

Trout Site – Bull Trout are Unique

By Bob Willis

My first encounter with a Bull Trout happened on the east side of the Bitterroot Mountains in the mid 1970's. I was fishing a small stream in the Skalkaho drainage that I thought would be full of Cutthroat and possibly Brook Trout. But all of the fish I caught looked like Dolly Varden and I didn't think too much about it. I had moved from Alaska in 1976 to Montana and caught many Dollies' in the 49th state. Dolly Varden was the most common river fish up there and I got used to seeing them. These fish were similar but had a little different coloration. I caulked it up to some kind of subspecies or color variation.



Bull Trout look a lot like Dolly Varden but I think they are prettier than their coastal cousins.

In the late 1970's these fish were Dolly Varden, but in 1980 taxonomic work was accepted by the American Fisheries Society that identified a trout in the northwestern United States as Bull Trout and distinct from Dolly Varden. Compared to Dolly Varden, Bull Trout are typically larger and have a longer and broader head. They tend to be a little browner than Dolly Varden and have smaller spots. The main geographic difference is that Bulls are usually an inland species and Dolly Varden are more commonly in coastal areas. The main populations in the lower 48 states are in Montana, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington with a small population in northern Nevada.

The effort to save this endangered species has changed the fishing regulations in all of the states with a Bull Trout populations. In 1998 the Fish and Wildlife Service identified that Bull Trout are an endangered species and included them for protection under the Threatened and Endangered Species Act. The four states that have Bull Trout populations have been working for at least a decade to preserve these fish, and a couple of states have been working longer. In 1993, the Idaho Fish and Game Commission declared that Bull Trout may no longer be harvested in the state, and Montana has also been working on the protection of Bull Trout since the 1990's. The other three states do allow limited harvest in areas where the fish are considered to be abundant.

There are a variety of reasons why Bull Trout have disappeared over the years. Degradation of habitat appears to be a principal reason, but the introduction of Brook Trout has also taken a significant toll. Bulls crossbreed with Brook (they are both char) and are eventually bred out of existence. The greatest concern is that the fish have been eliminated from most of the large rivers in their habitat area.

All of the Bull Trout that I caught in the 1970's were taken on stonefly or caddis fly nymphs in brown or black when I fished the headwater streams. I fished the Bitterroot and its tributaries in

2010 and was surprised. I caught five larger Bull's in the West Fork of the Bitterroot and Rock Creek. This time I fished with what I call an Ugly Clouser and the Bull's and large Cutthroat seem to really like that fly. It was a joy to see larger Bull's in areas where I had not caught them in the 1970's. That is a good omen for the Bull Trout population and will make fly fishing these rivers a lot more fun.



This is a Bull/Brook cross and cannot breed. This hybrid is one of the reasons for the decline of Bull Trout.

When you are in Bull Trout country you may run into a fish that looks like this one. It is a Bull-Brook Trout hybrid and is one of the reasons the range of the Bull Trout has been reduced. Both of these trout are Char and the hybrid will eventually eliminate Bull Trout in areas where both fish exist. The hybrids are sterile.

In Montana, Bull Trout do exist with other trout and in the area where no harvest is allowed any Bull Trout that is caught must be released as quickly as possible. Bull Trout are truly worthy fish and every effort to restore this fish to catchable numbers is worthwhile. I have always enjoyed catching different types of trout and comparing the characteristics of the various species, and this fish is unique. I will release all of the Bull Trout I catch as quickly as possible. It was a joy to see their numbers increasing on last visit to Montana.

For more information on Bull Trout see the chapter about the fish in the book or e-book **Trout Adventures – North America**. The book will be available in 2012 from Wilderness Adventures Press. This publisher features books on fly fishing and their e-mail is www.wildadvpress.com.