

OUTDOORS/Chris Santella

Willing Trout Are a Lure To a Private Part of Idaho

Cutthroat trout were once the dominant trout species of the western United States. Robert Behnke, a fisheries historian and professor emeritus of fisheries and conservation at Colorado State University, says that the original distribution of cutthroat trout is greater than that of any other form of North American salmon or trout.

The 14 subspecies of cutthroat once ranged from the Kenai Peninsula in Alaska down the Pacific coast to the Eel River basin in Northern California. Populations also existed along the spine of the Rockies, from the Banff/Jasper area in Alberta through Idaho, Montana, Utah, Colorado and New Mexico.

Even though genetic markers are the only true distinguishing feature for trout species, cutthroat can generally be identified by the namesake bright red mark beneath their jaws.

Among the angling cognoscenti, cutthroat hold a warm spot. They are a beautiful fish, often sprouting intense yellow, orange and red shades. And they are a very willing fish. A valid scientific study — presumably conducted by some bored postdoctoral students — showed cutthroat to be the easiest trout to catch by angling methods, followed in difficulty by brook, rainbow and brown trout. Behnke validates this study, estimating that brown trout are more difficult to catch than cutthroat by at least a factor of 10.

Progress has not been kind to the cutthroat. Today's distribution is a fraction of what it once was, and two of the subspecies are extinct. Extremely sensitive to changes in water quality, cutthroat have been hurt by stream degradation brought on by logging and livestock grazing. Their great downfall, however, has been brought on by the introduction of nonnative trout species — rainbow, brook, brown and lake trout.

While nonnative introductions have eliminated pure populations of cutthroats from much of their original range, the Middle Fork of the Salmon River remains a great stronghold of the west slope cutthroat. Framed by the Sawtooth and Salmon River Mountains in the heart of the Frank Church/River of No Return Wilderness in central Idaho, the Middle Fork provides a stunningly beautiful backdrop for pursuing this trout.

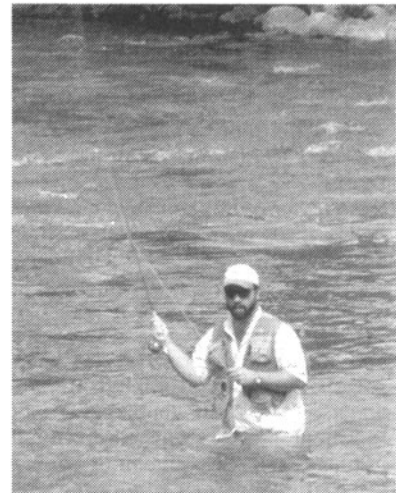
There are no roads into the area; visitors either hike in, ride in on horseback, or fly in by bush plane and float the river for all or a part of its 106 miles. At Boundary Creek (the first put-in), the river is small and fast, hemmed in closely by thick forests of Douglas fir and spruce. As you proceed down river, the canyon opens up to expose jaw-dropping crags of Idaho Batholith. Bighorn sheep and mountain goats practice their acrobatic routines.

There are also several natural hot springs. Sunflower Showers, a hot spring that includes natural pools and a makeshift shower, is especially nurturing for sore casting shoulders.

One can also hike into the canyon at certain points to view American Indian pictographs and pioneer homesteads. There's also a bit of whitewater on the river; most rafting enthusiasts place the Middle Fork in the top 10 whitewater rivers of the world.

And then there's the fishing. Standing in the bow of the drift boat being guided by the Solitude River Trips outfitter Al Bukowsky, I cast large, easy-to-follow attractor patterns — Stimulators, Schroeder's Hoppers and Parachute Adams — against granite walls, behind midriver rocks and along the seam lines of back eddies. More often than not, my casts brought a vigorous rise.

The crystalline waters of the Middle Fork often let you follow the action from when the fish begins to move for the fly to when it takes. The fish are opportunistic, as the Middle



Jan Stephenson

Fishing for cutthroat in the Middle Fork of the Salmon River.

Fork isn't especially rich in food, Bukowsky said as we drifted from run to run. They're willing to take flies on top throughout the day, whether there's a hatch on or not.

The cutthroat of the Middle Fork of the Salmon are not particularly large. They average 12 to 14 inches, with an occasional fish of up to 20 inches. But they are plentiful enough to provide steady action throughout the day. An angler with modest skills can expect to hook 30 to 50 fish a day during the summer.

"We have quite a few families on the river, because there's something for everyone," said the Solitude guide Bryce Tedford. "The anglers in the family can take a drift boat and fish all day, while other family members can raft and hike and swim. As a guide, it's really wonderful taking a father and child out on the river, where the child can't really cast yet. On Day 1, we focus on teaching the rudiments of casting. By Day 2, I can sit back and watch the son or daughter make the cast, set the hook and play the fish in. Being able to watch the father watch his child get their first fish is just fantastic."