

INTO THE HEART OF IT

Given the choice between float-fishing a big, famous blue-ribbon trout river or wading some little-known brush-choked stream, I'll take the creek any day.

Don't get me wrong. I'd like to hook into a 4-pound rainbow on the Missouri or Big Hole as much as anyone. But for sheer enjoyment and relaxation, I can't think of anything that tops fishing for 8-inch cutthroats on a mountain stream.

Not everyone thinks of backwoods trout fishing as relaxing. There's the bugs. And the often impenetrable streamside vegetation. Nowadays my adult sons occasionally accompany me to fish small streams, though truth be told they prefer full-sized rivers. But when they were boys, it was like pulling teeth getting them to my favorite trout creeks. They got tired of swatting mosquitoes, busting brush, and untangling snagged flies from branches.

They're in good company. The vast majority of fly anglers living in and visiting Montana shy away from skinny waters and instead flock to the Madison, Bighorn, and other famous rivers. They like the big water, big casts, and, of course, big fish.

But big is relative. To me, fighting a foot-long trout in a narrow meadow stream on a 3-weight fly rod is as exciting as working a fish twice that size with a 7-weight on the Yellowstone.

What I like most about small-stream fishing is it takes me into the heart of nature. It's exciting to work your way upstream, never knowing what you'll see around the next bend. Maybe it will be the perfect hole, with trout rising everywhere you look. Or maybe you'll see wildlife unaccustomed to human visitors. Over the years while fishing small streams I've seen otters, mink, kingfishers, dippers, warblers, ospreys, and more. One time while fighting my way through a tangle of brush I peered out to see, just a few yards away, a herd of grazing elk, unaware of my presence (until the bull caught wind of me and the

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whole group bolted). It's that kind of intimacy with the natural world I find so appealing.

I'm biased of course, but I believe fly-fishing small streams takes as much skill as fishing big water. Sometimes more. My favorite challenge is seeing a deep spot beneath an overhanging branch where I just know a nice fish is resting. Should I try a slingshot cast, where you hold the fly in your fingers and use the rod to fling it at the target? Sneak along the bank to just upstream of the spot, then reach over the brush and lower the fly down to the water? Or take a chance with a short cast, knowing the fly could easily end up snagged? It's always a thrill to get the perfect drift and see the fish rise up to take the fly.

Even with the challenges of confined casting and having to bushwhack to get to the better spots, backwoods fishing helps me unwind more than any other activity. When I'm on the stream, I get so focused on what I'm doing that time disappears.

My wife could never understand. She'd ask how I could get so absorbed with a stream that time lost all meaning (causing me to be late getting home more than a few times). She likes to fish, but only in small doses.

Then last August I took her to a small meadow creek. It was grasshopper season, and that day the browns were coming out of the water like torpedoes to chase our imitations. After a few hours of non-stop action, I figured Alice had had her fill. But she wouldn't quit. Every time we'd finish working a pool, she'd say, "Let's go up to that next one!"

At that moment I had the satisfaction of saying to her what so many dedicated anglers long to say to their spouses: "See, *this* is what I've been telling you about for the past 40 years."

—JOE MAURIER, *Director, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks*



NATURAL WONDERS ILLUSTRATION BY PETER GROSSHAUSER

Q. I've read that snowpack in Montana has been very low. How will that affect fishing this season?

A. Overall, not by much. According to the Natural Resources Conservation Service, snowpack on April 1 was well below average because of meager winter snowfall in the state's western half. Stream flows across Montana are forecast to be 58 percent of average. That said, fishing is expected to remain very good in most popular rivers and streams. But those not backed up by reservoir storage may be very low, especially in July and August. Good rainfall could change all that, however, so before heading out to fish, call local fly shops for stream conditions.

