

# The one that got away: A fish tale

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We arrived at our campsite on the confluence of Big Creek and the Chilcotin River in the early afternoon. There was plenty of time to set up camp, bathe, and relax before diner. But for me, having brought my fishing gear and having had little time to use it previously, this was an opportunity I couldn't pass up. The flyfishermen were already stationed at the confluence and Rob caught a 17-inch bull trout within the first five minutes. The clear water of Big Creek was very enticing so I decided to take a walk upstream along the left bank, fishing as I went.

The first few casts were uneventful, but shortly thereafter I had caught two small rainbow trout (both under 8 inches). Nick met up with me and we continued upstream. Of course, with his audience, I caught nothing. He tried a few casts and also caught nothing. Bored and/or discouraged, Nick went back to camp. I continued upstream. I pulled a couple more small rainbow trout out of a long run barely out of sight of the campsite at the confluence. Instead of continuing upstream, I decided to stay within sight of our camp and walk back down.

Along the way up I had noticed some pools and large rocks along the right bank that I couldn't fish effectively with my gear. I found a place to cross just above that last run and fished my way downstream. A couple more small rainbows took my castmaster, bringing my total to six. I was getting closer and closer to camp and starting to think about putting my rod to rest and wading back. But I had gotten to an interesting-looking run and gave myself an ultimatum: 3 more casts in this run before quitting.

On the first cast, nothing. On the second cast, almost directly below me, I saw the flash of a large fish (the largest I'd seen this entire trip besides the adult sockeye and Chinook up near Chilko Lake) and a bite! But the fish didn't hold. That experience negated my ultimatum and I was determined to cast again until I got another shot at that big fish. It didn't take long. Just two or three casts later I was able to pull my lure next to the rock I'd seen the dart out from and this time it took my lure with full force. And the fish was big!

The adrenaline rush was instantaneous. My heart was pounding fast and loud. I had visions of this fish in hand, measuring it, posing with it in pictures, and bringing it back to camp for diner (by chance, we had been saving bull trout since the morning to eat that night). I would be hailed upon my return as a master-fisherman. And then killing it, cleaning out its organs, and cooking it. All of this happened in about 5 seconds.

It was a bull trout. It didn't fight much, but it was heavy on my line. I took a few steps into the creek and reeled it in to my feet. I lifted it out of the water, still attached to my line. Even out of the water it looked bigger than all the bull trout I had seen so far. Its head seemed huge. As I went to grab it from the air it twitched, and dropped into the water.

I was shocked, and paused for a moment before I realized that the fish was still sitting in the shallow water at my feet. As I got my hands on it in the water, it pumped its tail twice and was out of reach and out of sight. I was devastated. I experienced a strange release of feelings; one with hints of disappointment and relief. The fish was gone, with my castmaster in its mouth. Maybe this was the result of the fish's sharp teeth, maybe it was the fish's weight, but it couldn't have been my knot, right?

After coming to terms with my loss, adrenaline still flowing in my blood, I notice a hand signal to go back to camp. I confirmed the signal, gathered my things, and waded back across the creek for what I thought must be an early diner. I was so consumed by the thought of this fish with my lure that I didn't realize I was on the cooking crew that night and wouldn't be able to return to fish until late. I returned to the same spot at dusk and fished until dark with no results. I returned the following evening and caught a larger rainbow (11-inch) from the downstream end of the same run, but the bull trout made no appearance.

Overall, the Big Creek site was a fantastic experience. I did end up getting a 15-inch bull trout from a deep run further upstream in the late morning of our second day, and many rainbows. There were plenty of positive, non-fishing experiences, too: hiking up the terrace, delicious bull trout and sockeye salmon for two consecutive diners, a beautiful campsite, and entertaining hearts games and campfires at night. But I will always remember that bull trout that got away.

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## Tables and Figures



Figure 1. The 15-inch bull trout I caught the day after the big bull trout got away. Photo credit: Peter Moyle