gin-clear waters of the upper eastern reaches of the Kootenay River, above the put-in at the logging berg of Canal Flats. Beyond thick stands of golden-hued tamaracks and aspen that filled the valley floor, the jagged granite walls of the Canadian Rockies loomed. The icy October wind felt like the edge of a sharp knife against my face. Weaving left, cutting hard right, to avoid giant root balls, log jams, and exposed boulders, Lamey, at just the right moment, would gun his jet sled full throttle and rocket up through a narrow slot to find the main channel again. Lured by Lamey's stories of targeting 15-pound plus bull trout on big streamers, I had booked a mid-October guide trip with a bit of trepidation and a lot of excitement.

On day one, Lamey pulled out a rodent-size mass of gold tinsel from his box and tied it on a fly at least a foot long. I had to laugh. "You want me to cast or, better yet, chuck this Christmas tree decoration?" He replied with a smile, reminding me, "These fish are apex predators, sporting prehistoric-looking jaws and boasting voracious appetites. Most are on a spawning migration from Lake Koochanusa that coincides with the fall run of kokanee salmon." Lamey explained that a big bull trout can swallow an 18-inch kokanee, and also grow fat on whitefish, sculpins, and small trout. "Your streamer will make a fine meal," he assured me. "You just have to hold on."

Over the next two days, I would discover that casting wasn't my biggest challenge. Finding the fish was. When the bulls are on the move in their upstream migration or hunkered down in deep pools, they contract a case of lock jaw. Postspawn it's a different story. "The bulls need to gain energy and

mass for their long journey back downstream to Lake Kooconusa. The dead and dying kokanee are their main meal. This is when they will hole up. We just need to find the right spot,” explained Curtis.

Late in the morning of day two, it all came together. Lamey ran the jet boat to the top end of a long, deep run littered with gnarly root balls, with sheer drop-offs into deep holes, and giant submerged boulders. He cut the engine and jumped on the oars. I used the water behind me to load my 8-weight and lobbed the bulky streamer upstream, tight to the bank. Up from the bottom, ghostlike, two giants charged to inhale my flashy imitation. “Set,” yelled Lamey. I strip set hard, twice, and my line went tight; the slack line at my feet raced out through my fingers. Lamey rowed toward shore.

Here’s where it gets weird. As the bull trout bulldogged downriver, 20 others, maybe more, some huge, some small, raced out from deep cover, charging around the hooked fish. It was chaos. It was crazy. And then they were gone. In the net, a huge hooked kype, a white belly tinged with yellow and red, and pale olive spotted flanks marked the trophy-size male. We guessed the bull was at least 16 pounds and about 3 feet long. We repeated this scene several more times, and by the end of that day I had landed 10 huge bulls and lost many more.

The 485-mile Kootenay River flows from its headwaters in southeastern British Columbia into northwestern Montana, then west into Idaho, and back again into British Columbia, where it joins the Columbia River at the city of Castlegar. The fishing is best in April–May before runoff and then again in October–November when the glacier-fed stream runs clear. As a lifelong fly fisher, I will leave you with one certainty: when you hook one of these beasts, you’re in for a fight few other freshwater fish can match.

