

# Spinning Wheels —AND— Singing Reels

The reckless pursuit of cutthroat trout  
a long way from anywhere

Story by Buddy Levy  
Photography by Dave Scott

**F**or nearly two decades I have been fishing Kelly Creek, a gorgeous westslope cutthroat catch-and-release stream in Idaho's Clearwater National Forest. I've approached it from all the traditional angles: car camping and fishing the road-access sections from the main trailhead downstream five or six miles; camping at the trailhead and day-hiking the roadless section upstream, stumbling and limping back to camp in the almost dark, river grit and wet socks blistering my feet on the long descent; and even doing solo overnights way upstream from the trailhead, once making it up about 10 miles and sleeping out under the stars on a bed of tundra and native grass.

I came to prefer the roadless stretch above the bridge and the trailhead for the obvious reasons—fewer folks, more adventure, the perception of better fishing, and then once, during the deviously long slog out, as I tripped over rocks, my knees and hips ailing, I had an epiphany: I could get back to my car a hell of a lot faster on a mountain bike.

I've been an avid fly fisherman since my youth, and over the past 10 years I've become an equally passionate mountain biker. Combining the two endeavors made sense. I had always dreamed of getting into the high reaches of Kelly Creek where I could spend whole days fishing this remote, roadless paradise. But I never had the time. Biking in was the answer.

Kelly Creek is a long way from anywhere. It's part of the historic Great Burn, a 250,000-acre roadless area on the Bitterroot Divide, which separates western Montana from the Idaho panhandle. The area has remained roadless because most of its valuable timber was torched in the extensive forest fires of 1910, which devastated forests from northwest Montana into northern Idaho. The upper reaches of the watershed are sublime, with diverse water, including long riffle sections interspersed with boulder-strewn pools. Mountains



**Clockwise from above:** The long ride in offers sprawling views and technical pedaling. • Carrying a bike over an un-rideable section. • Fish On! The author plays a nice native Cutt.

erupt from the stream and the higher you climb, the steeper the approaches to the river become.

One summer I called my longtime fishing buddy Dave Scott and invited him on a trip to Kelly Creek. We were excited to use the mountain bikes for the approach, getting as far upstream as we wanted, not fishing any of the lower sections, no matter how enticing, until we'd found our campsite and ditched our bikes.

We planned to arrive at the trailhead on a Thursday night,



camp, then get an early start the next morning on the bikes, bringing only enough food for one night and two full days. We set as our goal a plateau about five miles upstream.

THERE IS A THIN SHEEN OF FROST on my bag as sunrise awakens me next to Kelly Creek. I shiver, surprised by the cold, and rise quickly to begin packing my panniers for the ride. We've chosen different systems for portaging our gear: I employ a seat-post rack with two voluminous Ortlieb panniers, while Dave is trying out a BOB cycling trailer that attaches to his rear axle and holds more gear, but is heavier and unwieldy. He needs the extra room for his camera gear; and the length of the trailer permits us to strap our rod cases on top, a bonus



that allows me to take my two-piece 4/5 weight Powell rather than my older, less responsive Fenwick pack rod.

Though he's never used a BOB before, Dave is also ready, having packed the ample trailer with most of the food, all his gear, and even the large plastic five-liter bladder from a box of red wine.

It's a perfect summer morning when we embark: cloudless, sun gleaming off the river, osprey perching in high cedar snags then soaring, screeching above the water. I shove off and start pedaling, smiling even as the thick brush along the trail whips and scratches my exposed forearms and shoulders. A dream has been realized—I'm mountain biking to a remote fishing locale.



From opposite left: No room for error or a biker might engage in a death-drop. • The deep, alluring waters of Kelly Creek. • The author working the boulder pools.

From the start, I try not to think about a section of trail that I remember well from hikes in: a quarter-mile of severe hillside where the trail cuts across the mountainside and the world plunges into the chasm below—"cliff" is probably the most apt description, but I've been careful not to use that phrase around Dave, who has considerably less mountain biking experience than I do. I figure he'll have the good sense to dismount and push if he needs to. As I pedal I remember the words of a cycling friend who does not fly fish, but has come here specifically to mountain bike the single-track: "There is significant 'pucker-factor' in many places," he recalled. "Fully loaded—you guys are nuts. Don't look down!"

The trail has been cut over the years by foot traffic as well as horses, which outfitters use for elk and other big game camps in the fall, and parts of the trail bottom are a good foot below the natural ground level, and where it's really narrow, my feet slam into the sides and my cycling shoes are kicked loose from the pedals, causing me to re-click in as I go. It's lovely, challenging riding, with long sweeping turns in places and straight-aways through dense and overgrown foliage which whips at my face and neck, wetting me, the low-slung branches slicing into my shins, drawing blood, which dries

the color of the Indian paintbrush dotting the trailside.

After a couple of miles the trail swings right down to streamside at a sweet hole and I have the urge to stop and fish. Through my sweat-streaked polarizing glasses I see considerable fish holding in the bottom and I suck long on my hydration bite valve, antsy as I see a few fish beginning to rise. Then I remember that one of the reasons we have chosen to ride is to avoid the temptation to fish on the way up which, in the past, has kept us from actually getting very far. I hydrate more, hear Dave clambering up the grade, give him a yell and press on, the smell of earth and river in my nose.

I see the sketchy section up ahead, a long exposed scar of dirt slicing across the mountain, and I slow my breathing, calming myself. Starting and stopping takes a physical toll, especially loaded and going uphill, so I settle into as smooth a rhythm as I can muster and chug along, pretending I'm on one of my familiar trails at home, all the while singing the mantra, "Don't look down, don't look down, don't look down." Then there it is, the place where the trail banks hard left and the severity of the drop to the right is undeniable, just air and river beyond. I pedal slowly but surely, nearly holding my breath and hoping it will be over soon while simultaneously



The release moment of "catch and release." • Locked and loaded for the long haul. Two systems, panniers and "BOB" trailer.

afire with exhilaration. Then the turn, and foliage as a buffer, and the terror subsides. I've ridden it.

I stop and wait for Dave. I have to know: did he ride it, too?

He grins and nods, affirming the unthinkable. Then he adds: "It's the first single-track I've ever ridden."

We make camp a half-mile or so before the plateau, on a lovely flat section right on the river, next to a giant downed cedar we can use for a backrest and to hang gear. The trail down is steep and rocky and I stumble as I shoulder the load. It takes both of us to yard the BOB down the bank. We huff the high mountain air and I smile, noticing that Dave is bleeding, too.

There is a decent hole right in front of our camp, and I tie on a small Elk-Hair Caddis my friend Ken Johnson has fashioned. The water is sepia-toned in the high noon sun, and I squint through the glare, imagining where fish should be. I toss one up against a wet, black rock and mend quickly, trying to will a fish to hit, but all is quiet. Again. Nothing. Then I work upstream to the tail end of the hole and slap, zing, gotcha. My first fish is a nice one, and I coax her in gently, marveling as I release her, the pebbly, speckled back, the blood-red belly and flame-slashed underjaw. Native cutts. This is a big part of what we came for.

We move upstream without talking much, leapfrogging along the stream from nice hole to nice hole, alternating "dibs" on water. It works well with just the two of us, and as it turns out, we seem to favor different water. I like the languorous, slow-swirling pools, and he prefers more active riffle and straight runs. The fishing is good, steady, but after an hour or two we realize we haven't eaten and we sit on a bank and gorge on jerky, two-layer Norwegian sardines and chocolate, bolting the food back with the cold, filtered river

water. We laze in the sun, and I notice grasshoppers leaping into the water, performing their insect version of synchronized swimming. Perhaps it's a sign: maybe a Dave's Hopper will lure in a lunger.

After lunch we move upstream along the river, but the canyon narrows and the walls turn sheer, and we tire of scaling huge downed trees. We scramble up to the trail and move into the cool, dark shadows of the afternoon forest, stopping to pinch thimbleberries and pop them into our mouths, their flavor tart and earthen. We want to reach the big boulders, a massive natural staircase of treacherous, slick-bottomed pools which are hard to hike down to and difficult to fish. The holding water is deep, the runs short and separated by falls and whitewater that is prone to snags, and the bottom drops out from under without warning, often leaving an angler armpit high or swimming if they're not careful.

The trail climbs, and we pad along in the cooling afternoon, our felt-bottomed soles quiet on the duff and dust. We find a game trail and poke through, rod tips snagging here and there on cedar and alder branches until we pop out and stand at the boulders.

Standing thigh deep in the rushing snowmelt, holding steady as a trout against the current, I realize that my legs are tired from the ride and the hike but it's worth it. Fish begin to rise in the slack water above a few slate-grey boulders, ancient and rounded smooth from eons of runoff. I cast to rising fish, and they take my offerings graciously, hungrily. I see Dave's silhouette around the upstream bend, watch the arc of his cast in the late light like a lasso or bullwhip. And then there is only the sound of the river, the mesmerizing wash of water over rocks and the *gear-zing* singing of the reel



when the fish flee downstream.

We limp back to camp under headlight beam, boil water, belt down whiskey as a bracer and sip long on red wine from metal Sierra cups. Linguica sausage sizzles in the fry pan and we talk about fish landed and lost, about the deer we saw drinking at the river's edge, about our kids and how we ought to do this more often. We clink metallic toasts and warm ourselves by the imaginary bonfire of the propane-stove glow.

Later, I think I hear a faint howling—like a coyote but deeper and longer, and less yippish—and I remember that offspring of the original pair of a reintroduced wolf pack, the Kelly Creek Pack, still roam areas adjacent to the Great Burn, where we are now sleeping. The possibility comforts me, and I lie still and peaceful, listening to the easy roil of the river.

We rise with the sun, stiff limbed and hungry. We pull on cold wet wading boots and hike to the boulders and tie on Humpies and Hemingway Caddis and Stimulators, casting again and again to likely water, to leisurely rising trout, to stubborn trout, and sometimes casting to hope alone.

Time distends as we move up the river in tandem. It's just the two of us alone in the mountains and the timeless rush of river spray all around. Dave puts down his fly rod and climbs onto a monstrous boulder and splays himself out and sleeps like a sunning rattler, the strains of work and town and responsibility many miles and riffles and river drainages below him.

We catch more fish than we can count, or care to, some as long and thick as our forearms, and we lose some even bigger (always do); and at the end of another perfect day we load the bikes for the ride down and out.

This time, when we reach the cliffs we stop to survey the sweep of earth and air below, the death drop, and laugh at how ludicrous it seems. We should probably walk the bikes because we're tired, bonking and wobbly, and we've ridden it once uphill so there is nothing left to prove. But we need to ride.

We push off tentatively and I hear the metronomic spin of my gears and grin, recalling the *whir-zing* of the reel. I clench the handlebars, tap-dance my fingers on the brake-levers, click into the pedals and let it roll. I can hear Dave's primordial voice hooting behind me, echoing off the mountainside and careening into the still mountain air—simultaneously mournful and plaintive as a wolf-howl, yipping and high-pitched like a coyote.

I know exactly what he means. **BSJ**

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