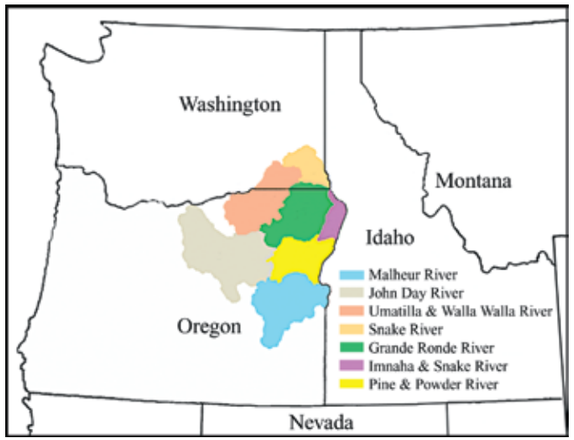
Bull Trout Range

Historically, bull trout were found in river systems of southeast Alaska, California, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Washington, British Columbia and Alberta. The current distribution and abundance of bull trout is significantly reduced from the historical range.

Within the Interior Columbia Basin, bull trout populations have declined or been eliminated in the mainstems of most large rivers. Bull trout are now found primarily in upper tributary streams. A few populations inhabit lakes and reservoirs.

Local Bull Trout Populations

Local populations of bull trout reside within several watersheds in the Interior Columbia Basin. The geographic area for this brochure encompasses watersheds in eastern Oregon and southeast Washington, as shown on the map below.



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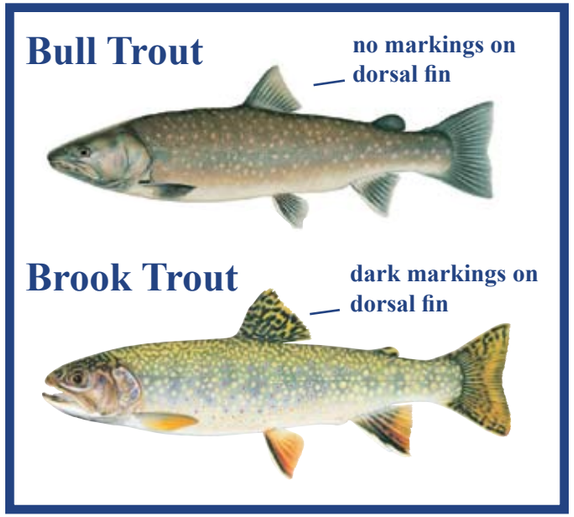
Black and white illustration by Marisa Meyer.
Technical assistance provided by Mary Edwards.

Identifying Bull Trout

A distinguishing feature of bull trout is the absence of markings on the dorsal fin. Other similar looking fish, such as brook trout, have dark markings on this fin. Bull trout have olive green backs with pink or yellow spots, and a light-colored belly.

Male bull trout may develop bright orange bellies during spawning. Migrant bull trout can grow up to 3 feet long and weigh more than 20 pounds. Resident bull trout generally are smaller, averaging 6 to 12 inches in length at maturity.

Bull trout and Dolly Varden look very similar and were once considered the same species. Bull trout are mainly an inland species, while Dolly Varden are more common in coastal areas. Many people still refer to bull trout as "Dolly Varden."



"No Black, Put it Back"

If you catch a trout with no markings on its dorsal fin, it's probably a bull trout. Please release it without removing it from the water.

Bull Trout Research

Biologists are trying to better understand bull trout in order to help this species recover from its ongoing declines and become a self-sustaining species with no need for protection under the ESA. Several studies are under way including radio tracking to investigate bull trout migration, surveys to determine bull trout distribution and monitor abundance, and genetic sampling to examine population diversity and structure.

Photo courtesy of USFS

Biologists conduct a bull trout spawning survey.

For more information please contact the nearest U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Forest Service, Oregon or Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, or Bureau of Land Management office.

This brochure was produced in cooperation with the following partners:

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Eastern Oregon and Southeast Washington

BULL TROUT

A Native Coldwater Fish

Bull Trout

An Elusive Native Fish

Bull trout often hide in the shadow of a fallen log or a boulder. A sudden movement in the water may be all you see of this elusive fish.

Bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*) are members of the char subgroup of the salmon family. Char are well adapted to life in very cold water, with a range extending farther north than almost any other freshwater fish. Like salmon and steelhead, bull trout evolved in our local waters as the glaciers of the last ice age receded. For 10,000 years, native bull trout and salmon have coexisted in the same streams.

Role in the Food Chain

Small bull trout eat insects, but as they grow they shift to a diet consisting mainly of available fish species, including juvenile suckers and salmonids, dace, redside shiners and sculpins. Bull trout, in turn, are a food source for larger fish and other predators. Bull trout are a native fish within our streams and serve a vital role within the ecosystem.

Habitat

Bull trout thrive in rivers and streams with cold, clear water and clean gravel. They often are found in stream segments fed by springs. Spring water cools the stream in the summer and limits ice formation in the winter. Trees, shrubs and grasses along riparian areas collectively stabilize stream banks, add woody material to the stream to create habitat structure, filter surface water runoff into the stream, and provide shade to keep the water cool. Woody material, undercut banks and boulders provide places for the fish to hide.

Life History

Adult bull trout spawn in the fall in headwater streams. Females lay their fertilized eggs beneath the gravel in nests known as redds. Some bull trout remain in these headwaters their entire lives. Others migrate to larger streams and rivers, or lakes and reservoirs, before returning to spawn.

Photo by Philip Howell

Bull trout can grow up to 3 feet long, weigh more than 20 pounds and live 12 years or more.

Unlike salmon, bull trout do not typically die after spawning. Bull trout reach sexual maturity at 4-7 years of age and can spawn more than once, but may not spawn every year. Bull trout have a longer life span than salmon and can live for more than 12 years.

Threatened by Extinction

Bull trout in the Columbia River Basin currently are listed as a threatened species under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA). As salmon and steelhead populations have declined, so have bull trout for many of the same reasons. Bull trout are also losing an important food source as salmon and steelhead become scarce.

Photo by Philip Howell

Improving water quality for bull trout will also benefit humans.

Bull trout are very sensitive to human activities that disturb their stream habitat. As land is cleared, fine sediment runs off slopes and settles in the gravel beds of streams affecting eggs and juvenile bull trout. In addition, the removal of trees and shrubs from river edges can result in increased water temperatures. The diversion of water from streams can cause lowered water flow, which restricts bull trout migration between rivers and tributaries. Poaching and interbreeding with non-native brook trout also negatively impact bull trout.

Canary in the Coal Mine

Bull trout are more sensitive to water quality and habitat degradation than many other salmonids, making them a good indicator of watershed conditions. Like a canary used in a coal mine to indicate air quality changes, bull trout decline is a warning signal about the health of our streams and rivers. Actions to improve water quality and stream habitat for bull trout also will benefit many other species, including humans. Healthy stream systems minimize flooding, provide clean and abundant water, recycle nutrients, and provide habitat for plants and animals.

How Can You Help?

Everyone can help protect and restore bull trout in our streams and rivers.

Conserve Water
Bull trout and other aquatic fauna need sufficient water in streams to survive.

Follow Fishing Regulations
Due to their low numbers, bull trout must be released unharmed. Learn to distinguish bull trout from other fish (see back of this brochure). If you catch a bull trout while fishing, **please release it without removing it from the water**.

Use Backcountry Etiquette
Stay on approved trails. Cross streams in areas with large rocks instead of smooth gravel to avoid spawning areas. Do not build rock or log dams because they restrict fish migration.

Practice Sound Resource Management
Manage riparian areas to minimize erosion. Protect streamside vegetation that stabilizes banks, adds large woody material and shades the stream. Prevent pollutants from entering streams and rivers.

Recovery Efforts

Recovery efforts for bull trout are being coordinated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), USDA Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), state and tribal agencies, and others. These groups are working to protect and restore bull trout populations and habitats.