

# The Undiscovered Trout Rivers

By Jeff Holmes

**NORTHPORT, Wash.**—Emanating from Canada and tucked out of sight in the least populous portion of Washington, two blue-ribbon wild trout fisheries flow, featuring massive redband rainbows, excellent dry fly fishing, small crowds, cheap camping, and experienced guides.

No, it's true.

One might question the legitimacy of this claim given the endless dollars

many of us spend towing boats and hauling gear to Montana and beyond. But with \$5 to \$6 gas projected by the end of vacation season, staying closer to home makes sense, as does multi-purposing trips.

The Upper Columbia and Kettle Rivers offer untapped opportunities for anglers and their families to enjoy the beauty of the Columbia Highlands during peak vacation months. Along with tremendous summer flyfishing, the area offers excellent fishing and

watersports on Lake Roosevelt, inexpensive camping, small farms and wineries, vast forests with proposed wilderness with extensive trails, mountain lakes, and many hunting areas to scout for fall.

So how does Washington, the smallest Western state with the second highest population, hide two blue-ribbon trout streams? Why don't more anglers flock to catch giant redbands and walleyes on the Upper Columbia and big redbands and browns on the Kettle?



Guide Jack Mitchell with a whopper brown from the Kettle. Some up to 24 inches have been shocked out of the Northeast Washington river. (JACK MITCHELL/THE EVENING HATCH)





**SUMMER  
GETAWAYS**



Big 'bows below Canada.  
(JACK MITCHELL/THE EVENING HATCH)



(JACK MITCHELL/THE EVENING HATCH)

### THE CHALLENGES

There are several contributing factors to the relative anonymity of these fisheries; the first is their location in northern Ferry and Stevens Counties. With a combined population of fewer than 50,000 residents living in 4,600 square miles – and most of those in the Colville Valley and southern Stevens County – there just aren't many people.

The rivers themselves offer major logistical challenges.

The Upper Columbia, a 14-mile stretch from the Little Dalles to the Canadian border, is a massive waterway with dangerous eddy lines and whirlpools all summer, including big whitewater features during the highest flows in May through mid-June. The river flows high throughout the summer, dropping progressively and providing cold water and nutrients that fuel prolific hatches of caddis and western green drakes.

Most guides fish the river from power boats during summer, advising against drift boats for all but expert rowers with experience on confused, constantly changing waters, which are influenced daily by hydroelectric dams

in British Columbia on three rivers.

The Kettle is not nearly so big, but with lots of private land, Washington's short stream season, and high flows early and low flows late in the season make it a tough fishery.

Jack Mitchell of The Evening Hatch (509-859-2280) and Justin Hotchkiss of Far North Charters (509-684-6870), friendly competitors on both rivers, agree that the river's peak summer fishing spans a short window of time, especially for floaters.

"Once flows drop below 3,000 cfs, that's when I begin focusing on the Kettle," said Hotchkiss. "That usually happens in late June or early July."

Above-average snowpack that deepened late into spring may push flows above 3,000 cfs into July this year and extend the floating season, which is short but lucrative.

"Access is tough to begin with, but there is also a very narrow window for floating without having to drag boats and power through lots of water," said Mitchell. "Once flows drop below 1,000 cfs, floating is close to impossible without a lot of work. [The Evening Hatch] has private access permission

that allows us to offer anglers floating opportunities later into the season."

Despite significant logistical challenges facing anglers on both rivers, fishing can be fantastic, even for do-it-yourselfers, especially if you can hire a guide for a day to pattern fishy water and the fish themselves.

### THE 'JURASSIC RIVER'

Jack Mitchell has been fishing the Upper Columbia since 1994 and guiding it since 2000. Nicknaming it The Jurassic due to the fishery's scope, Mitchell raves about the nearly year-round fishery for plus-sized wild rainbows and gets palpably excited when he talks about the best dry fly fishing, June 15 through July 30. His brand new Black Bear Lodge, situated mere yards from the river, is set to open July 1, an investment that demonstrates his confidence in the fishery.

Between Mitchell and his guides, The Evening Hatch spends 150 river days a year pursuing trout on the Columbia. Summer fishing is excellent, especially during the July-long western green drake hatch.

"The drakes are big, size 8-10, and



# SUMMER GETAWAYS



Nothing better on a hot summer day than floating a river, except floating and fishing a river. (JACK MITCHELL/THE EVENING HATCH)

trout rise eagerly to them,” said Mitchell. “We get a full month where drake patterns catch fish. It is a lot of fun ... [but] the big-ticket food item during summer is caddis. They hatch in blizzards, and the rainbows gorge themselves.”

Upper Columbia rainbows look like they gorge themselves at all times on the Mark McGwire diet, averaging 18 to 19 inches and 2½ to 3 pounds a piece. Mitchell reports that even during summer months, a client catches a 22- to 26-inch rainbow every few days.

Walleye, cutthroat and incidental bull trout are landed regularly as well, but rainbows rule.

“An average day turns up five to 10 fish of exceptional quality during summer, but some days are absolutely fantastic and will yield many more,” said Mitchell. “We have lots of 30-fish and better days.”

“Before the drakes come off in July, we also get some blue-winged olive action in June when the big caddis

hatches start up,” offered Hotchkiss. “The trout stuff themselves on caddis in June after their spawn, but many times they will select BWOs during caddis hatches ... Pale morning duns and pale evening duns hatch from mid-July to the end of summer, and they offer some action too.”

“Nymphing is always good, but you’re not looking to get your rig near the bottom like on many freestone streams because it isn’t happening due to depth,” said Mitchell. “We set our indicators 2 to 5 feet deep. It’s a different mindset.”

Very different. Try trout that don’t want streamers during summer and that face downstream instead of up due to the force of summer flows. Imagine fishing a favored run or seam on your favorite trout river, only to have it vanish or become something else before your eyes.

“I have been fishing the river for 27 years since I was a kid, and it is the

strangest place I’ve ever fished,” said Hotchkiss, a Northport native. “The flows change often, and so do the seams and current breaks where we fish. There’s always a new challenge, and the rewards are awesome if you can figure out where the fish want to feed.”

Indeed, finding the fish on unfamiliar waters – along with navigating a big dangerous river with whirlpools swirling feet below the river’s surface – is the do-it-yourself angler’s greatest challenge.

Getting on the river is less challenging. The Northport City Park offers a free launch right in town. One can also stay or camp in Northport by RV camping at the city park, or by reserving a clean, comfortable cabin at Lazy Daze Retreats (509-732-6686). Seven miles upstream from town on the Waneta Road is Upper Columbia RV and Campground (509-732-4367), a quiet private resort with showers.

Free or cheap camping can be found easily in the Colville National

# SUMMER GETAWAYS

Forest or the Lake Roosevelt National Recreation Area, which begins 5 miles downstream from Northport. Reservations are a good idea on the lake.

Colville and Kettle Falls to the south offer a much broader range of options, including fishing licenses, which are not available in Northport.



Anglers release much of their catch in the Columbia Highlands. (JUSTIN HOTCHKISS/FAR NORTH CHARTERS)

## LITTLE MONTANA

The Kettle first enters Washington at Midway, B.C., bending south through Curlew and then north to the border at Danville through a magnificent mountain valley. This is the upper Kettle fishery, the best and smallest trout water. The USGS Ferry, WA, gauge, just south of the border, provides real-time flows and air temperature. This is the gauge to watch.

The Kettle reenters the states a bigger river at Laurier, home of another USGS gauge. The lower Kettle then flows almost due south to empty into Lake Roosevelt just north of Kettle Falls. A greater diversity of species and fewer trout are present, but the trout fishing is still more than viable with a higher percentage of browns in the lower river.

Rainbows dominate in both stretches, however, big, broad-tailed redbands from genetic stock that evolved with steelhead prior to the construction of Grand Coulee Dam. And during the short fishing window between 3,000 and 1,000 cfs, they gobble dries, especially on the upper river.

With golden stones in the system, Hotchkiss and Mitchell both advocate rubber-legged patterns like Chernobyl Ants, Turk's Tarantulas, and Madame

Xs during prime water. Both sometimes hang a dropper, Hotchkiss a Copper John, but neither bothers nymphing much due to the excellent dry fly fishing.

According to Hotchkiss, "We get unreal numbers of risers to big dries, but we also fish PMDs and caddis. Usually, something like a Chernobyl is all you need."

Mitchell agrees, adding, "During high water years like this one, we get fishable flows into August. That allows us to fish hoppers, and it can be great."

For the river's brown trout and beefier rainbows, Mitchell also fishes streamers in a variety of techniques, favoring patterns like JJ Specials, Beldars, and mohair leeches. Big browns are the stuff of legend on the Kettle, and Mitchell occasionally catches large specimens.

"The water is clear enough that you can climb the bank and spot fish. For whatever reasons, the bigger browns will sometimes hold in the shallow tailouts. Spending time spotting and stalking these fish can be very rewarding."

But rainbows dominate both the sport catch and results from electroshocking surveys that Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife fisheries biologist Jason McLellan conducted several years ago.

"What we found when we sampled around Curlew were not huge numbers of fish, but we found huge fish and good numbers of them ... rainbows to 20 inches ... browns to 24 inches," said McLellan. "We sampled lots of mountain whitefish to 16 inches."

"Every time we fish the river during prime flows, somebody catches at least one 19- to 20-inch rainbow, usually more than one," said Hotchkiss.

Anglers cannot simply show up to the Kettle and expect to fish anywhere, however. Access is limited with lots of private land, but many landowners will gladly allow polite anglers when asked.

Basic googling skills can yield access insights into options for the lower river, as well as unlimited camping options on surrounding Colville National

Forest lands. Pierre Lake boasts a popular and beautiful USFS campground just miles from the bridge at Orient; more exist. Beware of the vinyl raft hatch during hot summer days on the lower river.

The upper river is tough but doable to access, offering an excellent floating opportunity: 9 miles of prime water between Toroda Road and Curlew. Do-it-yourself floaters should focus on this stretch while perhaps exploring other options later. Walk and wade anglers can also find access at Toroda Creek. Mitchell recommends looking for roadside access all the way from the border at Ferry to Curlew. Like the upper river, a range of free and cheap camping options exist in the Colville National Forest, as well as at Curlew Lake State Park, a popular fishing, swimming and cavorting lake. **NS**

## GOOD NEWS FOR THE FUTURE

Little science had been conducted on wild trout populations in either the upper Columbia or Kettle until the last few years. As part of a stock assessment program, Jason McLellan is currently directing WDFW projects on the lower Kettle and on a major tributary of the Upper Columbia that shall remain unnamed.

The major purposes of the study are to identify spawning productivity and to determine the year-round patterns of wild adult fish, including the extent to which they use Lake Roosevelt and tributaries.

"Screw traps" currently in operation in both streams have yielded some exciting news.

According to WDFW biologist Chuck Lee, who maintains the trap on the Upper Columbia tributary, "We are catching lots of native minnows, but we are also catching lots of wild redband rainbow juveniles. Just below our trap are a few redds with 3- to 5-pound rainbows on them right now," Lee reported this late April.

WDFW biologists estimate that 1,000 such adults may be spawning on this one tributary of the Upper Columbia.