

# THE FUTURE OF THE NORTH FORK

CANADIAN MINES THREATEN PRISTINE NORTH FORK  
FLATHEAD RIVER

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Energy speculators have long cast a covetous eye toward the North Fork Flathead River Basin. In some places the till left by the receding Wisconsin glaciation 14,000 years ago barely covers the rich coal seams beneath. In other places the ice scraped the Earth bare and the coal lies naked on the surface. Early settlers soon came to recognize which bears skins were North Fork in origin due to the kerosene smell caused when the critters wallowed in the exposed black stuff.

In 1892 those coal deposits proved irresistible to a Columbia Falls man, James A. Talbott, and he hatched one of the most infamous expeditions in Flathead history. In late May of that year the steamer F.F. Oakes, a 75-foot sternwheeler Talbot spent \$5,000 constructing, left Columbia Falls on an ill-fated voyage up the North Fork.

The steamer made it as far as the Fool Hen Rapids a few miles upstream of Blankenship. There the Oakes battled high-spring flows. While attempting to navigate the rapids a steam pipe burst, the ship lost power, took on water, and capsized. Fortunately, the crew made it safely ashore, suffering nothing more than a cold, rainy night spent trudging through the forest to Belton Station (today's West Glacier).

The nearly disastrous voyage of the Oakes may have cooled for a time that coal lust, but not permanently. Pressure to extract energy from the river's upper basin continues, now driven from the north where Canada's Cline Mining Corporation and British Petroleum eye the basin as a source for coal, and its adjunct, coalbed methane.

But where energy company officials imagine coal mines, others see one of the most pristine, intact ecosystems in North America. Cline has proposed its Lodgepole coal mine, using the mountaintop removal



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*A nice westslope cutthroat caught and released north of Polebridge.*

process that has devastated watersheds in Appalachia, along the banks of Foisey Creek and the main stem of the Canadian Flathead River (as the North Fork is known north of the border). Immediately downstream from the proposed mine site researchers have found one of the highest concentrations of bull trout spawning redds in all of the Flathead drainage.

BP has its eyes on the methane gas trapped in the coal seams of the North Fork. Last year the energy giant — under pressure from Montana senators Max Baucus and Jon Tester — announced it was pulling back on its plans in the Canadian Flathead and would restrict its activity to the nearby Elk River drainage, a tributary to the transboundary reservoir Lake Koocanusa and the Kootenai River.

But researchers on the downstream side of the border say Montanans shouldn't take anything for granted.

“Just because swings in the economy do what they do doesn't mean it's off the table,” says Ric Hauer, a Professor of Limnology at the University of Montana's Flathead Lake Biological Station. “Everything is on the table until the Canadians change their land use plan.”

The upper Flathead is unique in that the wildlife found there at the time of the first European exploration remains intact.

The Canadian Flathead is home to the greatest concentration of inland grizzly bears in North America, as well as wolves, fisher, lynx, elk and moose.

Most immediately threatened by mine development would be fish. The Canadian Flathead provides important habitat for two critical species: westslope cutthroat trout (a species of special concern in Montana) and bull trout (listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act). In the Flathead, these fish continue to use the entire watershed. Radio telemetry work has shown that some migrate from Flathead Lake to the Canadian Flathead to spawn.

Like the full host of terrestrial critters, the North Fork contains all the aquatic pieces as well.

“We've still got the migratory component,” said Clint Muhlfeld, an aquatic ecologist with the USGS Northern Rocky Mountain Research Center in West Glacier. “We've still got the full expression of life history diversity.”

Muhlfeld continues the ongoing research in the North Fork documenting the boundary crossing ways of the migratory fish in the river, as well as a growing threat to the westslope cutthroats: hybridization. As in many waters across the westslope's range, hybridization with introduced rainbow trout

is threatening the unique genetic information recorded in the genes of these native fish.

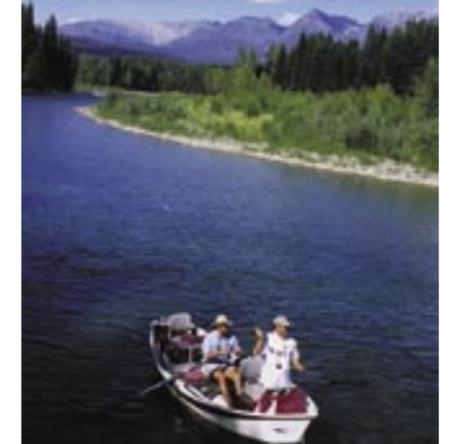
For now hybrid populations are concentrated downstream of Polebridge, while upstream into Canada the westslopes remain pure. Maintaining those runs is critical for a couple of reasons.

For starters, westslopes are a perennial candidate for listing under the Endangered Species Act. So far the Fish and Wildlife Service has resisted efforts to list the fish. But, pure-strain cutthroats inhabit less than 10 percent of their historic range, and the Flathead, despite the hybridization threat, remains a stronghold for the fish. Losing the North Fork would push the population closer to an ESA listing.

Secondly, these cutthroats are the fish that evolved in this system following the retreat of the last glaciation. While they all may be westslopes, fish that spawn in different streams retain distinct genetic information that separates them from even fish spawned in adjacent streams. As hybridization occurs in the population and hybrids begin to mate with hybrids, those unique characteristics that allowed the fish to thrive in the North Fork will likely be lost, Muhlfeld explains.

And have no doubt that while the North Fork is a very good trout fishery, it's also a tough place for a trout to make a living. The granitics of the upper basin just don't provide the kind of nutrient base needed to grow trout to large size. The results are beautiful, gin clear waters, and trout that have to cover a lot of ground in search of food.

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## Fishing the North Fork

You need to understand two things about the North Fork Flathead River if you want to fish it successfully: hatches are sparse and most of the big fish are migratory.

The gin-clear water of the North Fork just doesn't grow a lot of bugs, so it's rarely necessary to match the hatch. Instead, attractor patterns are the ticket.

Mike Paulson, a fly fishing guide out of West Glacier, grew up fishing the Flathead River. He has been a guide for 15 years.

Paulson's North Fork favorites include the Elk-Hair Caddis, the Stimulator, orange or olive, and the Fat Albert. And he's almost embarrassed to admit that he and his clients have caught their share of fish on the classic Royal Coachman.

For under the surface, Paulson goes with bead-head patterns such as the Hare's Ear or Prince Nymph.

My personal North Fork favorite is that over-the-top attractor pattern, the Chernobyl Ant. I tie on No. 10 and No. 12 hooks, with a thinner silhouette than most commercially tied flies. Tan and orange are my favorite colors for the under body, and I like brown legs on my ants.

Paulson favors the upper river around Polebridge as he finds that stretch has more of the productive riffle and drop-pool habitat he likes to fish. But he sees more of the bigger, migratory spawners in the lower river, from Coal Creek down to Big Creek.

That's because the bigger fish in the North Fork are usually on their way back to Flathead Lake by the time anglers start hitting the water in earnest after high flows subside in late June or July.

Boating safety is critical on the North Fork. There are two sections of whitewater. One is well upstream of Polebridge where Kintla Creek enters the river. There can be some big standing waves in this section early in the season. The other whitewater section is between Big Creek and Glacier Rim. Fool Hen Rapids can be a handful during high water. And the middle section of the river has to be respected as well. While the river is generally tame with moderate flows, the braided channels are filled with log jams and “strainers”.

Paulson suggests first-time North Fork floaters get the word on the river from folks who are on it all time before heading out.

“If you don't know what's going on, talk to someone who does,” he says. “Or get a guide.”

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"Those fish, to get big, have to go to the lake," says Mark Deleray, a fisheries biologist with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks in Kalispell.

Cutthroats can't grow to lengths of 15 to 16 inches or more on the food supply available in the North Fork. Those larger fish move up the river from the lake or Flathead Valley sections of the main stem Flathead, spawn in May and June, and are usually on their way home when North Fork anglers intercept them in the early part of the season.

The threatened bull trout is also usually a part-time visitor in the upper forks of the Flathead. Bulls, however, are fall spawners. So after these big aquatic predators make their spring run up the river, they tend to hang out at the mouth of their natal stream, waiting to make fall spawning runs.

It's not legal for anglers to target bull trout in either the North Fork, but smaller pre-adult fish will occasionally take a dry fly. By the time adults reach sexual maturity and make their first spawning run up the system, those fish are six to seven years old, Deleray says, and have moved on to a diet made up almost entirely of other fish.

While they can't be targeted, it is not uncommon for anglers reeling in smaller cutthroats to see dark shapes move up off the bottom and trail hooked fish. Occasionally the big bulls will even latch on to the struggling fish and an 8-inch cutthroat suddenly becomes a 5-pounder.

But the spring run, fall spawning strategy takes its toll. Without the plentiful forage base of Flathead Lake, the fish lose weight and vigor all summer. Once they've spawned and made their way downstream, the big bulls are in bad shape. Most do not spawn in consecutive years, if they even survive to spawn again.

"They're scarred, they're thin. They've just been through the ringer," Deleray says. "They need a year in the lake to build up their reserves again."

The Lodgepole mine couldn't be sited at a worse place for North Fork bull trout, Deleray says. FWP has been tracking bull trout spawning in the Canadian Flathead for 28 years and the most recent counts show that 28 percent of the bull trout redds in all of the North Fork Basin are in the river at, or just below, the mine site. That's 71 out of 250 redds counted in the North Fork, and out of 503 counted in the North and Middle Forks combined. Fourteen percent of the Flathead Lake run is assembled at the mine site.

The bulls are concentrated there because the site possesses the unique characteristics these choosy fish need to spawn

successfully, Muhlfeld explains. The water is clear and cold. And because the Canadian Flathead flows through the porous till left behind by the retreating glaciers, groundwater upwells at the spawning site, bathing the buried eggs in cold, highly oxygenated water.

The impacts of an adjacent mountaintop removal coal mine are obvious. Sedimentation would choke off the eggs buried in the stream gravel. And with the delicate, complicated geology of the valley floor altered, the upwelling so critical to bull trout spawning success could be lost. Heavy metals such as selenium would threaten all aquatic life.

The North Fork remains a dichotomy. South of the border it is considered one of the most wild and pristine rivers in the lower 48. It's a gem of a Montana fly fishing experience, providing scenery and solitude on the western edge of Glacier National Park. Yet on the Canadian side the Flathead is viewed differently. Canadian energy officials see the Flathead through the same prism as that early Columbia Falls entrepreneur James Talbott. They see coal. They see mining jobs. They see royalties paid by the mining companies.

But these plans may be no less reckless than Talbott's disastrous expedition.

"The bottom line is that this is really, really dangerous for the Canadians to even be thinking about doing," Hauer says. "All of the carnivores present at the time of Lewis and Clark are still using the landscape. This is a wild place and they want to industrialize it. It's crazy."

"There is nothing good that can come out of this for the United States. Zero."

*To learn more about the threats facing the North Fork and what you can do to help preserve this pristine trout fishery, visit American Rivers ([www.amrivers.org](http://www.amrivers.org)) and the National Parks Association ([www.npca.org](http://www.npca.org)).*

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