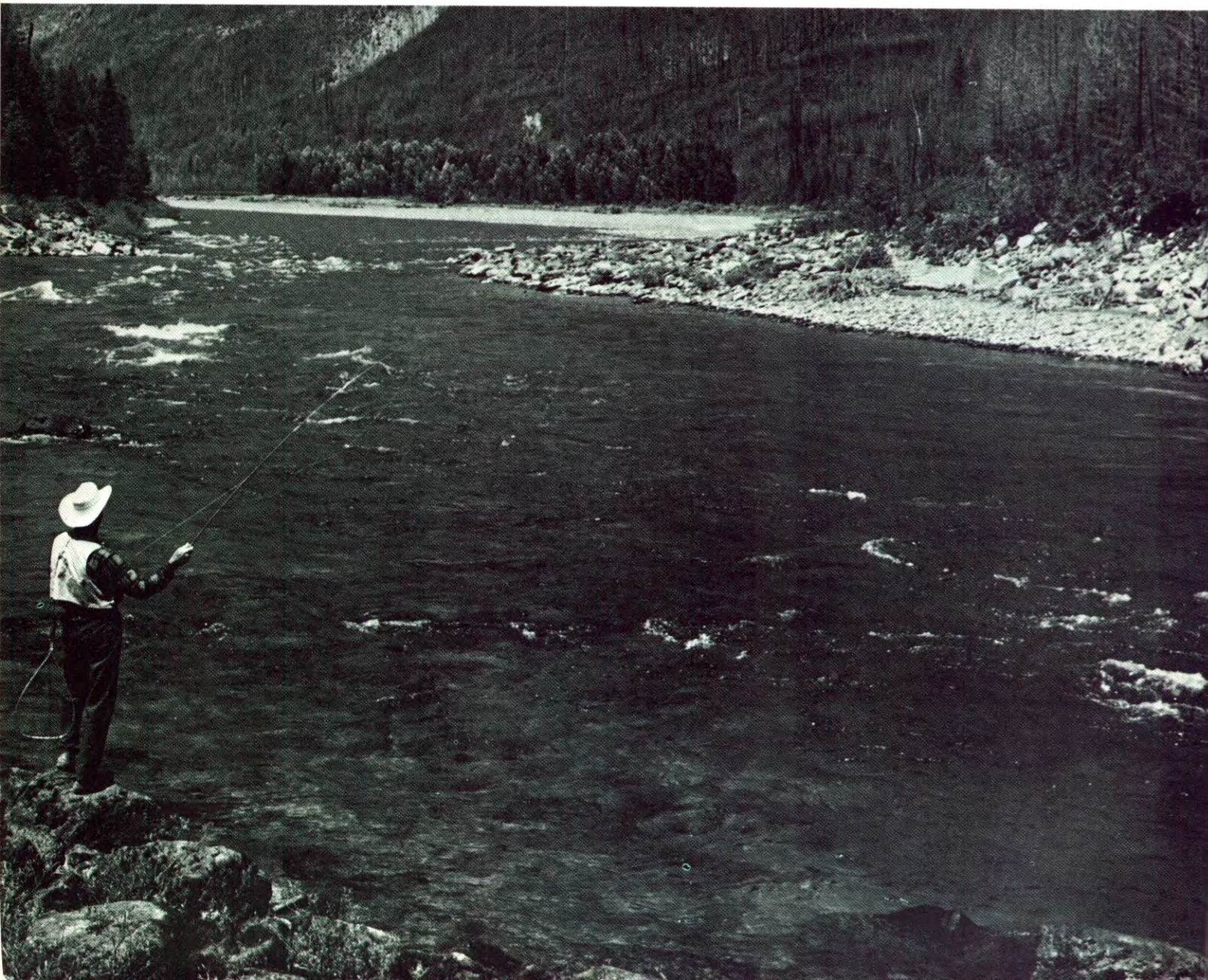


Russell Tinsley

DRIVE-IN WILDERNESS TROUT

(Below) Bill Browning casts for cutthroat on isolated stretch of the North Fork of Montana's Flathead River. (Above) Bill holds a worthy trophy of his trip with author Tinsley.



Cutthroat cruising at mouth of Big Creek, a Flathead feeder stream.

THIS PLACE," SAID BILL BROWNING, grinning, "is getting crowded." He was looking upstream and I glanced that way. Sure enough, in the distance was another fisherman.

"Oh well," I answered. "Nothing is perfect."

But this was close to it—delightful solitude, a picturesque stretch of swift and clear stream flanked by hazy green mountains and dense timber and underbrush, miles upon miles of virtual wilderness river, and an astronomical population of cooperative trout.

The American College Dictionary defines a wilderness as: "A wild region; any desolate tract, as of water."

The North Fork of the Flathead River is northwestern Montana certainly qualifies. It is wild and unspoiled in the truest sense of the definition. Yet, ironically, it is so easy to reach, so very accessible even in an ordinary passenger automobile.

A well-maintained gravel road reaches northward from Columbia Falls and maintains this easily traveled condition almost to the Canadian border. In many places it skirts alongside the river, water where trout can be taken with little fuss or bother. The country is desolate and primitive, this chunk of the Flathead National Forest being one of the few remaining strongholds of the vanishing grizzly bear.

Twenty-one miles from Columbia Falls is Big Creek Campground, a comfortable National Forest facility with tables, running water and pit toilets that was practically deserted when we were there, which is significant since this was the weekend following July 4th, the peak of the tourist season. Only three of the 21 camp sites were occupied. Up the road perhaps a mile is another smaller

campground. Here Bill and I had the entire park to ourselves, and we parked the pickup camper among the lodgepole pines and cottonwoods, in a picturesque location overlooking the river. It was twilight, the magic time of day, and only the chirping of crickets and the subtle roar of the swift-running stream disrupted the vast vacuum of quiet. Unspoiled, untamed beauty; a rare treat.

Soon after daybreak the following morning we shouldered our waders and tackle and hiked to the mouth of Big Creek. The cutthroat trout were active. They were visible everywhere flashing at the surface. Bill, a veteran Montana fisherman, handed me a Royal Coachman and instructed me to get with it. He knotted on a Ginger Quill.

"They ought to take one of these," he said.

He was wrong. They took not one but both.

These weren't big cutthroats, averaging maybe nine or ten inches in length, but they were eager and spirited and fun to catch. We caught and released trout until we tired of it.

Later, we sat in the campground, on a high bank which plunged down to the river, and sipped on tall glasses of iced tea and simply soaked up the magnificent scenery.

"It's irony I suppose," Bill said. "Just across the river there is the Glacier National Park and all the campgrounds are full-up. Yet here we have an entire park to ourselves."

"No telling how many people visit Glacier each year and don't bother to bring their tackle, not realizing such superb fishing is so convenient," I replied.

One day Bill and I took time out from our fishing to take the paved road which branches off the gravel near the Big Creek Campground, crosses the river, and connects with the main artery inside the popular park, and spent the entire day visiting the scenic wonderland. Yet we were back on the river to enjoy a delightful hour of fishing before nightfall.

There are *some* anglers who fly fish the North Fork for native trout, of course, but so few are scattered over so much river that it is an unusual sight to see another fisherman. About the only other humans visible are those anglers throwing heavy hardware with formidable spinning outfits, attempting to catch so-called bull trout (Dolly Varden). The Dollies run up the North Fork in late June and early July, but by mid-summer the fishermen practically have disappeared. Yet fly fishing is just reaching its peak.

"The peak fishing starts in early July, soon after the river gets low and clear," Bill explained. "It slacks off somewhat in August, during hot weather, but picks up again in September. Some of my best catches have been made around Labor Day."

The North Fork isn't noted for big trout. A 16-incher is a good one, but a few in the three- to five-pound class are taken each summer. But what the river lacks in quality it more than compensates with quantity. Cutthroats are abundant and the angler can enjoy action in almost any likely-looking trout water he might try. If you simply enjoy catching fish, lots of fish, in a wilderness setting, this is the place to go.



Around the mouths of tributary creeks is particularly productive. Many such creeks—Whale, Trail, Coal, Big Creek, etc.—feed into the North Fork. Most creeks themselves are off-limits to fishing, to protect spawning Dolly Varden, but there is enough river where the angler needn't worry about the smaller streams anyway.

As with any trout, the cutthroats are most active early and late in the day, but often feeding periods are quite prolonged. One day we fished until mid-morning and the trout still were cooperating when we decided to quit. A fly presented into any prime water—eddies, around islands and brush and rocks, or the mouth of a tributary creek—is apt to get attention in a hurry. These diminutive cutthroats are indeed eager!

One thing I discovered is that they are not finicky in their food preference nor are they too aristocratic about presentation. Even I, an awkward Texas pole-whipper, had no trouble catching trout, which is about the ultimate in fish naivete. Just about any dry fly pattern, No. 12 in size, will do the trick: Royal Coachman, Ginger Quill, Light Cahill, and various Wulff patterns, to name a few we tried. One of the most consistent producers, when grasshoppers are active, is a Joe's Hopper.

If your future itinerary includes a trip to the North Fork, here are a few timely suggestions: Watch for huge logging trucks traveling the gravel road. They journey at a high rate of speed and they yield to no one. If one with its heavy load strays near the loose-dirt edge of the road, that's it brother. We saw one truck turned wrong side up. The North Fork is big water and waders are necessary. Hip-boots will do, but waist- or chest-high waders are even better, preferably with felt soles since the water is swift and bottom stones are numerous and slippery. Mosquitos are pesty at times and some sort of insect repellent eliminates a lot of cussing and slapping. A one-day non-resident Montana fishing license is available for just a dollar. Stamps costing \$1 each can be added for each additional fishing day. The nearest tackle outlet is in Columbia Falls, although fishing licenses and food, along with some tackle, can be had at Polebridge Store, about 30 miles north of Columbia Falls, just off the main road.

But one last note of caution: be sure to budget enough time for the trip. It's difficult to leave when trout are this cooperative!

Browning brings a biggie to net on Flathead's North Fork. Practically wilderness fishing, there is easy access by car. Photos by the author.

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