

About 250 words

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YELLOWSTONE CUTTHROATS

This place is a zoo. I had barely waded into the Yellowstone River and started casting, last August, when a fellow in full-formal fly-fishing gear came running by, if you can call that running. Two more men in waders and vests followed (thump-thump-puff-puff). Behind them trotted a buffalo bull, carrying his weight more gracefully. He just wanted to cross the river. The fishermen happened to be in the way.

There are more fishermen and more buffaloes in Yellowstone Park than there used to be, but there are more big cutthroat trout, too. Some of them are easy to catch. The dark, skinny trout that have recently spawned will take anything, including spinning lures or streamers fished downstream at random.

The best and brightest fish are in the stream for its abundant insects. They tend to hatch when fishermen are not

around: during a storm, or on a cool day, or in the evening. Be there. Tie on a dry fly that looks like the mayflies or caddisflies the fish are taking. Then cast to the best rise you see. The cutthroat making it may turn out to be 19 or 20 inches long, bright and heavy. That's your trophy.

Go to the six-mile stretch of river that is open to fishing below Yellowstone Lake. Access is almost too easy, but you will have good water to yourself, and deserve it, if you put on high waders and cross to the far bank at the spot marked Buffalo Ford. Don't risk it if the water is high.

The season does not open till July 15, and the fishing slows by late August. For those few weeks, it is extraordinary. Yellowstone Park is busy then, so make lodging reservations. The nearest cabins are at Lake and Canyon Villages.

The bison solved one problem: competition. A black squall solved the next, pock-marking* silvery river with hail. Mayflies love weather. Trout love mayflies. Big insects with wings the color of rain-clouds * appeared on the surface and flew off, except when trout ate them. Rising fish sent spray high enough to catch the wind and blow away in puffs. Most of my time was spent playing trout, though I bent the rod as hard as I could, wanting to get back to casting. The right trout would not be be horsed in, when its time came. It measured between 19 and 20 inches long in the net. It was heavy-bodied and silvery -- a fish that had not spawned for at least a year. That's a trophy. Maybe you'll be happy with smaller, darker fish, and you will get plenty of those. None are likely to be under 14 inches. But for the big ones in top condition, work fast during the hatches.

Access is almost too easy, but a good map will show you places where you can hike away from other anglers even if a buffalo does not clear the decks. You can wade across at Buffalo Ford, too, when the water drops to summer levels. Use high waders with felt soles or cleats, and maybe a staff: not a piddly little one but a pine trunk seven feet long, so you can dig it in downstream at an angle. This thins out the crowds and you don't want to be a cull.