No bull (OK, maybe a little)

Admit it, you want to catch a bull trout. Most of us do. But don't let it get the best of you – it is illegal to try to catch them in all but five fisheries in Montana – and only one of them is a river. That doesn't stop some anglers, however.

Bull trout (Salvelinus confluentus) only exist in a small percentage of their historical range in Montana, are considered "secure" in only 2 percent of the waters they inhabit according to the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, and are listed as threatened on the Endangered Species Act. In certain other states and Canada however, anglers may target them.

Only a few drainages ever hosted bull trout in Montana, and fewer yet host the big ones. The entire Bitterroot drainage for example, has nary a 20-incher according to Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks surveys. All bull-trout fisheries are either in the Pacific or Hudson Bay drainages in FWP regions 1 and 2 where the water's gin clear, but what exactly gets anglers a violation for targeting them is not.

According to Region 2 Game Warden Sergeant Joe Jaquith, an angler fishing a small tributary with a Rapala in bull-trout country, for example, would grab a warden's attention. "A lot of times we sit and watch people for a long time. And if a guy's been pulling out bull trout, (we can issue a citation) ... We use quite a bit of discretion."

Jaquith said that a warden might issue citations a few times per year, but that species-specific statistics are not kept.

And in case you hadn't heard, bull trout will occasionally eat a dead-drifted stonefly nymph – even dries in the right circumstances. They often share water with cutthroat trout, which also eat stonefly nymphs and dries. So if you see a couple bulls in the bottom of a hole while fishing for cutts, would you try to sneak your fly in front of them? Intent is hard to prove.

There are five fisheries in Montana where it's legal to target them: Lake Koocanusa, Hungry Horse Reservoir, the South Fork of the Flathead River (the only river, and only open from the regular-season opener through July 31 upstream of Hungry Horse Reservoir), Swan Lake, and the Blackfeet Reservation's Duck Lake. In the first three, a Bull Trout Catch Card specific to the fishery is required (free and available at mt.fwp.gov). Limited harvest is allowed at Hungry Horse Reservoir from the general opener to August 15 and at Duck Lake where they were heavily stocked for a study.

Photo Courtesy of Ted Moody

Spawning bulls are as brilliant as the Fourth of July at dusk, and commence the dance when water temps reach about 48 degrees in the fall, according to the US Fish and Wildlife Service. The Montana state record is 25.63 pounds and 37 inches, caught from an undisclosed location in 1916. All bull trout caught in Montana must be released immediately unless authorized, although a quick photo is apparently allowed.

They look similar to brook and lake trout (all being char), but FWP offers a few tips to help anglers identify bull trout. Look for white edges on the front of the lower fins, only a slightly forked tail compared to the lake trout's deeply forked tail, and the dorsal fins of bull trout are a clear olive color with no black spots or dark wavy lines.

They will hybridize with brook trout to produce "bullkies", which are identifiable by the vermiculate marking on their backs, but appear similar to bull trout otherwise. Harvest is allowed and encouraged for bullkies because they are usually fertile (which could further dilute the gene pool), and they compete for bull trout's livelihoods.

Anglers west of the divide will tell you that one of the most common ways to encounter a bull trout is by hooking a cutthroat. The erratic thrashing of a hooked fish triggers the predatory instinct to pounce on wounded prey. Bear in mind that it is illegal to use game fish for bait.

Of course incidental catches occur. Should you be so lucky, be gentle and release it quickly.

Those who have, tell stories of these torque-filled sea monsters screaming line off the reel, bending the rod unmistakably. Hooked bull trout are evident.

"It reminded me of lake trout that I have caught in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness," said Michael Furtman of Minnesota, who caught his first when it was legal in Rock Creek. "It was a bulldog. I had to run downstream as the fish led me to deep water."

Therein exists the appeal and subsequent temptation.

Happenstance occurs and can result in a tremendous catch – but be careful how you shift your odds and intent.