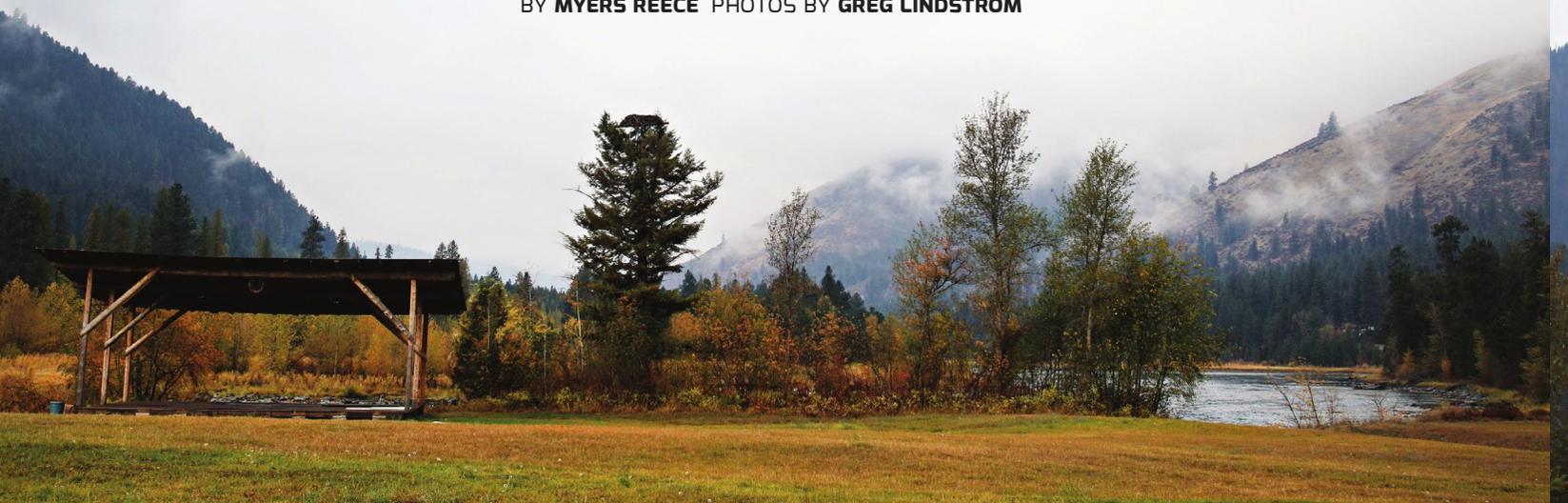


ON THE MEND

Evolving priorities on an overlooked tailwater

BY MYERS REECE PHOTOS BY GREG LINDSTROM



It was only 8 a.m. and I'd already moved a dead body.

The carcass in question was a fat doe that had been hit by a car near Dave Blackburn's Kootenai Angler fly shop in northwestern Montana. Blackburn was worried that eagles feeding on the deer could get hit by logging trucks coming around a sharp corner, so he enlisted me to help relocate it where the raptors could dine in peace.

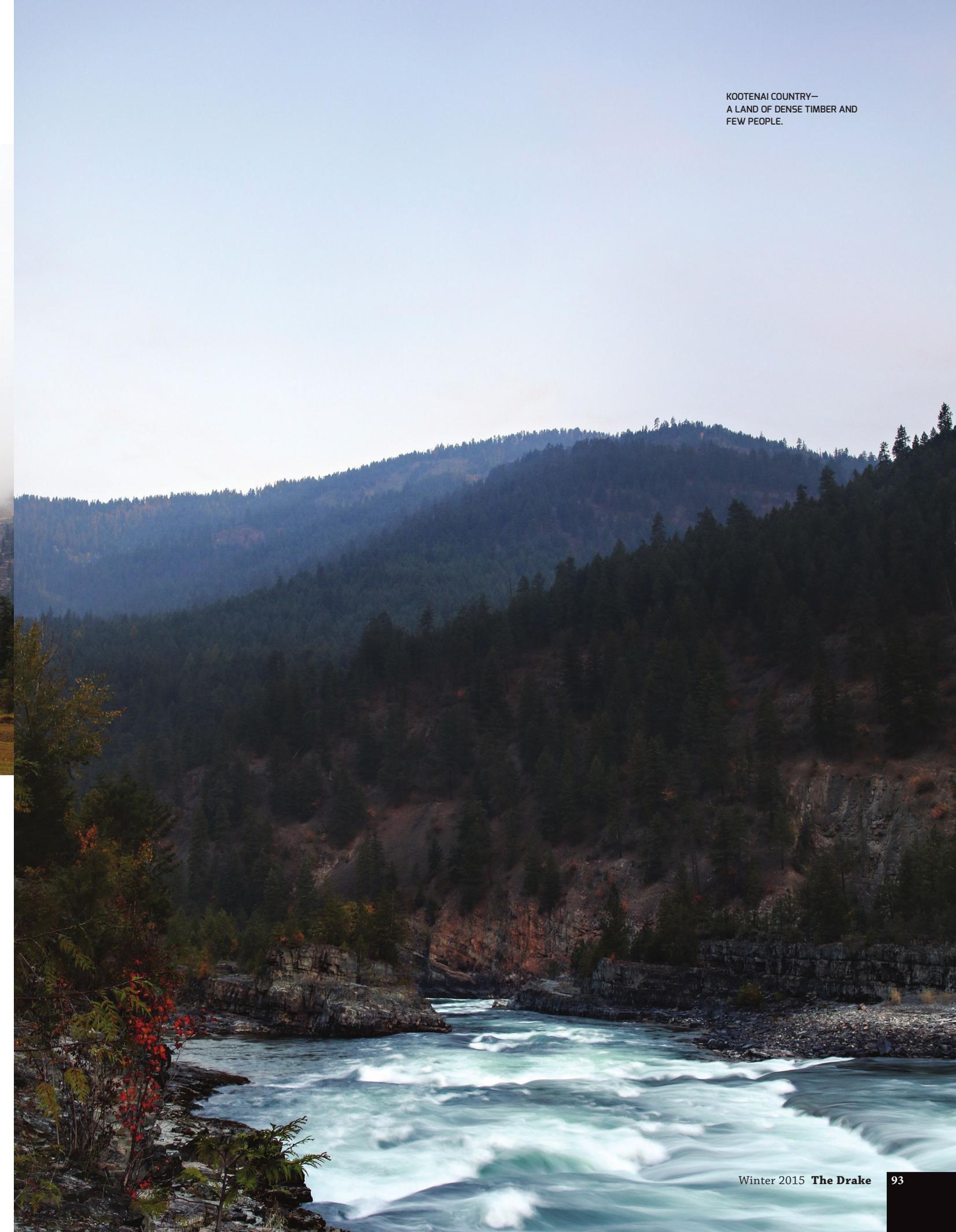
Blackburn is the kind of guy who thinks about these things—helping birds and saving lives and storing bodies. But mostly he thinks about fish and banjos. He's the longest tenured flyfishing guide on the Kootenai, a tailwater fishery that is as unique as it is overlooked, despite producing

the largest rainbow in Montana history: a 39-inch, 33-pound leviathan caught in 1997 on a spinning rig.

Off the river, Blackburn is an accomplished banjo player who peddles his bluegrass band's CDs out of his fly shop and hosts jam sessions at his bar. He's a good dude and a great guide who knows where the fish are holed up. And he'll show you. But first you have to make the journey to Montana's remote northwestern corner, a land of dense timber and few people.

"That's probably one reason the Kootenai doesn't have the same reputation as some of Montana's other rivers," says Blackburn, who has a sheriff's fu manchu and wears a crisp Stetson cowboy hat on the river. "We're pretty far out here." ➔

KOOTENAI COUNTRY—
A LAND OF DENSE TIMBER AND
FEW PEOPLE.



The Kootenai is Montana's largest tailwater by volume of impounded water—the water being 90-mile-long Lake Koocanusa, 42 miles of which are in British Columbia. It is also the state's youngest tailwater, established in 1972 with the completion of Libby Dam. While its attributes are many, including its status as the state's lone watershed with native rainbows, the river has failed to capture the attention or imagination of the greater angling community, even here in Montana. Isolated geography is only part of the reason.

Unfairly, but undeniably, a stigma of sickness hangs over the region, specifically its central town, Libby. From 1919 until its closure in 1990, a vermiculite mine that produced materials used in insulation also unleashed deadly asbestos, killing more than 200 people and sickening thousands. National media descended on the quiet timber town. A 2004 book called *"An Air That Kills"* flew off the stands. Not the type of stuff you put in tourism pamphlets.

Buoyed by more stable flows, rainbow populations are flourishing, a trend further propelled by new regulations...

"Sandpoint was blowing up with development, and the Flathead was, too," Blackburn says, describing neighboring areas in Montana and Idaho. "But all of that put Libby in this little bubble."

The air no longer kills. It's Big Sky pure. Still, one more obstacle has impeded the Kootenai's blue-ribbon eligibility—it hasn't been the most reliable fishery. This is due in part to regulations that have traditionally favored freezer-filling anglers, as well as ecological disruptions caused by Libby Dam, a 422-foot-tall, 3,055-foot-long behemoth built for hydropower and flood control.

The river's glacial waters weren't particularly nutrient-rich to begin with, and then the dam created what biologists not so affectionately call a "nutrient sink." Phosphorous and nitrogen bind to sediment and get trapped behind the dam in the depths of Lake Koocanusa, depriving downstream aquatic life of food. Since 2005, fisheries managers have been pumping liquid phosphorous and nitrogen into the lower river at the Montana-Idaho border.

Further complicating matters was the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's decision to implement experimental spills, hoping that heavy surges of water would mimic spawning conditions for endangered native white sturgeon, a dinosaur of a fish that has remained nearly unchanged for 70 million years and can grow more than 10 feet long and 1,000 pounds. But the spills proved fruitless and were terminated in 2012. Dam operators have also tinkered with power-peaking flow schedules to prevent wild daily fluctuations in water levels.

"Libby Dam wasn't fish friendly early on," says Jim Dunnigan, a fisheries biologist with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. "It's gradually transitioned since then into what we perceive as much more fish friendly."

Buoyed by more stable flows, rainbow populations are flourishing, a trend further propelled by new regulations that prohibit keeping any rainbow under 28 inches along the four-mile stretch below the dam, a section popular with bait and lure fishermen. Blackburn says that trout numbers have historically ebbed and flowed through natural cycles, and the Kootenai seems to currently be in a growth cycle. "Four or five years ago, we were catching 90 percent bull trout below the dam," he says. "Now we're catching 90 percent rainbows."

As Dunnigan puts it, "Around 2009 the fishery was in a lull—pretty much at rock bottom—but we feel that it's responded well to the changes."

With all of those variables coalescing, Blackburn sees a bright future. Fishing on the Kootenai was excellent during the summer and fall of 2015, partly because it was one of the few rivers in Montana—or much of the West for that matter—that ran relatively cold all summer. Katie Coyle, a Ph.D. student at University of Idaho researching ecological changes in the Kootenai and an avid fly fisherwoman, is similarly hopeful.

"It's already a fun fishery," Coyle says, "but it has massive potential."

The Kootenai originates in southeastern British Columbia—where it's spelled Kootenay, derived from the name of the native Ktunaxa Indians. The 485-mile river flows south into Montana until it takes a 90-degree turn at the "Big Bend" and shoots west into Idaho, where it meanders north across the border back into British Columbia. It's the Columbia River's second-largest tributary by volume, behind only the Snake.

The stretch that most interests trout anglers is the roughly 40 miles below Libby Dam. The first four miles of tailwater hold the greatest numbers



DAVE BLACKBURN, PROBABLY
THINKING ABOUT FISH AND
BANJOS.



A NORTHERN MONTANA NATIVE.



RIFFLEFRONT PROPERTY.

of large fish, including monster rainbows and bulls that can grow beyond 30 inches on kokanee salmon-rich diets. At the Big Bend, the river transitions into a more typical, idyllic Western trout stream, with beautiful mountain views no longer spoiled by a 400-foot concrete wall.

Blackburn's land is the first piece of private property below the dam, located right at the Big Bend. Down to that point, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers owns everything on each side, primarily using it for campgrounds. Blackburn's acreage is spread out on high ground overlooking the river, including his home, five log cabins for guest lodging, a hayfield, and his fly shop, attached to the River Bend, the restaurant-bar he runs with his wife, Tammy.

While inland redband rainbows are found throughout the Columbia River basin, nowhere in Montana has them except the Kootenai drainage. It represents the species' deepest inland penetration. The rest of Montana's rainbows were introduced from hatcheries.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service calls redbands a "primitive" form of rainbow, best described as an "evolutionary intermediate between ancestral cutthroat-like species and coastal rainbow trout," although the agency says there's no consensus on classification. Dunnigan says genetic testing

shows that most Kootenai rainbows, though not all, are actually hybrids with some combination of garden-variety coastal rainbow, redband and cutthroat genes. Several tributaries maintain pure redband strains.

"There's enough (redband) in them to make them much different than the stocked rainbows in the eastern parts of the state," Blackburn says of the hybrids.

However you categorize them, the football-shaped pigs are the reason Blackburn set up shop three decades ago and never left. He grew up fishing on Pennsylvania streams and was making his own rods by the time he hit puberty. After earning his degree at West Virginia University in forest resource management with an emphasis on water quality and aquatic ecology, he moved west and got a job as wilderness ranger for the Bighorn National Forest in Wyoming.

In 1981, he traveled with his wife to the Kootenai Valley on vacation. After ambling down to the river's edge with an eight-foot, four-weight Lamiglas rod that he'd built when he was 14, he quickly hooked into a fish that bent his hook. A few more bent hooks later, it was clear the man had found his home.

"Those fish were like horses," Blackburn recalls. "I managed to land some. Imagine that, a kid



A LOT BETTER THAN STARING AT BOBBERS ALL DAY.

growing up back East and catching stocked trout his whole life, and then catching these. It was quite an experience.”

When he opened Kootenai Angler the following year, Blackburn was the only flyfishing guide in the region. There are now two other outfitters. He’s been a tireless conservation advocate in a timber-and-mining stronghold where meat fishing has long ruled the day. He chaired the Upper Kootenai River Preservation Society, a major force in defeating the Jennings Rapid Dam Project in the ’80s, and he sits on the board of the Kootenai Valley Trout Club, which has been working with the Corps of Engineers to install structure for fish habitat.

Flyfishing icons such as Bud Lilly and the late Dave Engerbretson have praised Blackburn and his efforts to protect the Kootenai, with Engerbretson calling him a “terrific guide” who has “superb knowledge of the river.” Lilly has argued that the Kootenai should be classified alongside Montana’s other large rivers—Clark Fork, Missouri, Yellowstone—as a fishery with vast potential, so long as certain regulations and flow releases are implemented, as we are seeing now.

“Dave Blackburn is doing a marvelous job of promoting those kinds of ideas on the Kootenai,” Lilly said in a testimonial promoting Kootenai Angler.

The Kootenai was featured in the 1994 Meryl

Streep movie *The River Wild*, and the recently filmed Leonardo DiCaprio flick *The Revenant*. But to anglers, the Kootenai is famous not for Leo and Meryl but for those wild and wily rainbows, the biggest of which resemble blocky steelhead. They grow so big by feeding on kokanee salmon—introduced in the 1980s—coming out of Lake Koocanusa.

“Kokanee are like mini Snickers bars for those fish,” Dunnigan says. “They’re just a huge caloric boost to their system.”

Yet, those goliaths are anomalies largely confined to a small stretch, with 10 to 14 inches more typical for the rest of the river. Devoting too much attention to the trophy potential paints a misleading picture of the fishery, and distracts from its many other wonders. For one, Pacific Northwest weather patterns and flora give this rugged country a lush rainforest aura not found on Montana’s more famous trout streams. For another, the Kootenai feels virtually deserted compared to the bumper-boat chaos of the state’s busiest rivers.

Furthermore, Lake Koocanusa’s deep storage reservoir allows for stable water temperatures even during brutally dry summers like 2015, and also keeps the fishing good through winter. Streamers remain productive during the cold

ON THE MEND



THE KOOTENAI IS KNOWN FOR BIG WATER, BRING YOUR DRIFTBOAT GAME.

months, but midges and little blue quills offer classic technical tailwater fishing until the upper stretch closes in March through June.

Then there's this: the Kootenai is an ideal dry fly fishery. It has a full checklist of the usual caddis and mayfly suspects, including its bread-and-butter PMD hatches, as well as late-summer terrestrials. It's big water, best fished by boat but wadeable during lower flows, with deep runs and seams that aren't necessarily obvious holding water. You get a few riffles here and there, but most appealing to dry-fly disciples are the opportunities to cast to sippers in nearly still or ever-so-nervous water, with rocks and weed beds providing subtle structure clues.

"You'll be able to dry-fly fish every month of the year as long as you can get the line through your guides without freezing up," Blackburn says.

Blackburn avoids nymphing unless the situation demands it. When not throwing dries, he prefers to chuck rodent-size streamers that are crafted under a veil of secrecy at his mad scientist fly-tying desk. The consequence for disclosing those secrets is death.

"There's nothing like a good streamer take," he says. "It's like a hole-in-one in golf. It's a lot better than staring at a bobber all day."

While an angler might occasionally bump into

a brown or a brookie in the river's lower reaches, the primary fare consists of westslope cutthroat, redbands, and bulls—all natives.

When I fished with Blackburn in October, on a warm day with autumn's colors popping, our boat hauled in all rainbows except for one bull trout. Joe Cielak, Kootenai Angler's senior guide, caught the biggest fish of the day, an athletic 20-inch rainbow that nailed a streamer on a dead drift. A week earlier, Cielak had landed his largest rainbow ever, a 32-inch inland whale.

The river was at minimum flow, 4,000 cubic feet per second, less than Blackburn's preferred 6,000 or 7,000. The lower water level had the upside of exposing huge fish patrolling the river bottom, none of which was interested in our offerings.

We also got a clear view of *Didymosphenia geminata*, known colloquially as either didymo or rock snot, an algae species that has always been present but has only been a nuisance since 2001, when the river began overproducing "stock material" that binds to the microscopic diatoms, according to Coyle, the Ph.D. student from Idaho. Funded by Dunnigan's agency, Coyle has spent three years studying didymo in the Kootenai for her dissertation, which will be used to develop a management strategy.

"It produces mats that look like toilet paper



STETSONS AND WADERS ARE STANDARD ATTIRE. BANJOS, OPTIONAL.

in the water,” Coyle says. “The concern is that it changes what kinds of invertebrates are present. You can lose caddisflies, mayflies and stoneflies, and they’re replaced by midges and worms.”

Toilet paper notwithstanding, the clear water demanded light tippet once we switched from streamers to dries. Blackburn set me up with another of his specialties, an orange stinkbug pattern trailed by a soft-hackle emerger. I wasted no time in demonstrating my time-honored technique for yanking a fly out of a nice fish’s mouth, although I landed enough healthy rainbows afterward to temper the shame.

That night Blackburn picked his banjo and sang sweetly at a River Bend jam session. Outside the restaurant, my photographer friend, Greg, and I walked up on two employees petting a deer. They told us her name was Petty, presumably in honor of her favorite activity rather than the singer. She’d been orphaned as a fawn when her mother died on the highway, and she gradually grew more comfortable with people. Even deer are fond of Blackburn.

Burger and beer satiated, Greg and I made the short walk from the bar to our cabin, the Otter, which Blackburn built in 2001 out of lodgepole pines. Its back porch overlooked the river, and inside were two beds, a kitchenette, a bathroom, and a cozy living room. All we needed were the beds. I dreamed

of crimson flashes and bluegrass lullabies.

The next morning, with Greg off in search of that elusive perfect dawn light, I met Blackburn at his shop. I was groggy enough that I figured I had misheard his request to move a body. It wasn’t until we came upon the carcass that I fully understood the mission, and saw the importance of it. A bald eagle had already staked out the roadkill and was patiently waiting in a nearby tree for us to leave. I was relieved to see that the deceased wasn’t Petty. This gal was quite a bit heavier.

With the job done and eagles safe, Blackburn and I set out for a morning trip in the canyon, 30 miles downstream from the dam. At a private river access that Blackburn had permission to use, we hopped in his boat along with his bird dog, Maisy.

Using an electric trolling motor, Blackburn took us upstream into the mouth of the canyon. Fog had moved in overnight and immense limestone formations stood silhouetted against the gray sky. There wasn’t another boat or human in sight.

In the canyon, the river was so deep that it was black, and Blackburn informed me that his name roughly translates to “dark water” in Old English—“burn” being the term for “stream.” This seemed like a good omen. Dark water was everywhere, keeping me safe; dark water was guiding me. He even packed me a sandwich. 🐾