



JOSEPH TOMELLERI ILLUSTRATION

The westslope cutthroat trout is Idaho's state fish, and is native to the Middle Fork of the Salmon River. Since 1973 a catch-and-release, single barbless hook only policy has allowed the trout to thrive. Westslopes average 12 to 15 inches, with some pushing 20 inches or more.



because only a small part of the hull is touching the water at any time.

One surprising highlight of the trip occurred at the end of the second day. We pulled into a campsite with hot-spring pools on a high bench above the river. The overflow created a natural shower below with endless hot water—nature's bounty at its best. Over the next few days a routine set in. In the mornings and afternoons we made our miles while pausing at noteworthy locations for lunch or simply to sight-see. While the guides made dinner, the guests often gathered around Bill at the dinner table, breaking out a cocktail or three, and listening to him hold forth. Our nights were dark and silent and studded with stars.

Because this trip was not devoted exclusively to fly fishing, two oar-powered rafts and one paddle raft also accompanied the McKenzie. Would-be fly fishermen, women and kids rotated from rafts to the McKenzie throughout the day, often with spectacular results. Bill often lagged behind to hang in an eddy where the fishing was best. Because 12,000 to 15,000 people

will float through this canyon every year, the U. S. Forest Service has designated this area as catch and release to enable everyone to share in the excitement.

According to Bill, "The art of fly fishing is something that few mortals will ever completely master, but with a few hours of instruction and practice, they'll be able to see satisfactory results." That was certainly the case on this trip with all who participated. What happens when practiced technique becomes art, however, was demonstrated by our Logan, Utah participant. While sharing the bow of the McKenzie with another fisherman, he caught and released over 50 cutthroat between breakfast and lunch. His partner caught 35. He said he wants to come back in order to "break 100." Overhearing this story during lunch, Catfish quipped, "Bill is the fishing guide's guide."

Toward the end of the trip some of the guests began to discuss what this experience had meant to them. Was it simply about exciting whitewater, great fishing and beautiful scenery, or was there something more? One young woman who seemed

dazzled by the river canyon described it as a "magical place." When I asked her to explain, she said, "It seems unbelievable to me that a place of such incredible beauty could exist." One Salmon River guide with unusual maturity, insight and eloquence seemed to echo the thoughts and feelings of all his fellow guides: "I love the wild and the intimate relationship I have formed with it over my lifetime. I am completely comfortable here and consider it a special privilege to give newcomers a glimpse of what I have known for so long." Perhaps this is why so many of the guides and outfitters regard what they do not as a job but as a way of life.

Standing at the river's edge on our last day, I finally realized this river's and this canyon's gift to me: an overwhelming sense of humility at how small and insignificant we all really are, and how fleeting are our lives. Come and discover for yourself.

[Fly Fish America](http://FlyFishAmerica.com)

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