

KOOTENAI TAILWATER CHAPTER

LOCATION: The Kootenai River is located in the extreme northwest corner of Montana. Three major airports serve this area. Spokane, WA, about 3 hours away, Kalispell, MT about 2 hours away, and Missoula, MT about 4 hours away.

The Kootenai is Montana's largest tailwater fishery with over half its drainage located in British Columbia on the west side of the continental divide. To that end, it's a major headwater tributary of the Columbia River and an arm of the Columbia Hydropower system. The Libby Dam is located 18 miles north of Libby, Montana. The trout fishery begins immediately below the dam offering approximately 40 miles of fishable water to the Idaho border. Above the Libby Dam, Lake Koocanusa Reservoir extends over 100 miles into the Canadian Rockies.

This northwest corner of Montana is not typical big sky country. Instead, it's a place of dense, coniferous forest, lush mountains and river bottoms, and a place where the Pacific rainforest ecosystem crashes into the spine of the northern Rocky Mountains. The Kootenai basin is unique in that the river actually runs at only about 3000 feet in elevation making it one of the lowest riparian zones in the state. Weather and conditions throughout the winter are likely more mild than one might imagine.

The Kootenai River flows through the towns of Libby and Troy, Montana. Greater Libby has a population of approximately 10,000 people and Troy is far smaller with around 2000 full time residents. Logging supported this area for many years and is still responsible for a portion of the economic base although much diminished as an industry. You will be welcomed here with a smile and tourism dollars are greatly appreciated.

Primarily a rainbow trout fishery the Kootenai boasts the state's only native strain called inland-redband- rainbows. Known for being strong, hard fighting and extraordinarily acrobatic, Kootenai rainbows average 12"-20" and it's not uncommon for a Kootenai rainbow to rip off fifty feet of line and jump three or four times before your skills catch up with your adrenaline. Westslope cutthroat trout are also native to the Kootenai as well as bull trout. Bull trout are actually part of the Char family and are awesome natives, thrilling to catch, and often average 5-10 lbs. When floating over bull trout holes anglers are often reminded to keep hands and feet inside the drift boat.

The Kootenai is broad, wide, and big water by any standards and most efficiently fished from a drift boat. It offers consistent, steady flows throughout the season. Pre-runoff fishing begins in March when daytime temps start to warm. While this time of year is primarily about nymphing, for a period of about 4-6 weeks hatches of March browns, baetis, and midge are sporadic enough to provide some early season dry fly action. Snowmelt and run-off starts in earnest around the first of May and the gates of the Libby Dam are wide open. It's a vast basin and this time of year the river is unfishable for the most part. But by mid-June the annual run-off event is largely over and discharge from Libby Dam is reduced and the official summer season kicks off.

Consistent dry fly fishing is the modus operandi of the summer season and the Kootenai's long runs and flat pools are perfectly suited for endless drifts. With steady flows and temperatures from Libby Dam throughout the season, hatches of pale morning dun mayflies and caddis are predictable and always have fish looking up. As the summer deepens, terrestrials like hoppers and ants add new opportunities for angler and trout alike. Due to the lack of fishing pressure attractor patterns like royal wulffs, parachute adams, stimulators, and tarantulas are still very effective. Swinging soft hackles during hatches is an effective Kootenai technique. If the fish aren't looking up for dries, nymphing and pulling streamers through specific runs and boulder gardens is always productive as well.

Four, five and six weight rods, floating lines, and 9'5X leaders cover most bases from a dry fly and nymphing point of view. Be sure to have a spool of 6x as well, especially during in the fall. The Kootenai is still user friendly in this respect. But that's not to say the average rainbows and cutthroats are pushovers. The Kootenai is flat and smooth for the most part and as the season progresses becomes absolutely gin clear. Flies have to be presented well and must be drag free. But it's safe to say the resident trout here are far less sophisticated than they are on the more popular and famous tailwaters around the state. Seven and eight weight rods are better tools for running flies deep with sinking heads and streamers in search of truly large fish. And two handers and switch rods are also gaining in popularity and are very effective tools for the big runs and pools of the Kootenai River.

The Kootenai is best fished from a drift boat employing traditional float-wade techniques. Even at minimum flows you cannot wade across the Kootenai. Drift boats will offer access to the many mid-stream islands that have half acre riffles at the heads and tails. These are prime spots and only accessible by boat. That's not to say the wading opportunities aren't worthy as well. Depending on annual snowpack, there is generally plenty of wading opportunities by about the middle of July and access up and down the river is good.

The Kootenai may well be the biggest tailwater in Montana you've never heard of. But that's its inherent charm. Far less traveled, boasting good hatches and hard fighting rainbows and a friendly northwest flavor, the Kootenai River is a solid blue ribbon fishery.