

BRIDGER-TETON TROUT!

BY DON VACHINI

With 25 miles of dirt road, undulating prairie and badlands behind us, we still had roughly 8 more miles to go before reaching our destination, emphasis on the “roughly.”

We shifted into 4-wheel drive, continuing our eastward drive by straddling deep ruts, dodging big rocks and fording a pair of tiny streams. That was just to reach our base camp. Following such an initiation, it would be a shame for the fishing to be lousy.

During the following four days, Terry Donahoe and I would play across a large expanse of land east of Grand Teton and Yellowstone national parks. As guests of Gene Borre, owner and operator of Western Wyoming Outfitters, we'd be hiking, fishing and exploring roadside, as well as in remote sections of the Bridger-Teton National Forest in west-central Wyoming.

Borre, a licensed guide who runs a successful hunting operation near the headwaters of the Gros Ventre River, spends several months fishing the many creeks around this land as he readies base camps for hunters, scouting and stocking firewood prior to the hunting season in mid-September. He graciously volunteered to share some of his favorite waters, along with a few of his secrets!

While Jackson Hole is a site of frenetic tourist activity, its sidewalks and the nearby national parks overflowing

with humanity, Borre promised us solitude, spectacular countryside and abundant trout opportunities at his isolated camp. This remote backcountry, reached only by foot or horseback, offers a glimpse back to the days of untracked wilderness. Terry and I were comforted with the thought that we'd be alone in this primitive setting — alone to deal with the ancestral trout of the West!

THE QUARRY

During the geologic time frame when the Rocky Mountains were still shrugging their shoulders, drainages were changed, waterways diverted and cutthroat populations transplanted to new territories. Over the centuries, trout adapted to their isolated locales, eventually forming new subspecies.

One of about 15 individual cutthroat species identified, the Snake River fine-spotted cutthroat is characterized by a yellow-hued body, profusely sprinkled with irregular, pepper-like dots. By far the dominant trout throughout the region, this cutthroat exists in the upper Gros Ventre River and its tributaries in nearly all-time high densities, according to Wyoming Game & Fish Department biologists.

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“While cutthroat here typically range between 8 and 16 inches, the average fish will be above 10 inches,” Borre said.

Whitefish populations are also found throughout the Gros Ventre system, mackinaw (lake trout) are present in a pair of stillwaters, and brook trout are occasionally found in some headwater streams and lakes.

THE WATERSHED

Originating in the Gros Ventre Mountain Range as snow and ice melt from Black (11,657 feet) and Steamboat (10,914 feet) peaks, the Gros Ventre cascades steeply over Upper Falls and Ouzel Falls and, as it reaches the valley floor, horseshoes from east back to west. Here it hugs the range's northern edge while meandering a wide, glacier-scoured valley. It courses through sage, meadow, willow and forested terrain for more than 60 trout-filled miles before entering the Snake River north of Jackson Hole.

This is pristine water with a healthy ecosystem that produces hatches of



caddis, stoneflies and mayflies that are supplemented by grasshoppers, beetles and ants. Geological features are also impressive and include hot springs, varied and multi-colored rock formations (Lavender Hills, Red Hills and the Gros Vente Slides). Along the river's lengthy course, it gains volume from numerous named and unnamed tributaries, many of them viable fishing destinations.

RIVER STRATEGIES

Borre outlined our strategy for the next few days. "Tomorrow, we'll explore the upper Gros Ventre, and during the following 2 1/2 days, you'll visit several hike-to tributaries," he said, between mouthfuls of elk stew.

Two days earlier, we had sampled a section of river just downstream of Lower Slide Lake. Here the timber thickens, and the canyon narrows tightly. Flows are forced around large boulders, creating numerous stepladder pools, foamy pockets and swirling eddies, heavily oxygenating the water and offering prime trout habitat. In the rapidly moving water here, the fish are forced to make quick decisions. During our half-hour stint there, we received several strikes and managed to land a pair of frisky 11-inchers.

The five-mile section from the Crystal Creek/Gros Ventre confluence upstream to Upper Slide Lake flows across public land. Here aesthetically

A trio of roadside ponds are available along the Gros Ventre Road. Photo by Terry Donahoe.

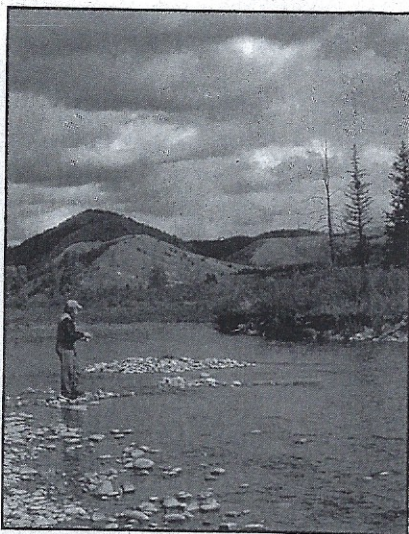
pleasing slot canyons offer excellent structure that's readily accessible via several spur roads. Scrambling and wading allows additional access to undercut banks, lengthy slicks and mid-river pools.

The farther upstream one travels, the more open the valley becomes. Borre directed us to a section of river well above the Goosewing Ranger Station road. We high-stepped over sage and swampy meadow and squeezed through stunted willows while making our way along the flood plain. Periodically, we found sparse

stands of aspen and cottonwood growth crowding the edge of the waterway. And the classic freestone river's bottom, composed of bedrock, gravel and cobble, was just unstable enough to make for unsure footing.

We entered the riverbed where a sizable riffle plunged into a large, azure pool. Like small children on Christmas morning, we eagerly approached with reckless abandon. Terry headed for the tail-out while I positioned myself 30 yards upstream of him. Allowing a size 12 soft hackle with a green body to drift deep, I watched the tip of my fly line stab under and my rod dip mightily. Looking up, I saw Terry's was doing the same. A double on our first casts led to identical 12-inch cutts!

Dense streamside foliage and lack of a trail made movement along the river challenging, a reminder of what early settlers who trapped in this area must have endured. However, the fish certainly cooperated, as Terry and I enjoyed losing track of the number of fish we caught. Basically, we narrowed our search to "trouty" water



High along the west slope of the Continental Divide, several noteworthy tributaries drain a vast and primitive backcountry. Photo by Don Vachini.

and were usually rewarded with two or three takers per spot.

During late spring, runoff has the upper river running high, cloudy and unsafe to wade. When working its brawling flows, Borre suggests

focusing on the slower swirling eddies and fringes of seams. For the flyfisher using a 9-foot, 4- to 5-weight fly rod, lethargic residents often prefer weighted, size 10-12 Prince, Pheasant Tail or Beadhead Hare's Ear nymphs, either twitched slowly along the bottom or tumbled freely in the current.

Early in the season, these fish tend toward biting lightly and indecisively, so be prepared to set the hook on the slightest hesitation.

Where they occur, braided channels provide soft-water advantages. Sometimes dropper setups, such as Irresistible/Bucktail Caddis or Adams/Pheasant Tails, will entice a rise in their less-voluminous backwaters or slack areas.

During the limited-visibility runoff, Borre prefers light to ultralight spin tackle with 4-pound line to retrieve size 0-2 Panther Martin, Mepps, Rooster Tail or Vibrax spinners through strong currents, along the bottom of deep holes or around huge submerged boulders. Dragged slowly and erratically through these ambush points, the noisy spinner blades frequently attract inquisitive responses in the murky flows.

As flows diminish from mid-summer through fall, trout become squeezed into more defined pools, pockets and seams where anglers can pinpoint them in highly readable locations. One of Borre's favorite fall ploys is working a wet fly downstream through structure. "Make your cast quartering upstream, follow it through the swing and then retrieve rapidly upstream on a tight line along the surface. This final burst commonly triggers a strike reflex," he said.

TRIBUTARY TROUT

Heading high along the west slope of the Continental Divide are Fish Creek and noteworthy tributaries Purdy and Bacon and Cottonwood creeks. Cottonwood's feeders include Sohare and Slate creeks; and its Dallas, Bear Paw and Carmichael forks feed Slate. During Borre's scouting duties prior to the hunting season, he often samples these and other productive streams, listing them among his most predictable. "These remote creeks shouldn't be overlooked," he said. "There are usually

Continued on page 54



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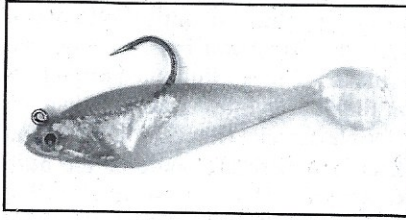


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TETON TROUT...Continued

(fewer) than a dozen anglers a year and, in some cases, none at all."

Early the next morning, we centered our attention on upper Fish Creek, following Sheridan Trail up its lengthy North Fork for about three miles. Due to the presence of grizzly bears, we carried pepper spray canisters as a deterrent, made plenty of noise and kept each other in constant sight.

I opted for a 7-foot, 3-weight fly system and an ultralight spinning rod and reel with 2-pound line. Since we planned on releasing our catches, our single hooks were all barbless.

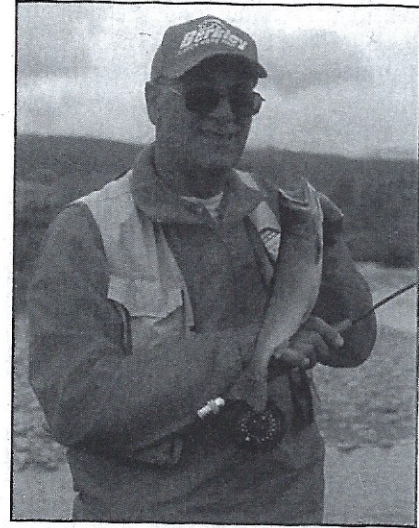
I could hear the creek gurgling, but a thick blanket of stunted willows that outlined its serpentine course hid it from view. At 35 to 40 feet wide, the moderately pitched freestone water was an intimate, scaled-down version of the Gros Ventre River.

Weaving through brush, I targeted an inviting run where my size 14 beadhead was sucked into a complex swirl created by a sharp bend in the creek. At the midpoint of its drift, I felt a welcome tug and, expecting a nimble 10-incher, attempted to coax it away from bank-side roots. But the fish violently protested, repeatedly thrashing broadside in the fast flows. I let the fly rod absorb the trout's energy, with no other option but a forced upcurrent landing. The 4-pound tippet held, and a chunky, 17-inch saffron-hued trout with orange-striped mandibles came to net.

Slowly working our way back to camp, we spent most of the day reading the water and successfully probing with size 12-18 Caddis Pupa, Golden Stone, Copper John and Bird's Nest nymphs through narrow slots, gravel sills or wherever the creek's incline concentrated flows. These imitations, retrieved on a tight line in inch-long pulls just under the surface, caused a fair number of Fish Creek residents to act as if they'd never seen a fly before.

My 17-incher took big-fish honors for the day, but Terry claimed the numbers game, literally losing track of the considerable number of cuts he released.

The second morning, with the pungent aroma of sage infiltrating our nostrils, we followed a faint 4-wheel-



Author Don Vachini displays a Snake River cutthroat from upper Fish Creek that he caught on a tiny nymph. Photo by Terry Donahoe.

drive road several miles, then hiked four miles alongside Cottonwood Creek. Past its confluence with Sohore Creek, trout-holding structure grew less frequent. We had our best luck prospecting in close quarters with shortened, 9-foot leaders, dappling and floating dries — Parachute Adams, Pink Sparkle Dun, Madam X, Green Drake and Elk Hair Caddis — as well as 'hopper and ant patterns in sizes 14-18. These presentations were often smacked with reckless abandon wherever shade enveloped the water.

Although the morning hours were sunny, by 2 o'clock gunmetal clouds smeared the sky and spit windblown snowflakes at us. Twenty minutes later, however, the flurries ceased and sunshine returned.

While exploring the upper Cottonwood Creek drainage, we located a few tiny beaver ponds. Scouting from above for our quarry, we worked these ponds in stealth mode while attempting to perform an out-of-their-window approach. Presenting dry Light Cahill, Hendrickson, Wulff, Goofus Bug and Mosquito patterns daintily from below the dam often drew confident rises, pleasantly visible on their glassy-smooth surfaces.

ROAD-ACCESSIBLE STILLWATERS

In 1923 a massive section of earth

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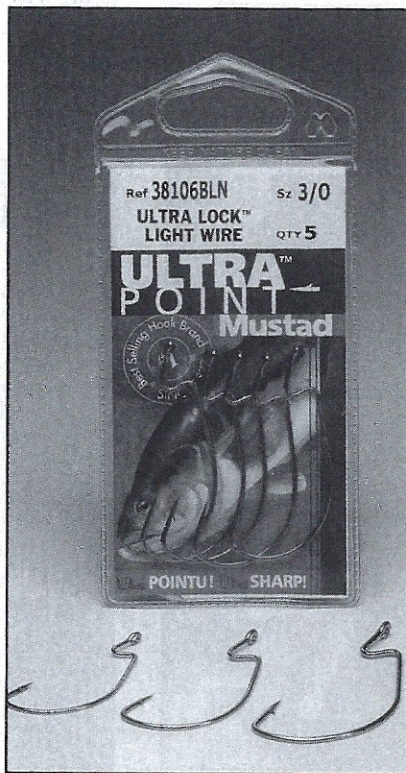
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Shotpak, the manufacturer and marketer of the leading durable shotgun shell dispenser, introduces the Super Slam Three-in-One Shot Pak light-weight vest specifically designed for three types of hunting: upland bird, waterfowl and turkey.

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TETON TROUT...Continued

let loose from Sheep Mountain and filled the canyon in front of the Gros Ventre River, forming Lower Slide Lake virtually overnight. Several years later, a less volatile but equally effective slip occurred farther upstream, creating Upper Slide Lake. While they created relatively large bodies of water, both altered stream flow and underwater structure, while maintaining bountiful nutrients for lake residents.

Shore anglers using light-action spinning tackle can either cast lures or a fly/bubble combination to rising fish, or opt to soak Power Bait, Crave or similar putty baits on a sliding sinker. Worms or night crawlers drifted a few feet under a bobber can be effective for shoreline cruisers.

While Lower Slide offers a boat launch, small prams can be easily carried to the water at Upper Slide. Float-tubers at both waters effectively troll size 6-10 minnow-imitating yellow, green or white Wooly Buggers, silvery Matuka Olive or Muddler Minnow streamers, or flick size 12-16 Quill Gordon or Comparadun dries in protected coves or along the littoral zone for feisty cutts. Boaters dredging the deep, submerged channel with Glass-Eyed, Hopkins, Humdinger or Krocodile spoons or yellow or white Curly-Tail, Bug-Eye or Apex jigs will occasionally land mackinaw in the 3- to 8-pound range.

Slightly off the beaten path, Soda Lake is reached by driving 2 1/2 miles past the Goosewing Ranger Station, then taking the Soda spur road followed by a short hike. It's managed as a trophy cutt fishery. Borre hints that it presents unique challenges to anglers and gets little traffic because of its remote location and creel restrictions (including single, barbless hooks and a limit of one fish over 20 inches). "The water is rich in aquatic and terrestrial life, and a float tube takes advantage of its bottom topography," Borre says.

To try for its selective 17- to 22-inch residents, Borre suggests using size 10-12 green, olive or brown Flashback Pheasant Tail, Bitch Creek or Buckskin Caddis nymphs on 12- to 15-foot leaders. He uses a subsurface retrieve, either parallel to drop-offs or from shallower to deeper water.

Heavy tippets are needed to pressure hooked fish out of weeds or away from underwater obstacles.

WILDERNESS WATERS

Directly east of Jackson Hole, the Gros Ventre Wilderness is composed of 287,000 mountainous acres and more than 200 miles of steep trails throughout the Gros Ventre Mountain Range. Blanketed by a thick canopy of spruce, fir and lodgepole pine, this country is home to moose, elk, mule deer and Dall sheep. In addition, grizzlies, black bear, mountain lions, wolves and coyotes are common predators.

Serviced by Gros Ventre Road, eastside trailhead portals include Big Cow, Goosewing, Soda Creek, Upper Falls and Red Rock Ranch, where lengthy hikes or horse rides take backcountry visitors into perhaps the finest remaining unprotected wildlife habitat in the state. Though trails within the wilderness area are primarily geared for foot travel, horses, mules and llamas are permitted.

Great trout fishing can be found here in a dozen alpine lakes and miles of streams. A fly/bubble setup with steadily twitched Foam Ant, Rubberlegs, Griffith's Gnat or Stimulator patterns works wonders on the hungry brook and cutthroat trout of Brewster, Lunch, Six, Blue Miner, Turquoise, Grizzly and Chateau lakes. A wide variety of tiny wet flies are effective on nearby plunging trailside creeks: Bear Cabin, Clear, Big Cow, Crystal, Soda and Goosewing.

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

To contact Gene Borre, owner and operator of Western Wyoming Outfitters, call him at (307) 734-1130. □

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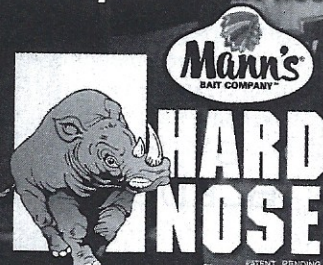
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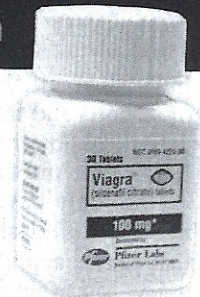
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