

GRAYLING: MORE THAN
JUST A SEXY DORSAL.

Big Hole Bonanza

The underappreciated Arctic grayling BY MYERS REECE

IN THE SWIRLING POLITICS of salmonid recovery, grayling seldom inspire the loudest debates, unless you live in Montana's Big Hole River valley. Even anglers familiar with the species may not realize they're in the same family as trout, salmon, char, and whitefish, although Lewis and Clark had a hunch when they documented the "new kind of white and silvery trout" in 1805 along the upper Missouri River.

The "Lady of the Stream," a scaly steel missile of a fish sporting long dorsal fins splashed with iridescent purples and blues, is no less beautiful today than during the Corps of Discovery's expedition, but it may be even more mysterious, since so few people get to see one for themselves. I've been fortunate to hold quite a few in my hand.

Historically, fluvial Arctic grayling, *Thymallus arcticus*, were distributed across Canada and Alaska, but only in two Lower 48 states, Michigan and Montana. By the 1930s, the Michigan population was extinct. Montana's native grayling, once found throughout the upper Missouri drainage above Great Falls, are restricted today to a single remaining viable population in the Big Hole River watershed. Montana also holds the Continental United States' last native adfluvial, or lake-dwelling, grayling population—in the Centennial Valley's Upper and Lower Red Rock Lakes.

Grayling need cold and clean waters, and are considered an indicator species that offer clues into the health of an aquatic ecosystem. Accordingly, habitat degradation jumps out as the most obvious culprit for their decline. But another contributing factor is that they're fairly easy to catch, prone to slurping flies and lures with little discretion.

In addition to those variables, the Big Hole population, which is genetically and geographically distinct from northern populations in Canada and Alaska, was decimated by drought in the 1980s. During a particularly severe drought in 1988, parts of the Big Hole went dry. The combination of extreme weather and accompanying declines in grayling set in motion wide-ranging efforts to find answers, reaching from the river valley's farmland all the way to Washington D.C.

Partnerships like the Big Hole Watershed Committee and Arctic Grayling Recovery Program emerged, tasked with bridging the gap between the often-competing interests of private land ownership and fish recovery. Ranchers, flyfishers, conservationists, and scientists were forced to sit at the same table to untangle complicated knots, and a funny thing happened: they discovered it was hard to hate each other once they heard each other. They started hammering out solutions for habitat improvement, fishing regulations, and water allocation.

In a counterintuitive quirk, the grassroots collaboration was prodded by courtroom quarreling, namely the specter of the Endangered Species Act. Rather than let federal bureaucrats and judges decide their fate, everyone from government biologists to landowners saw benefits in prioritizing conversation and compromise.

The legal wrangling dates back to 1991, when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) was petitioned to list grayling under the ESA. In 1994, USFWS concluded that the species was indeed worthy of listing, but was precluded by priority. For a decade, grayling were a low-priority candidate until being upgraded to high-priority in 2005. The Center for Biological Diversity and Western Watersheds Project filed a complaint in 2003, requesting a listing decision. ➔

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Then, in 2007, USFWS reversed course and concluded that grayling weren't "a listable species under the ESA," prompting another legal challenge. Under the new Obama Administration, the agency again changed its mind, renaming grayling a candidate species still precluded by priority. The agency reached a settlement in 2011 to make decisions on a number of species, including grayling, which culminated in an August 2014 announcement that the fish, inexplicably, no longer met criteria for protection.

The Center for Biological Diversity, along with Western Watersheds Project, Pat Munday, and George Wuerthner, who was among the original petitioners for protection in 1991, sued again in February 2015. That is where the legal battle stands today.

Meanwhile, back at ground level, the partnerships continued trying to find their own answers. One major breakthrough was a Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances (CCAA), implemented by multiple government agencies. As of today, 33 landowners have agreed to conservation plans through the CCAA covering more than 153,000 acres, including agreements on maintaining stream flow. Though enrollment is down from its peak, the Big Hole CCAA is one of the largest of its kind in the country.

Unlike the lawsuit's plaintiffs, members of the partnerships celebrated the announcement that grayling no longer warrant ESA considerations, hailing it as evidence of how far recovery has come. Biologists are also monitoring the progress of grayling reintroduction in other Montana creeks and rivers, including the nearby Ruby. But, no matter where you stand regarding the individual Big Hole case, the truth is that grayling's big picture remains bleak, with the species inhabiting roughly five percent of its historical range.

Rather than murky politics, I prefer to dive into the similarly cloudy depths of memory, where I can track my own fascination with grayling. I can't remember my first trout—in my recollection, I simply started catching them right out of the womb. But I do recall with uncommon clarity my first grayling. I was on a trip to the Big Hole with my father, not yet old enough to be fully trusted with a fly rod but at that impressionable age when the magic of fishing was taking hold.

We were fishing on the upper Big Hole, near Wisdom, where the river is braided and snakes through willow-threaded pastures. It's not the pulsing Big Hole of Melrose or the tumbling stream of the canyon, nor is it the meandering river of the meadows immediately above the canyon. Rather, it could be mistaken for a creek, and both brook trout and grayling love it.

The grayling of my memory gobbled a small red-and-white Mepps spinner: a clash of crimson and violet just under the

surface. Based on one morning's worth of evidence, I believed myself to be a brook trout whisperer, and surely I had just caught the world's first purple brookie. But when I brought it to my feet, its colorful dorsal fin swaying in the current, I knew I had captured a mystery.

I've been smitten with the fork-tailed fish ever since, although I caught very few for many years. It wasn't until I moved to Kalispell, nearly a five-hour drive from the heart of native grayling country, that I reacquainted myself with them, at Rogers Lake, one of four stocked lakes in Flathead County with viable populations of the species.

Earlier this year, Mark Kornick, a hatchery manager with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, let me and a photographer tag along on a mission to collect grayling eggs and semen during the Rogers Lake spring spawn. Typically, the narrow inlet above the lake would be choked up with spawning grayling. But on this day, as with the biologists' previous outing, there was scarcely a fish in the stream.

The grayling that Kornick and his partner did manage to net were splotted with a white fungus as disconcerting as it was

mysterious. Fungus is a secondary infection, meaning that it's responding to a primary affliction: illness, injury, changes in habitat or food supply. Biologists haven't determined the root cause, although Kornick figures it's related to stress from winter.

Kornick was able to secure a below-average haul of eggs and semen, which he's incubating at a Flathead Lake hatchery for restocking this summer. At a separate Flathead Lake hatchery that he runs, and where his house is located, he's raising grayling derived from the Red Rock population, which he called "imperiled." Those fish will be stocked in Handkerchief Lake, also in Flathead County, as a reserve stock to bolster the country's only remaining native lake-dwelling population.

What the fungus means for the future of my backyard Rogers grayling, which are a genetic mix of both Big Hole and Red Rock strains, remains to be seen. I fished Rogers in late May and didn't catch anything, which may say more about the angler than anything else. In any case, the Rogers population was wiped out in the 1990s following the introduction of perch and then bounced back after restocking, so I like to think of them as a hardy bunch, even if the North American grayling experience has proven they are intensely vulnerable.

Perhaps it takes a grayling population in your backyard to get interested in the recovery debate. Maybe you need to catch one and hold its slender body in your hands. I'll leave the politics up to its practitioners, providing only encouragement from the sidelines that they make the right decisions. But it doesn't take an expert to see that grayling are special, and they're even prettier in the water than in your memory. 🐟





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