



Bitterroot River, MT

Confronting Cutthroat

By Joshua Bergan

Few anglers would call Montana's Bitterroot River the world's—or even the state's—sexiest trout stream. But it is, quietly, one of the West's strongest producers of native cutthroat trout, 2-foot brown trout, and intense insect hatches. Anglers who love the Bitterroot—even the plethora of veteran guides and outfitters who've come back to their home water after experiencing some of the best fly fishing around the globe—defend it as their favorite river.

Its virtues, however, are associated with a number of trials and tribulations.

Aside from the well-known Mitchell Slough ordeal (discussed below), landowner–angler conflicts seem to pop up here more often than on most rivers. With the influx of people to the Bitterroot during the past decade, conflict was probably inevitable. I experienced the tensions firsthand in 2008, when a confrontation sent me home having caught a glimpse of the West's water wars.

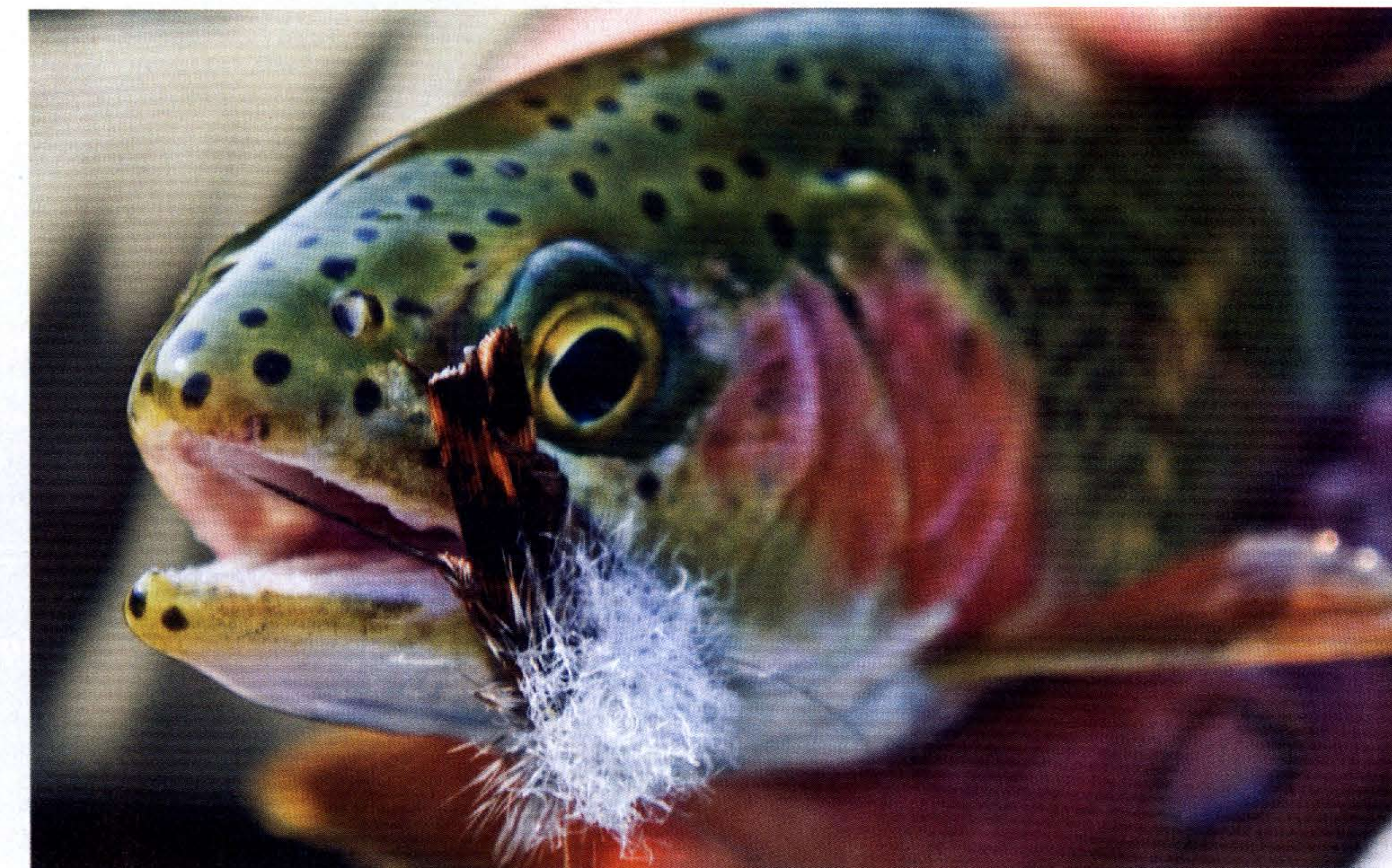
Rumors of a Skwala stonefly hatch had led me to Bell's Crossing Fishing Access Site, where trailered vehicles overflowed the parking lot, flotillas bobbed downstream, and etiquette was questionable. That afternoon, fishing a channel below a cutbank, I saw several fishing parties carelessly strut past two “NO TRESPASSING” signs well beyond the high-water mark. The landowner soon chased off one group whose members argued, incorrectly, that because they were within 10 feet of the high-water mark, they were legal. They escaped without further difficulty, but not the subsequent group, a happy-go-lucky family of three. This time, the steaming landowner drew his pistol. The father took exception and after a heated exchange, the sheriff's department was called to avoid further escalation.

Anglers like these rubes are at the heart of landowners' objections to Montana's stream-access law. I gained an understanding of the landowners' perspective that day, along with an understanding of the pugnacity that flows through the Bitterroot Valley.

But there would be no war if the river weren't worth fighting for.

Main-stem Fishing

According to the *Outdoorsman's Handbook* (formerly the *Angler's Guide*), Volume 1911 (a reproduction of a book published before 1923), “Reports show splendid trout fishing throughout this region. Reached from Hamilton, Mont. On Bitter Root branch of Northern Pac. R. R.” Soon after that report, local barber and fly innovator,



ALL PHOTOS BY JOSHUA BERGAN

The Stevensville-to-Florence float offers many rainbow trout that eat dry flies, as well as shots at big browns (above). The West Fork of the Bitterroot offers good fishing throughout the year, as Belgrade's Liz Juers demonstrates. The West Fork holds plenty of rainbow and cutthroat trout, along with mountain whitefish (left).

Franz Pott, got busy developing and testing his woven hair flies during the river's heyday. Since then, the river has seen its share of trials, travails, transformations, and of course, trout.

Above all, the Bitterroot River is one of the few remaining valley-bottom main stems where you can reliably catch native cutthroat trout, which are the main fare found in the section between the forks and Hamilton. That the cutthroat fishing has remained steadfast even through nonnative infestations, Supreme Court cases, droughts, and floods is a testament to the spirit of the Bitterroot.

Beginning at Conner, where the East Fork and West Fork Bitterroot meet, the river flows about 75 miles to join the Clark Fork River at Missoula. Along the way, the water is enhanced by many calcium-rich tributaries, which keep it lush with insects while maintaining its crystal-clear character. To anglers, the river is probably best known for its spring Skwala stonefly hatch. From early March to

mid-April, anglers gear up for Montana's annual first great hatch. Hitting it right can be as tough as any hatch, but folks can usually stick a few fish on bushy dries, regardless of conditions. Floating is the preferred approach.

Hamilton fly shop owner Chuck Stranahan describes the hatch as atypical because it doesn't migrate upstream uniformly like other stonefly hatches. Mountain snowmelt entering the Bitterroot from various streams cools the water enough to confine the hatch to particular stretches. As a result, you'll find the Skwala hatch scattered among several spots as it progresses awkwardly.

Outfitter Jed Fitzpatrick of Sula Mountain Fly Fishing contends that while the Skwalas bring the anglers, the concurrent hatches bring the fish. *Capnia* stoneflies, *Nemoura* stoneflies, and especially March Brown mayflies catch more fish annually on dry flies than Skwalas. Look for slow slicks and holes near downed trees.

Excellent trout fishing continues into May, when the spring runoff takes over. The 'Root typically clears in mid-June, before runoff subsides, but don't be lulled into thinking it's floatable early in the season. For high water, hire a guide if you're not highly experienced at the oars. If you are able to float, fishing the soft, green edges can be outstanding. As a bonus, the big fish get rather dumb, according to veteran Missoula outfitter Joe Cummings from Classic Journey Outfitters. Runoff is one of the best times to toss an oversized streamer.

June's Green Drake hatch offers another opportunity for a big trout on a dry fly, especially with a dun or cripple pattern. As the season progresses, Salmonflies, Golden Stones, Gray Drakes, summer caddisflies, Tricos, *Baetis*, October Caddis, and one of the West's best *Hecuba* hatches fill the valley. The Bitterroot is not particularly noteworthy for hopper fishing, though it's sometimes possible.

The largest trout in the system, aside from bulls—which are quite rare and illegal to target—are the browns.

Rainbows more than 20 inches are not uncommon but cutthroat rarely get over 20 inches (look to the upper main stem for the longest natives). While streamers are usually best for the biggest trout, Cummings contends the Bitterroot is not generally an outstanding streamer fishery.

"The Bitterroot does not have the baitfish forage base of our other rivers," he says, "and its

insect hatches are so dense that most of our fish are macro-invertebrate centered." But that doesn't mean you should leave your "bugger barn" at home. Anglers take numbers of large brown trout on streamers annually.

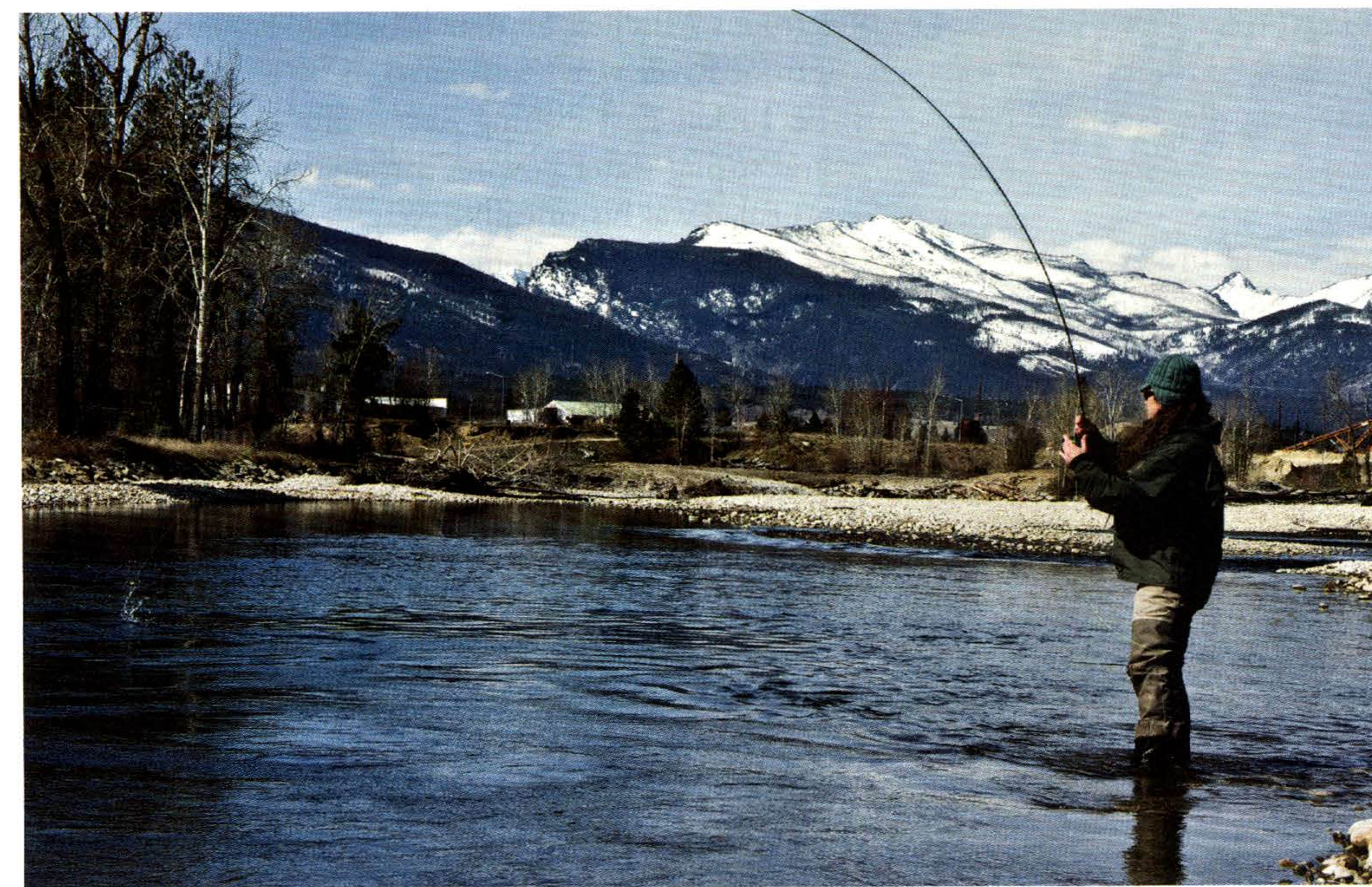
You can float from as high as Painted Rocks Dam on the West Fork all the way down to the Clark Fork, though not in one day. Always check with a local shop or outfitter before launching; there are many obstacles and fatalities are not unheard of. Most of the floating occurs above Florence.

"Downstream of Florence," Cummings notes, "it's long drifts with limited access and long shuttles. Never run it with any kind of wind as it is slow and 'lakey.' Generally, the public doesn't float it because it is such a pain to get the boats in and out."

If you do float, peek into the water. The schools of suckers you'll see are what Cummings calls the "bison of the Bitterroot" because they keep the waterscape fresh by moving the nutrients. Also abundant are mountain whitefish and northern pikeminnow, which get up to 9 pounds.

The river's floodplain is wide and easy to stay within in most places. Runoff fills it bank to bank and when it subsides, you have a new river to explore. It's common for main channels to go dry after runoff.

In low-water or hot years, the freestone Bitterroot warms considerably. In such cases, anglers often hike up the forks or find and fish one of the numerous springs that leaks into the main stem. Recent years have highlighted this situation: September 2012's Sawtooth Fire encroached to within a couple of miles of Hamilton (the river was unaffected). Then, in 2013, hoot-owl restrictions—when



Some days, a little sun is all the encouragement Skwala stonefly nymphs need to hatch.

fishing is closed from 2 p.m. to midnight—were imposed in July, having a particularly early impact.

By August, the river's flow dropped to 30-year lows—179 cubic feet per second (cfs) at Bell Crossing. The median flow for that date was 340 cfs. By mid-August, a fish kill in an important lower tributary resulted from fire-fighting efforts that relied on water from Lolo Creek, which quickly ran dry. Water has many responsibilities in this valley every year; warm, dry years can burden the Bitterroot system to tragic levels.

In better years, the fishing remains good. One October afternoon on a float from Stevensville to Florence, Cummings, along with another friend and me, threw long casts to numerous 14- to 19-inch rainbows and browns. In this and the lower stretch, rainbows outnumber browns by a long shot, though the browns can get truly huge. But the fishing wasn't easy.

According to Cummings, "It's an incredibly frustrating river from Hamilton downstream for all anglers. The middle and lower river require boat placement, fly selection, and angling skill that is vastly harder than the upper river. But when you get it right, the reward is outstanding."

Other sources told me that

some flies remain tried and true season in and out, including classics born here, such as the Sandy Mite or Bunyan Bug. Fitzpatrick adds that if he were allowed only one fly, it'd be Stranahan's Brindle 'Chute. From March Browns through *Hecubas* (March to October), it catches trout on the Bitterroot. It was the go-to pattern during our 2013 Skwalafest, despite being more of a mayfly attractor than a stonefly.

The forks and main stem are catch-and-release for cutthroat trout. There are many other sectional restrictions, so check the regulations if you plan to keep fish. Make it a point to clean your gear after a Bitterroot trip because whirling disease has been found.

If the fishing isn't red hot, craft breweries pepper the Bitterroot Valley. Some favorite brews include Higherground Brewing Company's Summerfoot Summer Ale, Bitterroot Brewing's seasonal Rye Pale Ale, and Wildwood Brewing Company's organic Karapiller Red Lager.

Headwater Hot Spots Don't think you can escape the pressure by heading up high: the popular West Fork of the Bitterroot is well known for its plentiful cutthroat and rainbow trout. The West Fork headwaters

Chuck Stranahan's Brindle 'Chute



PHOTO BY NORTHWEST FLY FISHING

Hook:	Standard dry fly sizes 12–16
Thread:	Rusty brown 6/0
Tail:	Dyed golden brown deer hair
Body:	Dubbing blend of 2 parts natural hare's ear and Antron, 1 part orange rabbit and Antron blend, and 1 part olive and Antron blend, with about 10 percent amber or gold trilobal fiber added
Wing:	White calf tail
Hackle:	Light golden brown dyed grizzly

are at roughly 8,100 feet near the Idaho border about 95 miles south of Missoula. Above Painted Rocks Reservoir, the only impoundment on the system, the river hosts pure westslope cutthroat, along with small bull trout, brook trout, and whitefish.

Below the reservoir, rainbows and browns up to 20 inches are mixed in, but cutthroat predominate. This section flows through a pastoral canyon and is usually floatable by drift boat. It sees many anglers, so if you see a fleet of trailers, consider fishing elsewhere. If you fished it yesterday, maybe try the East Fork today.

The East Fork headwaters are at Hidden Lake, about 0.25 mile west of the Continental Divide at 8,700 feet in the Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness. Rainbows, browns, and cutts up to 18 inches swim the East Fork, which twists for 11 miles through a fishy meadow before emerging at the East Fork Guard Station (a cabin available for rent) on the Bitterroot National Forest. The river continues another 15 miles through a partly developed valley to Sula, bends north, and follows US Highway 93 another 15 miles to the West Fork near Conner.

It's mostly skinny, riffle water with pockets here and there. The wilderness meadow is choked with downed timber and nice size cutthroat. A few bulls have their nurseries here, but you couldn't specifically target them (even if it were legal) because surveys show them to be quite small. In fact, most of the Bitterroot's high-country headwater tributaries hold bull trout—small, small bull trout.

Seesaw Slough

The Bitterroot's story would be incomplete without a few words about the infamous Mitchell Slough. Since 1972, when Montana's constitution (the Public Trust Doctrine) was established, anglers have been fishing "any surface waters that are capable of recreational use," regardless of streambed ownership or navigability. This rule was written into law in 1985; thus was born Montana's stream access law, which applies to natural waterways.

But certain flows remain in perpetual dispute, like the Ruby River, Gallatin County's Darlington Ditch, and the

Bitterroot's Mitchell Slough. Mitchell Slough is mostly Bitterroot River water—ushered in by a headgate north of the Tucker East Fishing Access Site—combined with natural spring water flowing through what the Supreme Court ruled was historically a roughly natural braid of the main river. Thus, the slough is, by law, a channel of the Bitterroot, despite its distinct springy character. It's small with a silty bed and overwhelming bottom greenery in high summer. Trout spook as you work your way through.



The wilderness section of the Bitterroot's East Fork is serpentine and fishy. And during August, midnight stoneflies tempt trout to feed on dries.

Some landowners—including Hugh Cregg (aka 1980s rocker Huey Lewis) and Charles Schwab of his namesake financial firm—have spent mountains of money on riparian enhancement and argue it's no longer natural. And there is a headgate, which by most definitions makes the water behind it an irrigation ditch and, therefore, off limits to recreationists.

For years, the battle was fought on the water but in 2003, after years of hedging, the Bitterroot Conservation District deemed it a ditch. That outcome was law until 2008, when the Montana Supreme Court overruled the decision and determined Mitchell Slough to be a channel of the mainstem river. And everyone lived happily ever after?

The danger to anglers is that if Mitchell Slough is ruled a ditch, any landowner who wanted to keep the river private could apply for a 310 Permit to "improve" the river, making it no longer natural and, thus, off-limits to anglers.

The battle continues today. Anglers can expect harassment on certain sections (beware of the Double Fork

Ranch, for example), be it in the form of motion-detecting irrigation sprinklers, excitable ranch hands, or another inventive new tactic. Should you choose to fish Mitchell Slough, defend your rights if confronted—you are unequivocally allowed to fish there. Currently.

Anglers can also expect to defend the Supreme Court ruling with each subsequent meeting of Montana's legislature. Bills and court cases will pop up; vigilance required.

For the full history on Mitchell Slough, an article entitled "Muddy Waters" from the *Missoula Independent* is available online.

Down-low Predators

Northern pike and bass are available in the extreme lower river and a seasoned guide can usually put you within feet of them because their habitat is quite limited.

The warm-water predators seem to coexist with the cold-water fish relatively well. No significant dent has occurred to the trout numbers since the introduction of pike in the 1960s. And despite the rumor that the pike count has plummeted since the removal of the Clark Fork's Milltown Dam and Reservoir in the mid-2000s, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks' Fisheries Biologist David Schmetterling says that the pike populations in the two rivers are separate and no noticeable impact has occurred in the Bitterroot. He adds that surveys usually capture between two and 10 pike per year and kill all they capture.

"The best pike fishing is [above] the Clark Fork," Cummings said. "They are very tough to coax into eating and the best veteran pike fly anglers consider a four-fish day exceptional. Look to slow backwaters. On most days, a grab or two is all that happens."

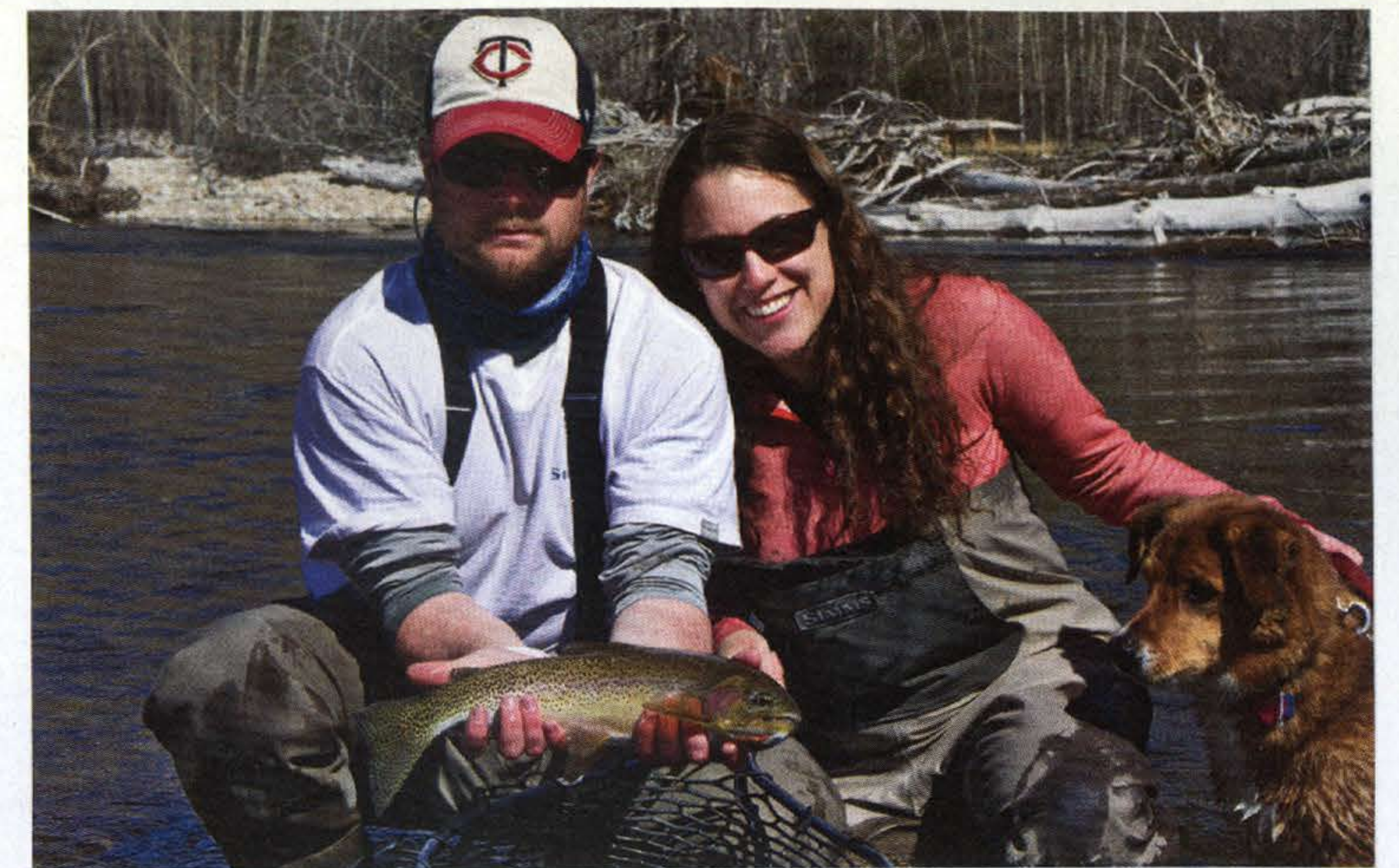
Largemouth bass, while rarer than pike, sometimes turn up. While numbers are extremely low, Schmetterling notes that in some places near pond outflows, suitable habitat for bass is about the size of a sedan and bass will be there.

When all is said and done, the Bitterroot River stands as strong and steadfast as the Native Americans who first lived near it. It is one of the West's most reliable dry-fly fisheries for native trout and one that should not be underestimated.

Says Cummings, "The Bitterroot is the most multifaceted river in Montana in the classic trout-water way. It is my favorite river in the state, hands down." ➔

Joshua Bergan is a Montana-based freelance writer and photographer.

Bitterroot River NOTEBOOK



When: Year-round; prime March–October.

Where: Western Montana, directly south of Missoula.

Headquarters: Missoula, Hamilton, and Darby. Accommodations, cabins, and campgrounds abound in the Bitterroot Valley. The East Fork Guard Station is rustic, but gorgeous and affordable. From the south and east, the drive through Wisdom via SR 43 to US Hwy 93 is spectacular but treacherous in bad weather.

Appropriate gear: 4- to 6-wt. rods, floating and sinking-tip lines, 1X–5X tippets.

Useful fly patterns: Stranhan's Brindle 'Chute, Gould's Half-Down Skwala, Quigley Cripple, Double Humpy, Bloom's Parachute Flying Ant, Copper John, Girdle Bug, Zebra Midge, Sculpzilla, Zonker.

Nonresident license: Ages 15 and older. Conservation license, \$10, plus Montana fishing license, \$15/2 consecutive days, \$43.50/10 consecutive days, \$60/annual.

Fly shops/guides: *Missoula:* Classic Journey Outfitters, (877) 327-7878, www.classicjourneyoutfitters.com; Grizzly Hackle Fly Shop, (800) 297-8996, www.grizzlyhackle.com; Missoulian Angler Fly Shop (two locations), (406) 728-7766, www.missoulianangler.com; Kingfisher Fly Shop, (406) 721-6141, www.kingfisherflyshop.com. *Florence:* River Otter Fly Shop, (406) 273-4858, www.riverotterflyfishing.com. *Hamilton:* Chuck Stranahan's Flies & Guides, (406) 363-4197, www.chuck-stranahan.com; Sula Mountain Fly Fishing, (406) 210-0142, www.sulaflyfishing.com; Angler's Roost Fly Shop, (406) 363-1268, www.anglersroost-montana.com; Osprey Outfitters, (406) 363-1000, www.ospreyoutfittersflyshop.com. *Darby:* Bitterroot Fly Company, (406) 821-1624, www.bitterrootflycompany.com.

Books/maps: *Flyfisher's Guide to Montana* by Chuck Robbins; *Montana's Best Fishing Waters* and Bitterroot River 11x17 fly-fishing map by Wilderness Adventures Press; Fishing GPS Data Card (micro SD card with waypoints for all accesses and fly shops) by Wilderness Adventures Press.