

Pay to Play on the **ELK** RIVER

A fisheries-management program in British Columbia is protecting pure-strain westslope cutts and yielding electrifying dry-fly fishing.

by Michael Hamilton

THE SUMMER SUN WAS SETTING IN A FIERY BLAZE of reds, typical of the Canadian Rockies. The sunset looked like paint smeared across the sky and reminded us just how long we'd been driving. A 10-hour journey from Seattle had left us road weary, but when we caught our first glimpse of the Elk River just outside Fernie, British Columbia—a small mining town and skiing destination about an hour north of the Montana border—it jolted us awake like a double shot of espresso.

We'd fished here before, but Bob's son, Tim, had not, and he laughed from the backseat as his father and I tried to remember every fish that inhaled our dry flies two years earlier. Like our first trip, our new expedition would take place under August skies in the East Kootenay (pronounced Koot-nee) region of southeastern British Columbia. The fishing here for wild native westslope cutthroat is fantastic, and Paul Samyica, owner and outfitter of Elk River Guiding Company and Fly Shop, describes other dimensions

EXPEDITIONS

of the fishing. “The handful of guides who know these waters call the region Montana North. The ‘Montana’ part gives the impression of a lot of great untouched trout water and Western mountain appeal. The ‘north’ gives the feel of adventure and undiscovered remoteness.”

We made base camp for the week at the Rocky Mountain community of Fernie. From its boomtown status at the turn of the 20th century to its reputation as the Whisky Gap during prohibition, Fernie has inherited a unique and colorful history. Defined as the gateway to adventure in the Canadian Rocky Mountains, Fernie is on Highway 3, also known as the Crowsnest Pass Highway, and if you follow the road north about 3½ hours, you cross legendary rivers, including the Oldman, on your way to the Alberta prairies and the lower Bow River.

On this trip, we had decided to float a different section each day during our weeklong stay. Stretching from the towns of Sparwood to Elko, a distance of about sixty miles, the Elk offers mostly nonstop dry fly fishing from drift boats or rafts for big and wild native westslope cutthroat. The fish often push 22 inches, and you also have a good chance to hook huge bull trout up to 36 inches. Above Sparwood, the



BOTH BY MICHAEL HAMILTON

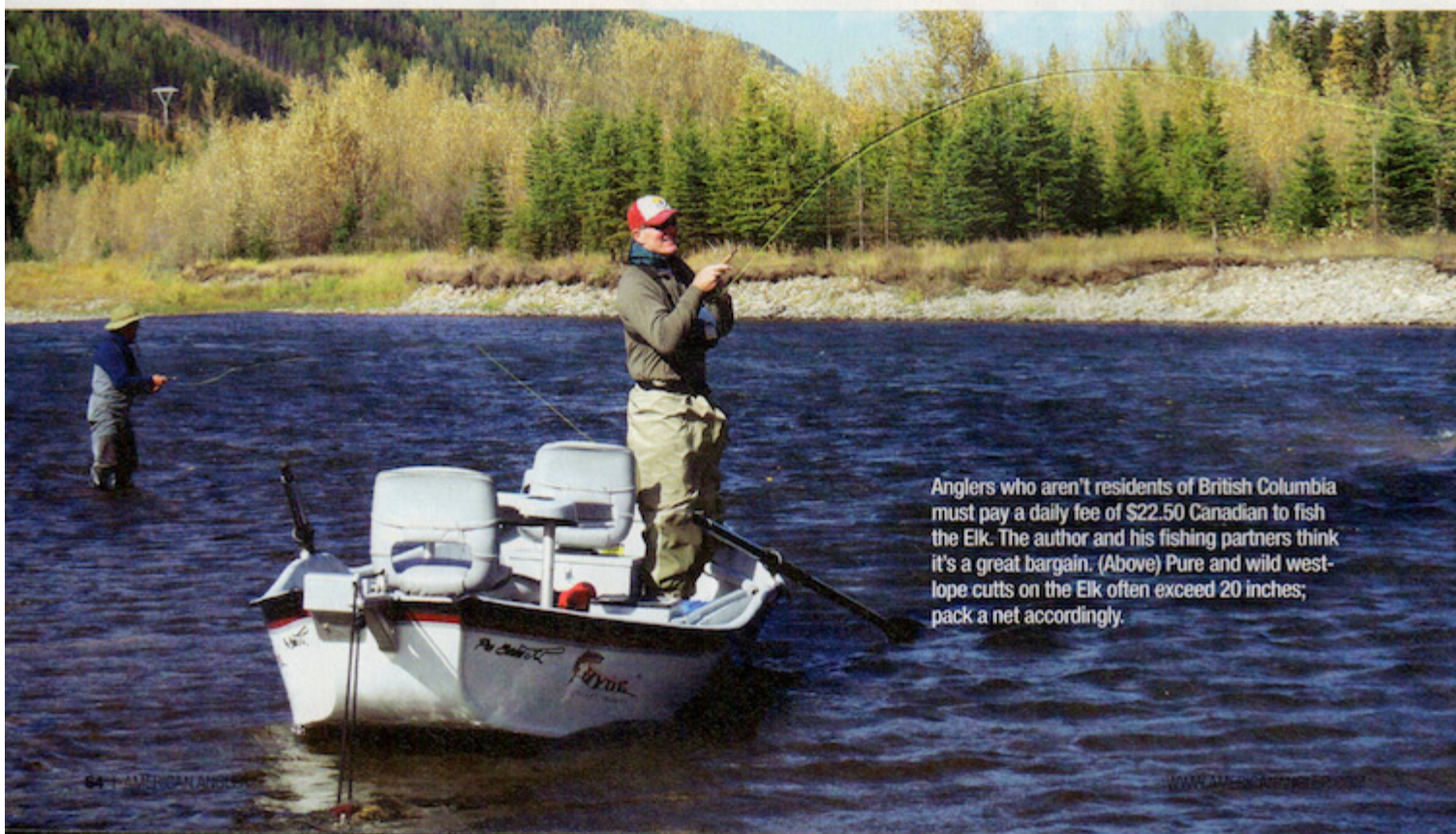
upper Elk is very remote—strictly a walk, wade, and bushwhack fishery.

In addition to fishing for genetically pure trout, Bob and I also wanted to gauge the effectiveness of the East Kootenay Angling Management Plan, (AMP) enacted in 2005. The comprehensive strategy was created to protect the wild westslope cutthroat in the East Kootenay region. The centerpiece to AMP is its “pay to fish” component. Nonresident anglers, such as Canadians from provinces other than British Columbia and visitors from the United States, shell out approximately \$22.50 Canadian daily for a special clas-

sified waters license to fish seven rivers, including the Elk, Saint Mary’s, Wigwam, Bull, Skookumchuck, White, and Upper Kootenay. This daily charge is in addition to general fishing-license fees. The question was, Is it worth it?

The Fishing

On our first day, we set out to float from Fernie to Morrissey Bridge, a six-mile stretch that has large populations of hungry cutts and deep pools where big bullies lurk. (See “The Drifts” in the bonus-content section of AmericanAngler.com for info on the stretches we fished.) As I



Anglers who aren't residents of British Columbia must pay a daily fee of \$22.50 Canadian to fish the Elk. The author and his fishing partners think it's a great bargain. (Above) Pure and wild westslope cutts on the Elk often exceed 20 inches; pack a net accordingly.

hesitated for only a millisecond before sucking in the imitation. By lunch we had 15 fish to net—the smallest was 16 inches and the largest just pushing 20.

On day two we awoke to a cloudy haze. Smoke from distant forest fires had colored the sky gray. We put in at a primitive launch at Hosmer, six river miles above Fernie. Normally in August, we'd fish rubber-leg patterns, but the hazy cover plus the number of trout rising to small mayflies changed our plans. We anchored ahead of the rising fish and tied on size 18 Quigley Cripples, CDC Baetis Cripples, and Parachute Adams. Catching a trout was often as easy as picking out a rise, making a cast, watching the take, lifting the rod tip, and holding on. We each caught a fish almost every cast and hop-scotched from riffle to seam through the day before heading back to base right at dark.

For the rest of the week, blue skies returned and a warm easterly wind blew the smoke out of the valley. And over the final three days, the fishing was much the same as the first two: big cutts taking large

drys cast to likely holding water. Bob and I relived some fond memories from two years before, and created some new ones with Tim. Each of us had 20-fish days. Many of the cutts stretched more than 20 inches, leaving little doubt that the daily fee of \$22.50 Canadian was worth every penny.

Built to Be Great

The Elk is a freestone river born high in the Canadian Rockies and is fed by the Petein Glacier. The runoff flows first into the Elk Lakes, where much of the glacial silt is deposited; leaving the river crystal clear and cold after winter snows melt away. The flow of cold, clear water from the glacier helps keep water temperatures in the Elk in the mid-50s, even through summer days. This is the optimal temperature for insect hatches in the area.

And according to Randy Dolighan, a former biologist for British Columbia Fisheries who now leads eco tours in the Elk Valley during the summer, the insect hatches also are augmented by the geology of the area, which is high in limestone. This sedimentary rock is formed from shells of minute sea creatures, and as the limestone breaks down, it releases a wide variety of marine-derived nutrients that are readily available to aquatic invertebrates. When combined with cold, clean water, these nutrients serve as a catalyst that helps produce prolific insect hatches throughout the summer.

This insect smorgasbord creates an abundance of hatches. Platoons of golden stones start in June and turn into battalions by July. Typical of most freestone rivers, the first goldens emerge in the lower river and move upstream. Cloudy or rainy July days will bring a strong Western green drake emergence. With such great water quality, sections of the Elk will explode with frantically rising trout when the hatch is on. Ants, beetles, and grasshoppers are on the August menu. September sees *Baetis* emerge with October caddis in the late afternoons and evenings.

Structure throughout the river aids aquatic invertebrate production. Much of the Elk River has optimal substrate-and-pool-to-riffle ratios—this means the holding and feeding areas are in good proportion to the areas where insects live and hatch. In addition, sufficient depth

and riparian vegetation allow the trout to avoid avian predators. Dense forests with downed timber produce flying ants and flying termites. When this happens, the fishing can be off the charts.

Another reason the fishing on the Elk is so remarkable is that it's less busy than other great trout rivers in North America. "A busy day would be six to eight boats on a stretch, compared to thirty on the Bitterroot or Madison in Montana," notes Dave Brown, of Dave Brown Outfitters. Brown points out that the Elk is also a relatively new fishery, discovered in the early 1990s.


Pay to Play

The Elk River is one of seven fisheries deemed "classified waters" that are strictly managed under the East Kootenay Angling Management Plan (AMP). The term "classified waters" means that anglers need a special license to fish any of the seven.

AMP was created in 2005 to manage angler overcrowding; to enforce regulations, such as single-fly barbless hooks and catch and release; and to sort out the guiding industry. For example, under the plan, guides are now assigned a certain number of rod days to fish the seven classified waters.

More than five years have passed since the program began, and results are positive. The quality and quantity of wild fish stocks have increased; less angling pressure has improved the quality of the fishing experience for all classes of anglers; and revenue from the classified license fees has generated hundreds of thousands of dollars earmarked for enforcement, education, and conservation.

But the real value of the program can be expressed only by experiences on the river. Based on a week of spectacular dry fly success that we had, our thoughts were in one accord: The \$22.50 daily fee was a bargain. Bob joked that he'd pay 50 loonies a day. (A "loonie" is the Canadian one-dollar coin, which features the image of a loon on the back.)

The season on the Elk opens June 15, and dry fly action continues through mid October. You can bet several loonies we'll be back next summer. 

Michael Hamilton is a freelance writer, voice actor, and fly fisherman living in Seattle, Washington.

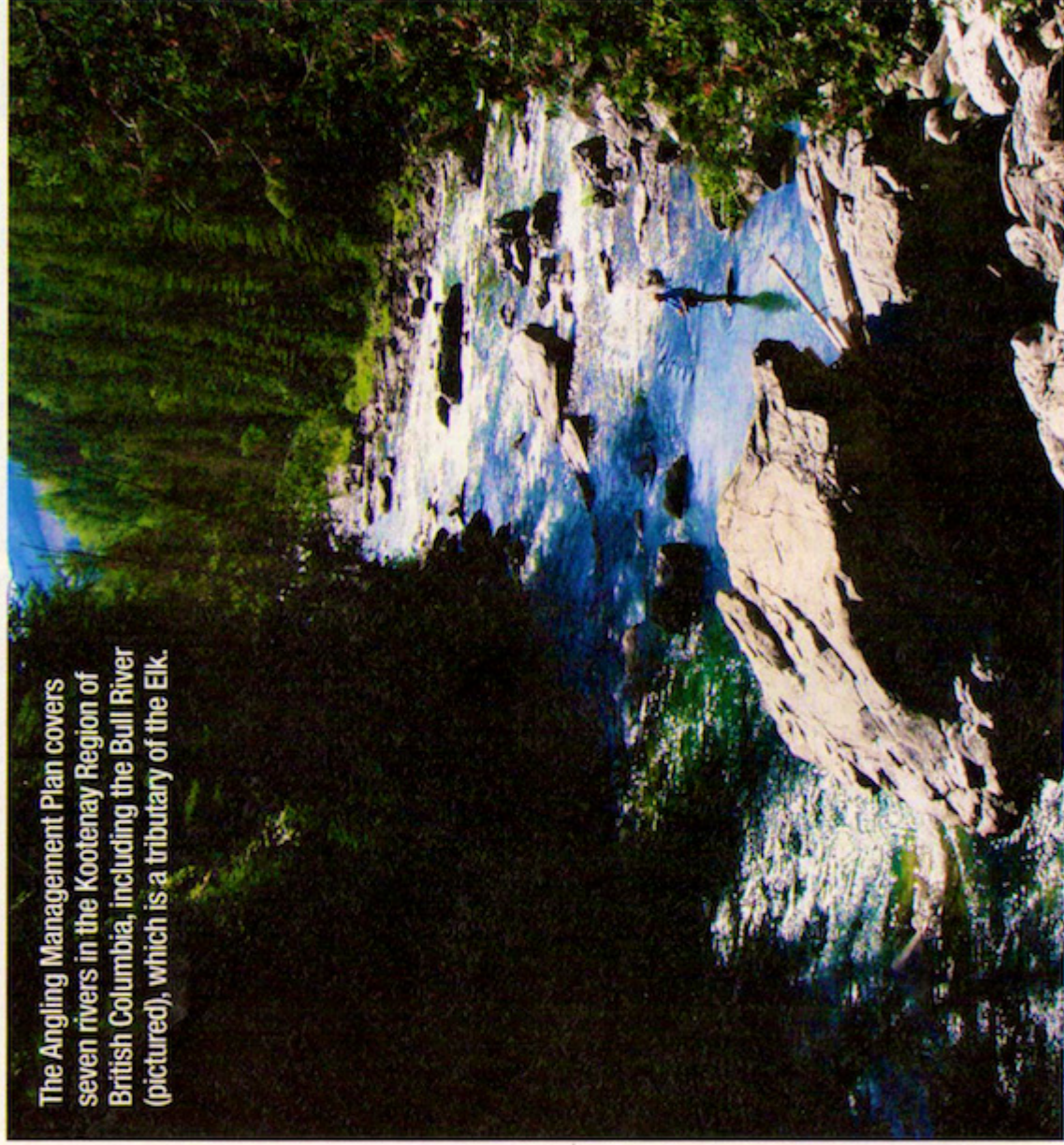
worked to unstrap my drift boat from the trailer, Tim waded out up to his knees to cast to a juicy piece of water in front of the put-in.

He had made only a few casts, when he whooped, "Fish on!" And out of the slick between two current seams, a huge cutthroat jumped, tail-danced, and belly-flopped back to the river with a resounding splash. The general consensus is that cutthroat don't jump, but the wild, greedy, bulldogging natives of the Elk are known for their aerobatics. Minutes later, we landed and released a black-spotted beauty that measured 20 inches and easily weighed 3 pounds.

To the north stood Mount Fernie and the Three Sisters. To the northeast were Mount Hosmer, and Morrissey Ridge with its outcropping, Castle Mountain. I rowed downstream, soaked up the setting, and wondered what the day would bring.

The answer came quickly. Standing in the bow, Bob made a reach cast, placing a size 6 Barrett's Stone tight to the bank. Rising like a Trident Submarine, a fat cutt

The Angling Management Plan covers seven rivers in the Kootenay Region of British Columbia, including the Bull River (pictured), which is a tributary of the Elk.



If You Go



Getting There

Though we made the 10-hour drive from Seattle to Fernie, British Columbia, you can decrease your highway time by flying in to one of several airports within a four-hours' ride of Fernie, which is 3½ hours from Calgary International Airport; 2½ hours from Glacier Park International Airport (FCA) in Kalispell, Montana; and about an hour from Cranbrook Airport (YXC) in British Columbia. If you enter Canada from the United States, don't forget your passport. You will need it to cross into Canada.

Outfitters

Elk River Guiding Company and Fly Shop

Contact: Paul Samycia
Fernie, British Columbia
1-877-423-7239
www.elkriver.ca

Dave Brown Outfitters

Contact: Dave Brown
Fernie, British Columbia
1-800-453-3991
www.davebrownoutfitters.com

Kootenay Fly Shop & Guiding Company

Contact: Gord Silverthorne
Fernie, British Columbia
1-877-423-4483
www.kootenayflyshop.com

Lodging

Lodging options abound in the town of Fernie and on the ski slopes. I recommend going through Fernie Central Reservations. They represent a wide variety of accommodations.

Fernie Central Reservations

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