



Special Report: Bull Trout



Upper Skookumchuck River, B.C.



If I had to pick one reason why Bull Trout are an exciting fly rod pursuit, it would be that you can fish for 28" to 32" inch fish that are easy to see in pools and streams where they often stack up while on their annual spawning run.

The Bull Trout is not a true trout, but rather a member of the char family. Fish of the char family are vulnerable during their spawning period as they congregate and are easy prey for bait or spin fishers. Like the trophy Brook Trout of eastern

Canada, another member of the char family, they have been overharvested in places where they are not protected and the fisheries decimated.

The waters of the Elk River drainage and other rivers in eastern British Columbia may offer the best remaining Bull Trout fishing on the globe. What makes this area special for the native Bull Trout are the protections provided by laws put in place specifically to protect them. For instance, in late June and early July, they begin entering tributary streams like the Wigwam River to begin their spawning journey. The Wigwam, a tributary of the Elk, is a beautiful wilderness watershed. Over 30 years ago, in what was a very controversial decision at the time, the Wigwam was made a strictly catch and release fishery, thereby protecting its population of native West Slope Cutthroat and the migrating Bull Trout.



This August, my son, Scott, and I spent three days fishing for Bull Trout in the Fernie area. One of those days was on the Wigwam with our outfitter's top "Bull Trout expert," a guide with over 30 years fishing the Wigwam. We started the day on the main stem of the Wigwam with two pools, each containing at least a dozen large Bull Trout. Throwing large, colorful streamers and using specialized techniques we were taught on the spot, we had three Bull's eat in those two pools, all fish over 28". After a few hours there, we moved up one of the tributary streams. Between the pools and holes where we found Bull Trout, we cast dry flies to the native West Slope Cutthroat and Cutbows (a rainbow – cutthroat hybrid). We released about 15 Cutt's, including one small 22" Bull Trout we saw rising and thought it was a Cutt. It was a fabulous day, one of those special days on the water when you "hit it right" and that you don't forget.



Male Bull in spawning dress



PRIME TIME: The Bulls begin moving into the tributary spawning streams, the larger fish entering first, in mid June, but “run-off” usually has the water high and dirty at that time.



The prime time for sight fishing would be July 10 to August 10. And if you hit it perfect, you would be fishing a cloudy day following a good rain. The cloud cover allows these big fish to feel less vulnerable in skinny water. The rain brings fresh fish into the river and they are still feeding aggressively. The longer the fish are in the tributary stream, the stronger the spawning urge becomes and the less inclined they are to feed assertively. A survey of experienced Bull Trout guides found

the expectancy, if conditions are supportive, during the prime time to be a dozen hook-ups with 4 or 5 of these monsters released.

(L to R: Cutbow, the Wigwam, native West Slope Cutthroat)



OPTIONS: One of the best aspects of the Fernie, British Columbia area is the variety of options. Some of those options include:

- main Elk River in the Fernie area – all native and natural with West Slope Cutthroats (surface oriented) and big Bull Trout
- Wigwam – fabulous small river south of Fernie. Cutts, Cutbows, and Bull Trout.
- Michelle Creek – small, walk ‘n wade north of Fernie. Beautiful small stream.
- Oldman – strong evening hatches – rainbows.
- Skookumchuck, a tributary of the Kootenay.
- Other small tributaries of the Elk, some great lake fishing, and many other streams in the area.

RESERVATIONS: The top Bull Trout guides are in demand for the prime time so best book early. For accommodations, there are a variety including ski-condos, motels, and 4 bedroom houses that occupy skiers in the winter.

Don Muelrath
Fly Fishing Adventures
www.flyfishingadventures.org
888-347-4896

