

# NORTHWEST Fly Fishing

cutthroat trout. Based on a morning of spectacular dry-fly fishing, our position was a no-brainer. "Heck, I'd pay \$40 a day for this kind of fishing," whooped Parkes as he landed yet another 18-inch, fat-as-a-football native cutthroat.

The Elk is a remarkable freestone Rocky Mountain river filled with undercut banks, deep pools, and long riffles, all jam-packed with healthy, wild native cutthroat trout ranging from 14 to 20 inches. These golden-colored, black-spotted beauties are rare descendants of the original west-slope cutthroat, *Oncorhynchus clarki lewisi*, which are all but extinct in a pure genetic form in the lower 48.

However, in the past two years, complaints from residents and concerned angling groups and organizations indicated that the quality of the angling experience on the Elk was rapidly deteriorating due to increased pressure. For example, in the past seven years unguided angler use has jumped 70 percent. Of that increase,

nearly 80 percent of the newcomers were nonresident anglers. To help alleviate the increased pressure, the B.C. government asked licensed commercial guides to step in and participate in the development of an angling management plan for the Kootenay region.

The night we arrived, we had overheard a longtime outfitter and his three guides complaining over several beers that "special interests should not dictate economic development" and that this new fee was a boondoggle. "Nobody wants to pay an extra \$20 a day in addition to their regular non-resident license," he had said. There are two sides to every story and we found the other half waiting for us the next morning after breakfast.

"Our bookings are up 30 percent," said Ned Cooper, co-owner of Elk River Guiding Company. "Almost all of our clients are from the States. When we let them know about the new Classified Waters fee they didn't bat an eye and said that finally someone is doing something about a river before it is too late."

Cooper and his business partner, Paul Samycia, have co-owned Elk River Guiding Company for five years. They both hold bachelor of science degrees in zoology and have been active in helping to get the Elk and seven other major streams and their tributaries in the Kootenay Region designated as Class II systems. "The Elk is one-of-a-kind. We know what we have here, and no one I know is willing to play Russian roulette with this resource as they have in other areas. We want to learn from other resource-management mistakes," Cooper explains.

Cooper says the extra funds have already been used to hire a few new conservation officers for the region (each day we fished the Elk we were checked for licenses and barbless hooks). The fees will also pay to bring the Classified Waters fee system online so agents can avoid writing out the daily permits by hand.

We also talked with non-fishing-related businesses in Fernie. More than one shop owner told us that paying an extra \$20 to protect this habitat is a worthy investment and that "it's not about economics, it's about the fish."

After four days of spectacular dry-fly fishing, we headed home, buoyed by Cooper's parting words: "If we can give these native cutts a chance to grow and flourish, we will have preserved one of the truly unique world-class fishing destinations."

The summer season opens June 15 on the Elk River, and dry-fly action continues through mid-October. For information on fishing and lodging, contact Elk River Guiding Company, (877) 423-7239, [www.elkriver.ca](http://www.elkriver.ca). Be sure to ask about Black Bob and the Beetle. You'll be glad you did.



PHOTO BY MICHAEL HAMILTON

## New Angler Fees to Benefit British Columbia's Elk River

By Michael Hamilton

Lunch along the banks of the Elk River in Fernie, British Columbia, was an exercise in economics for me and my two companions, longtime Washington-based fishing guides Al Parkes and Bob Aid. We were discussing the pros and cons of paying a daily fee of \$21.40 (Canadian) for the privilege of fishing for wild, native west-slope