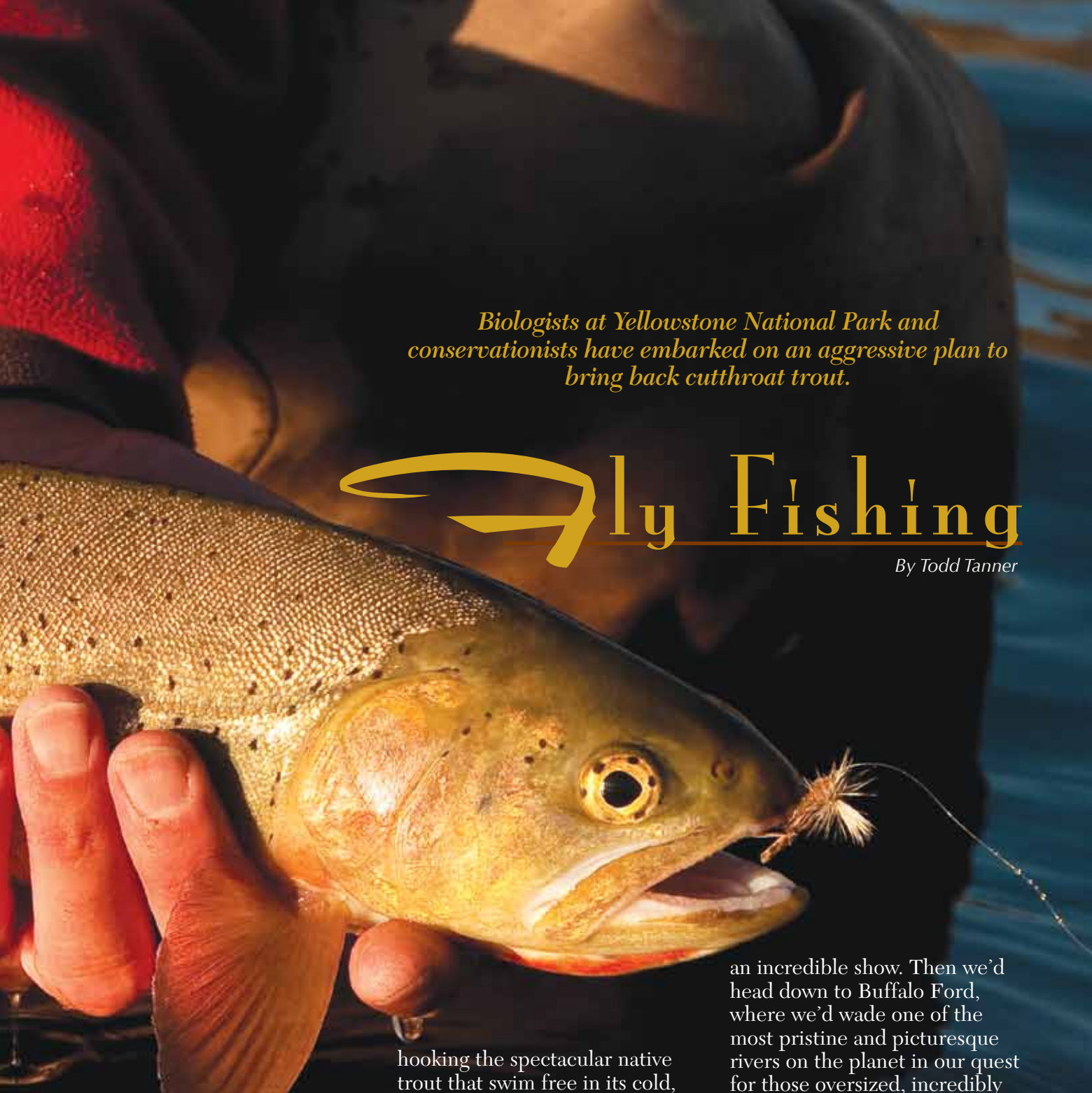
JOHN JURACEK

Biologists at Yellowstone National Park and conservationists have embarked on an aggressive plan to bring back cutthroat trout.

Fly Fishing

By Todd Tanner



If you're a fisherman and you've been fortunate enough to catch a Yellowstone cutthroat trout, you've touched – and been touched by – one of the world's most beautiful fish. Generations of American anglers have made the long pilgrimage to Yellowstone Park in the hopes of hooking the spectacular native trout that swim free in its cold, clear waters.

Twenty years ago, when I was guiding fly fishermen in the park, my clients could hardly wait for the mid-July Yellowstone opener. When the big day finally arrived, we'd load up my truck and drive to Fishing Bridge, where trout by the hundreds – sometimes by the thousands -–would put on an incredible show. Then we'd head down to Buffalo Ford, where we'd wade one of the most pristine and picturesque rivers on the planet in our quest for those oversized, incredibly colorful Yellowstone cutts.

The fish would be there, of course, rising gracefully for whatever insect happened to float by on the surface. Unlike the Henry's Fork's ultra-selective rainbows or the Madison's uber-paranoid browns, Yellowstone cutthroats are opportunists, willing to sample just about anything

that looks like food. And as a result, anglers both young and old, beginner and expert alike, have targeted and caught those incredible trout for decades. It was almost as if the Good Lord decided to share his favorite fishing spot with the American public. We, a nation of anglers, were blessed.

And then, like Adam and Eve, we fell from grace. Somehow, lake trout made their way into Yellowstone Lake and those cutts, which had evolved without ever having to worry about piscatorial predators, found themselves in the lion's den. Anglers on Yellowstone Lake started catching lakers – long, heavy, cutthroat trout-eating lakers – and cutthroat numbers began a slow but inexorable decline.

When I drove down to Yellowstone with Yellowstone Park Foundation's Ken Barrett this past September, biologists were estimating that the lake and Yellowstone River had lost 90 percent of their indigenous cutthroats. At the same time, lakers – probably stocked by some well-intentioned but delusional "bucket biologist" – had completely overrun the ecosystem.

What were the impacts? Traditional spawning streams like Clear Creek, which used to host 50,000 to 70,000 spawning cutthroats, saw those numbers drop down to a paltry 218 fish. Pelican Creek, another important spawning stream, didn't see a single cutthroat return to spawn. Not one. The lake trout had decimated them.

Anglers also took it on the chin. The very same waters that once attracted fishermen from all over the country, indeed, from all over the world, seemed barren. Folks told stories of fishless days, of looking in vain for one lone, colorful native feeding on the surface. Families changed their vacation plans. Guides and outfitters drifted away. Angling traditions that had been passed down from one generation to another gave way before the oppressive, inexorable weight of reality; the cutthroat were gone.

I have an important question for you. Do you believe in redemption? Because I surely do.

Yellowstone National Park, with the help of the Yellowstone Park Foundation and a number of conservation-minded individuals and businesses, has embarked on an aggressive plan to control the predatory, non-native lake trout. Using gill nets along with an innovative live-trapping system that allows native cutts to be returned, unharmed, to the water, the Park is removing hundreds of thousands of lakers – some as big as 30 pounds – from Yellowstone Lake every year.

While we're not out of the woods yet, the Park's biologists and fisheries professionals are finally starting to feel optimistic

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about the future. We may never again see the cutthroat numbers of old, but if the evolving lake trout control efforts prove successful, we could potentially restore a substantial portion of the original cutthroat population. That's an important goal because cutts are a vital part of the ecosystem – they support predators ranging from ospreys and pelicans to otters and grizzly bears – and also because of Yellowstone's rich, century-long angling tradition.

In addition to the morning we spent watching the netting operation on the lake, Ken and I also had a chance to fish some of my old haunts on the Yellowstone River. We started at Buffalo Ford (which has been renamed Nez Perce Ford), where a herd of buffalo grazed quietly in a nearby meadow, and then we moved upstream past Le Hardy Rapids to a spot where bull elk bugled in the distance and a family of otters swam by a mere ten yards away. We even had the good fortune to hook five gorgeous cutts, the biggest of which turned out to be an awesome 22- or 23-inch fish.

While we were wading the river, I couldn't help but think of all the anglers I've introduced to the Yellowstone over the years, and about a personal story that West Yellowstone fly fishing legend Craig Mathews shared when Ken and I stopped by his iconic fly shop.

It turns out that Craig had taken a family to that very same stretch of the Yellowstone years ago and against all odds, what seemed an intractable rift between a father and his teenage daughter – a rift that was apparently beyond repair – began to close and heal right on the banks of the river. Wouldn't it be fitting if those of us who've received so much from the Yellowstone, who've fished those pristine waters and cast for those amazingly beautiful trout, could help bring the magic back?

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