

Comments on the Fernie, BC Trip

My wife, Ann, loves to accompany me when I fly fish because of the scenery so she usually brings a good book to read while I go trekking up or down stream. Since Ann wanted to try some fly fishing herself, I asked Don Muelrath (of Fly Fishing Adventures) if there was a fly fishing destination that would accommodate couples with her as a first-time fly fisher. Don suggested Fernie, B.C. and its Elk River and tributaries.



Through Don, we booked a four day trip with his favorite Fernie outfitter in late August to early September. The weather normally is warm during this period but instead, we were greeted by an unusual cold front with day temperatures in the 50's and some rain. The week before, Fernie had temperatures in the 80's. Being from Hawaii, it was cold for us.

For our entire trip, all of Jeff's guides were super people, patient, and hardworking. All of the fish were very healthy and 95% of the fish were caught on dry flies. We



nymphed only once just because we couldn't entice the fish to rise and stuck it by going deep with a nymph pattern. We used streamers only once when we found an eddy that had some huge Cutts in it during one drift.

On our first day, we drifted the Elk River and stuck around fifteen Western Slope Cutthroats, all on dries. Since this was Ann's first time fly fishing, Spencer, our guide, rigged her up with terrestrials like Fat

Alberts, ant, and beetle patterns. Although Ann only landed one fish the first day, she missed many grabs and was thrilled landing her first Cutt.

The second day, we decided to fish the Wigwam River for Bull Trout. Kenny, our guide, gave us three options. In two of the options we were assured to have to share the river because of easy access. We chose the third option where we would have the river to ourselves. But the price was taking a 2.5 mile hike which included 50+ degree inclines and crossing the river three times to fish two nice pools where Bull Trout rest before reaching their spawning grounds.



The Wigwam ranks in my opinion in the top two most beautiful rivers on earth. The various colored stones and rocks in almost gin clear aqua and emerald tones made it a spiritual experience. It was Nature's art at its finest. The Wigwam is a pristine stream where we didn't see a smidgen of trash or any other people and you could even drink the water straight from the river. Pods of Bull Trout were resting in the two pools we fished

and it was a challenge trying to entice them to grab the big streamers thrown at them. Cross and under currents made it difficult to get a streamer dead drifted onto the fish's nose. After umpteen shots, a female Bull went for the fly and the fight was on. I managed to land a nice 27 inch female. I made another shot and stuck an even larger male with a reddish body but it got off because I forgot Kenny's instruction, "Bulls have really hard mouths and you need to set the hook hard several times." The rest of the day, we concentrated on dry fly fishing for Western Slope Cutthroats and saw only a few rises. Kenny took us to a spot where he has seen the water literally boil during a hatch; but not that day. The day before, it had rained and the fish must have gorged themselves because the bellies of the Cutts we managed to catch were rock solid from feeding the previous day. The hike back was memorable; especially the half mile climb up the very steep slopes on Kenny's secretly blazed trail. It took Ann a couple of days and a nice massage to recover from that hike down to the Wigwam. However, we both agreed, we'd do it again.

Luckily, Don put in a couple of "rest" days into our itinerary. During one of our "rest days", I walked and waded the Elk River myself for half a day and managed to stick a half dozen nice Cutts on hoppers.

The last two days of our stay, we went to the Island Lake Resort which was highly recommended by Don. The ambiance of the resort cannot be fully appreciated unless you're actually there. Our room had a view of the pristine lake and the Canadian Rockies. We could see the three beautiful peaks called, "Mama, Baby,



and Papa Bear" right outside our window and deck. Having lived in Northern California for nearly 30 years before moving to Hawai'i, we loved the beauty of the Sierra Nevadas. But the scenery of the Canadian Rockies is something hard to match. A full breakfast was included in our stay and the dinners at the resort were very well prepared. Island Lake Resort has a great spa and excellent massage therapists. Ann can attest to this because we could only afford one person to have massages—and she always gets the honor---sort of like a fringe benefit for putting up with going to fly fishing destinations with me.

The two remaining days of our stay, we made two different drifts on the Elk River with Joel as our guide. Ann got more proficient casting, mending the line, and hooking cutts on dry flies each day. She managed to land a nice 18 inch cutt that smacked her Fat Albert besides landing several others between 12 and 16 inches. We even had a double hook-up on one drift (above left).

Joel, our guide, one day brought his dog, and he was a great mascot. We managed to anchor up at a couple of nice riffles where we caught some nice fish. We even had a rare sighting of a moose crossing the river. We had such a wonderful overall experience with great fly fishing, great scenery, friendly and compassionate guides, and excellent food and meals. The Elk River is well managed and the all the fish we caught and landed were very healthy. Besides being one of the most beautifully colored fish, I think the non-selective behavior of the Western Slope Cutthroat Trout makes it an excellent quarry for first-time fly fishers because one gets many chances as you intently watch your fly dead-drifting in the foam line of Fernie's Elk River. I don't rate rivers by the number of fish one catches but by the memories. We will definitely be going back to Fernie.

Ken Yabusaki