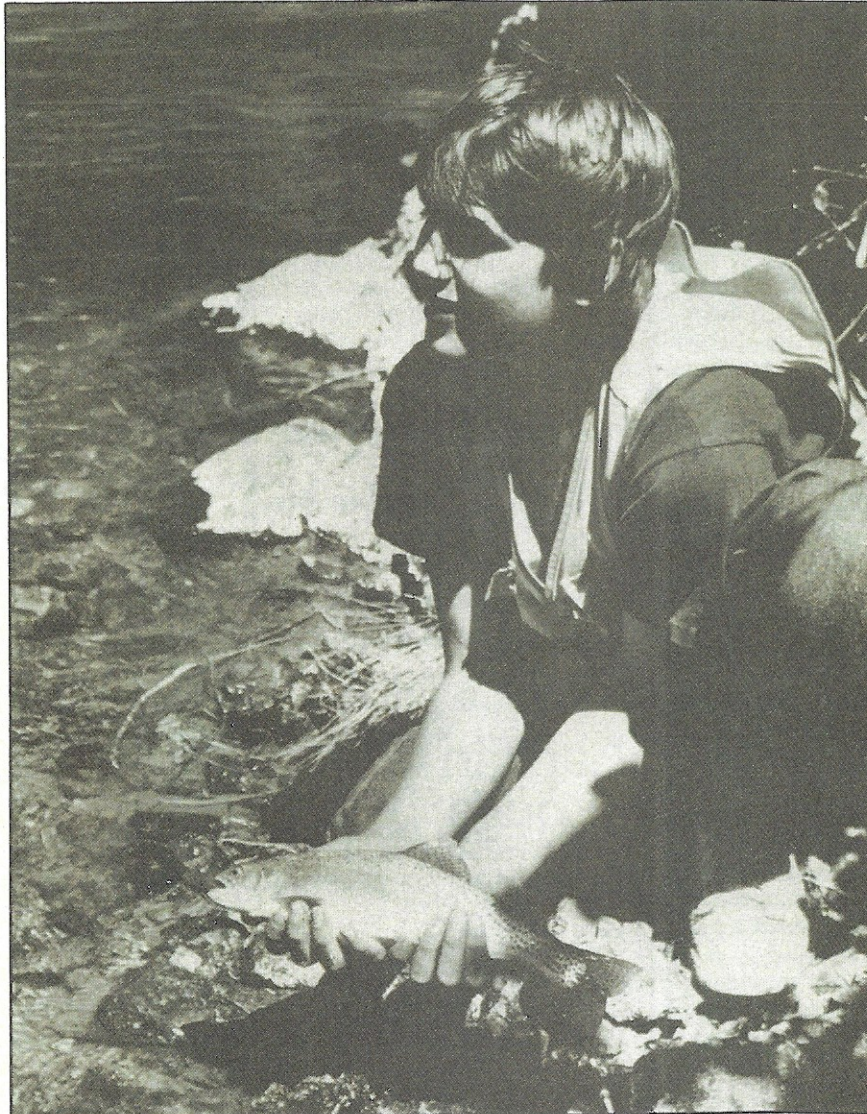


Idaho's River of No Return

A backcountry fishing camp services this wilderness water which houses a quality fishery for four trout species



Author's son, Jason, shows off a typical thick-torsoed Big Creek resident.

Don Vachini

With the creek babbling a pleasant midday sonata and a thick Douglas fir canopy shading me, I leisurely tossed my fly into the tail section of an azure pool, watching it float with the increasing current. Almost predictably there was a swirl and my rod arced in welcome combat. Several sizzling runs and frantic acrobatics later, the thinly spotted, bronze-hued battler thrashed in the

boulder-strewn shallows. We admired the spirited 14-incher's flaming red/orange slash marks and bulging, brawny torso before gently freeing it.

Heading back to camp a few hours hence, my son Jason and I had released a combined 15 plump cutthroats, all in the 12-14 in. range. To say the least, our anticipation was noticeably high for the upcoming few days.

As guests of the Taylor Ranch Outfitters, owned and operated by Con and Tina Hourihan, we were beginning a five-day August stay on the lower sections of Idaho's Big Creek, a born-again blue ribbon trout water cutting through the rugged Salmon River Mountains.

Surrounded by the 2½ million acre Frank Church/River of No Return Wilderness, Big Creek has its birthplace high

among Greely Mountain, Profile Peak and Big Creek Point. Snowmelt trickles downhill from these crags above 9000 ft., gains strength from numerous tributaries and tumbles approximately 40 miles through forest, meadow and steep canyon before entering the Middle Fork Salmon River at 1200 ft. elev.

The Hourihan's cozy camp is located far enough back in the mountains that a flying service is necessary to get there. On our half-hour flight from Challis, it was apparent that much of this wilderness, the largest chunk of publicly owned wildlands in the contiguous United States, has remained as primitive as when Lewis and Clark first saw it in 1805. We were joined at this secluded hideout by crewmembers Trent and Travis Bullock.

Our pre-trip research revealed that Big Creek, a tributary to a tributary to a tributary of the mighty Columbia River, supports a mixed native fishery. "Though cutthroat are by far the dominant trout, rainbow, Dolly Varden and whitefish are also present in abundant numbers," informed Don Anderson, a fisheries biologist with a high interest in the watershed.

From our very first day a relaxing mood prevailed since the trout were both plentiful and cooperative. However, I was more impressed with their small heads and thick, torpedo shapes—physical characteristics symbolic of rapid growth. Between bites of a bountiful sack lunch, Con explained that during the late 1970s and early '80s the fishery suffered through a slump with drastically declining numbers and small fish. Miraculously, according to him, zero limit, single barbless hook regulations imposed by the Department of Fish and Game (DFG) in January 1984 initiated a dramatic turnaround. "Before catch and release, we were catching mostly 8-9 in. fish," he lamented. "However," he continued, "clients now catch 12-16 inchers with amazing regularity!"

The DFG feels that in addition to the magic of catch and release the startling comeback was due to ideal existing conditions: cold, yearlong flows, numerous spawning tributaries and plentiful food forms. "Big Creek supports huge caddis, stone and mayfly hatches throughout the season," informed Anderson. "In addition to the aquatic insects, grasshoppers and white moths combine to offer a healthy smorgasbord," he added.

Though all four salmonids seem to show definite size increases, Anderson indicates that the cutts are really flourishing under current regulations. His records show this strain to be fast growing and long living, albeit extremely gullible. "While they cannot tolerate a consumptive type fishery, they certainly appear made to order for catch and release," he said.

The diminutive flows of late summer/early fall make the creek an excellent

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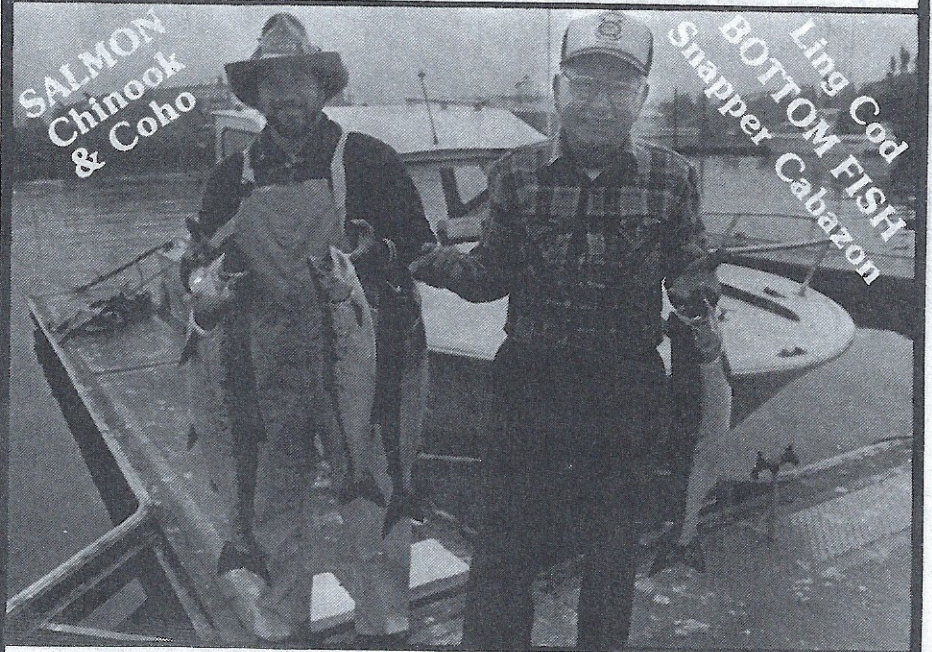
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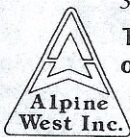
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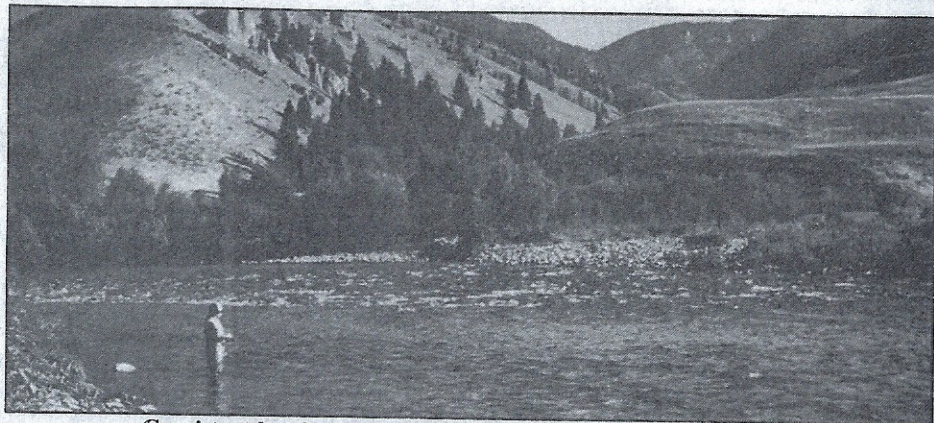
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prospect for fly fishing techniques. The pools, pockets, riffles and glides are clear, easily defined and basic to fish. As long as the imitation is fairly large (sizes 8-12), presented well and floats drag free in the fringe of the current it has a good chance of being engulfed.

On two separate occasions we were able to create our own hatches by shaking white moths onto the water from overhanging limbs. During the ensuing frenzies, we often watched the fish, many approaching 3 lbs., stalk our flies from the turquoise depths! Tina even managed to catch all four species during one of these hour-long "hatches," including a Dolly Varden on the

cutts and rainbows while the Dollies seemed to prefer large (sizes 4-6) red and white spoons or wide-bladed spinners bounced slowly along the bottom of deep, languid pools.

Although a wide variety of basic fly patterns work well here, a few stand out according to Tina, an avid angler who ties her own selections. "Caddis, Hare's Ear and Stonefly nymphs are good wet choices while Ginger Quill, Adams, Royal Coachman and Grasshoppers are especially productive dry patterns," she mentioned. "Flies with a lot of white seem very attractive and are easily visible," she continued.



Consistent hatches occur season-long on this flood plain creek.

surface—a rare feat. A size 8 Royal Coachman streamer drifted on the surface was just the ticket. "They all like big meals," she smiled.

While fishing is best early and late in the day, we were able to locate many shady holding areas in midday. The flood plain creekbed allowed us plenty of casting room.

Though we found light action fly rods matched with a floating line to be most practical for taking the highly energetic cutthroats, we also used light action spinning rods and reels with 4 lb. line for the dual advantage of tossing either hardware or a fly/bubble combination.

Brown and yellow Rooster Tails, Mepps Bucktails and Panther Martin spinners (sizes 0-2) proved very popular with the

Most of the rainbows caught here are yearling juvenile steelhead 12 in. or under although sometimes in the early season an angler will tie into a spring run steelie for some tackle testing moments.

Dolly Varden up to 10 lbs. are occasionally taken by lure anglers in the really deep holes.

Less pugnacious than their cousins, whitefish up to 2 lbs. are abundant and taken in the same lies as the cutthroats.

Traveling via horseback enabled us to easily explore about 15 miles of the creek plus noteworthy tributaries Cabin, Cave, Rush and Pioneer. As we meandered through thick stands of streamside fir, alder and birch, Con or Tina consistently pointed out productive lies or drifts between historic tidbits of local Indian lore. In addition to the trusty steeds and angling advice, our gracious hosts provided three square meals each day, including scrumptious family style suppers—an event not at all overlooked by my-always-hungry teenager!

With full stomachs, roomy wall tents and comfortable foam pads underneath us we had all the necessary ingredients for a pleasant and efficient wilderness camp. Of course, a magnificent creek laden with willing, thick-bodied trout helped, too!

For those seeking more information on Big Creek, its quality catch and release fishery or the wilderness camp, contact: Taylor Ranch Outfitters, c/o Con and Tina Hourihan; P.O. Box 398; Challis, Idaho 83226; telephone (208) 879-4718. □