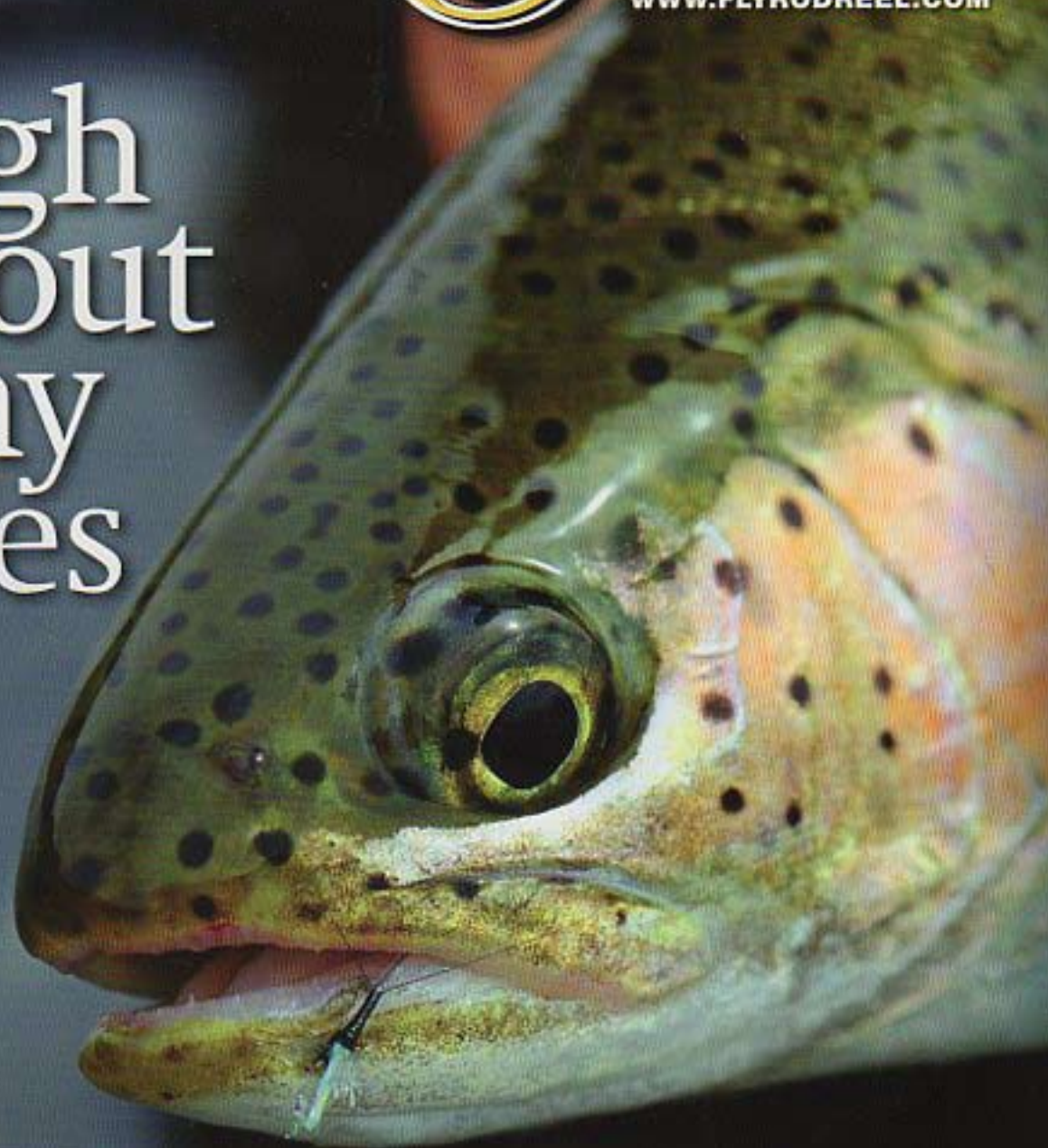


[BAJA BONANZA] Jacks, dorado, roosterfish... sharks?

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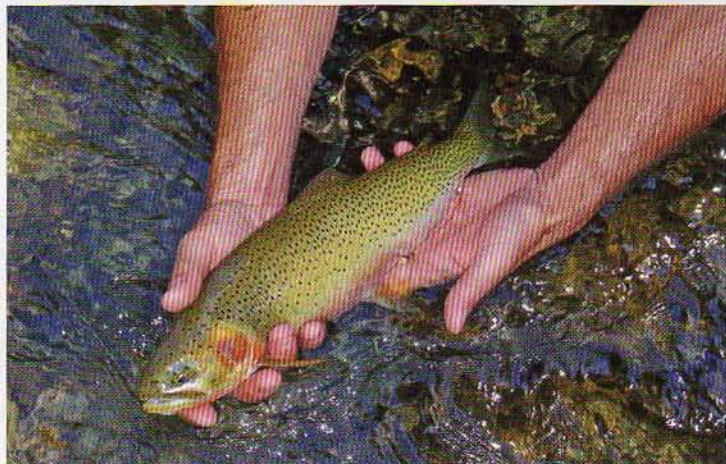
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[THE TRAVELING ANGLER] by Kirk Werner

Cutthroat Commandos

Pack-trains and a remote lodge offer the best westslope cutthroat fishing in Idaho's forested panhandle.

THE ST. JOE RIVER IS NO SECRET among north Idaho anglers, but those who fish it agree: the "Joe," as locals call it, is very much a diamond in the rough.

The Joe begins in the high, rugged mountains that divide Idaho's "northern panhandle" from western Montana. The upper river flows through steep canyons and heavily timbered valleys that gradually play out as the river continues its 120-mile journey before emptying into Lake Coeur d'Alene. Lower sections of the river are not exactly remote, nor does an angler fish without company there. But the Joe's upper 15 miles, beyond the end of the road, is Congressionally designated a Wild and Scenic River. That means no motorized vehicles or phone service; just plenty of solitude

and dryfly action on native westslope cutthroat trout.

It was there, at the end of the road, that my most recent St. Joe adventure began. In fact, at 10:00 AM (right on schedule) we arrived at our rendezvous point for a trail ride into St. Joe Outfitters. We were welcomed with a handshake and a genuine smile by Will Judge, the number-two man of the operation. Duffel bags and 4-weight rods were wrapped carefully in waterproof tarps, which were then lashed securely to the backs of pack horses. I

The river holds enough westslope cutts to keep you entertained for hours.

detected a subtle sense of urgency to hit the trail, and after a brief introduction to our mounts, we were off in single file.

The horses moved slowly, but deliberately, along a well-maintained trail that winds through the spruce forest. The animals know every step along the way so there's no need to worry about the origins of a particular pool known as Dead Horse Hole. If the river isn't in full view during the length of the ride, it's never out of earshot. As we rode in I couldn't help but wonder if we might stop and fish along the way. It was hard to stay in the saddle as we passed run after run of sweet-looking trout water. But there would be no stopping to fish.

Five miles and six gentle river crossings later, a large meadow unfolded before us and the horses got a little skip in their step. We pulled up to the hitching post in front of St. Joe Lodge after three hours in the saddle. Will checked

his watch and exhaled a sigh of relief as his boss (and wife), Barbara, appeared from the lodge to greet us. Like Will, Barbara has a genuine,

friendly and laid-back manner. She also works hard to prepare meals for the guests and crew, and all she asks is that folks be on time to eat. I understood why Will was adamant about sticking to the schedule: Lunch was ready.

Barbara is up each morning long before

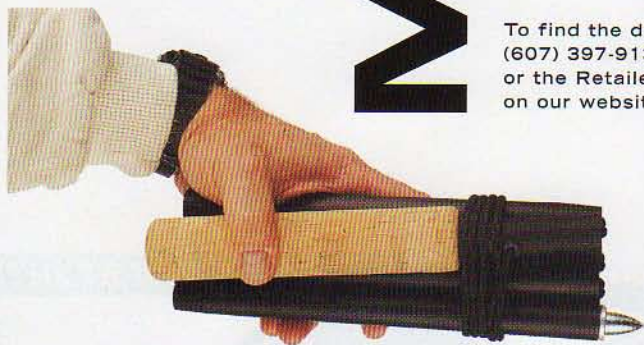


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guests, and breakfast is served at 7:30. We're talking about stick-to-your-ribs fare that even a light eater can't resist: biscuits and gravy, sausage, bacon, wild blueberry pancakes, fresh fruit. You'll appreciate the hearty breakfast if you plan to fish hard all day, as we did. Barbara offers the option of eating lunch at the lodge or packing a lunch to go (we opted for the latter). Dinner is served promptly at six. Dinners match or exceed those breakfasts with roasts, ribs, homemade meatloaf and lasagna on the menus, with a variety of side dishes. Desert was equally anticipated, with Barbara's fresh-baked cookies and pies. It's advised that you leave any notion of a diet for when you return home, although Barbara does accommodate special dietary needs.

Mealtime is the only thing that's on a schedule when you're a guest here. Between breakfast and dinner all we did was fish, and excellent fishing can be found within a short walk of camp. In fact, there's no need to walk more than a quarter-mile to find good water, and the river holds enough westlope cutts to keep you entertained for hours. The upper river isn't much wider than a good cast in many places, and wading is not difficult when the river is at its prime summer levels. During the peak heat of summer wet wading is preferred, although I was glad to have waders, as it can get chilly in the mountains when the sun is off the water.

The upper river is all catch-and-release, and we released scores of 10- to 12-inch fish that eagerly rose to most any attractor pattern (Stimulators, Turk's Tarantulas, Humpies, Chernobyls). To entice bigger fish I had to work harder and match a tan mayfly that hatched in the late afternoon. These hatches weren't epic, but when they came off the fish wanted nothing else. Presenting a size 18 Sparkle Dun on 6X tippet with an absolutely drag-free drift was the ticket, though not without obvious challenges. On our last full day I was nearly late for dinner because I'd lost track of time trying to woo a particular 17-inch fish that had high standards. After an hour I was finally able to hook up briefly before the fish snapped me off. Then I ran back to camp

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just in time for dinner.

For those willing to work a bit harder, hiking up the trail opens seemingly endless miles of even-less-pressured water. We never hiked more than three miles upstream, simply because it was just too hard to pass up inviting water along the way. Nor did we want to encounter a moose along the trail, which can be narrow and steep in places. We saw a couple of large bulls in the meadow near camp, and we counted more wildlife than anglers during the course of our three-day visit.

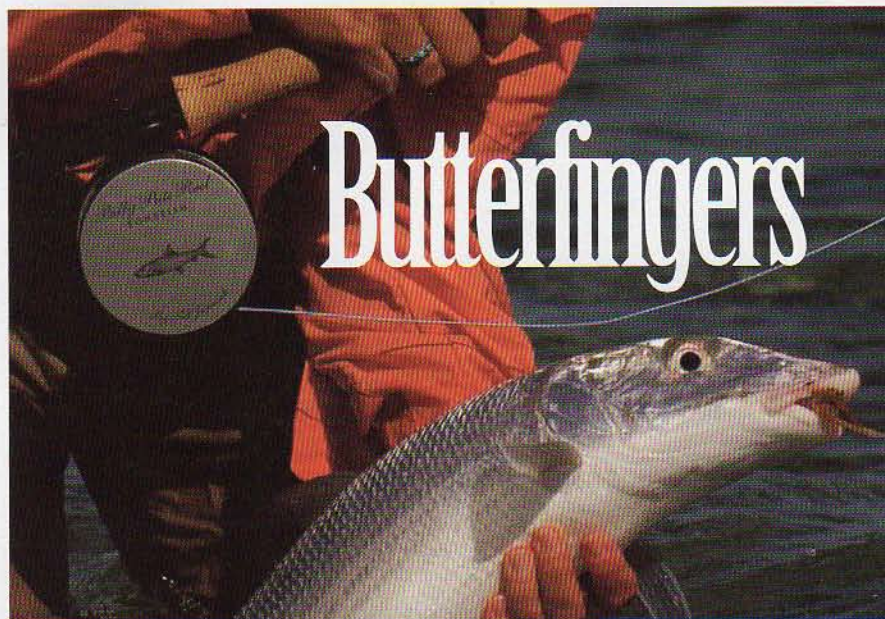
As proprietors of St. Joe Outfitters since 1989, Barbara and Will offer guests something very unique and special—great dryfly native-trout fishing amidst breathtaking natural beauty. The lodge is something to behold, too. Nestled among the trees at the edge of a meadow, it was built in the 1940s and has stood the test of time. It has a rustic flavor and it's far from a luxury resort, but does offer genuine backwoods comfort. You can grab a hot shower at the end of the day, and a generator is fired up to provide light for a couple hours in the evening.

As darkness set in each night we gathered around a campfire to share a little whiskey and tell lies. By 10 we hit the sack in guest cabins that provided more than adequate shelter from the occasional summer rainstorm.

I've visited St. Joe Lodge on two occasions, both times in mid-July. This is prime time on the St. Joe, when flows are at their most productive, hatches are strong and summer air temperatures make for comfortable fishing. If you can't make it in July, however, understand that fishing remains excellent well into fall when some outstanding Blue-Wing Olive and October Caddis hatches occur.

Point your browser to www.stjoeoutfitters.com for more information. ■

Kirk Werner is a freelance writer who thrives on wild trout in north Idaho. He runs a Web site called The Unaccomplished Angler, www.unaccomplishedangler.com



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