



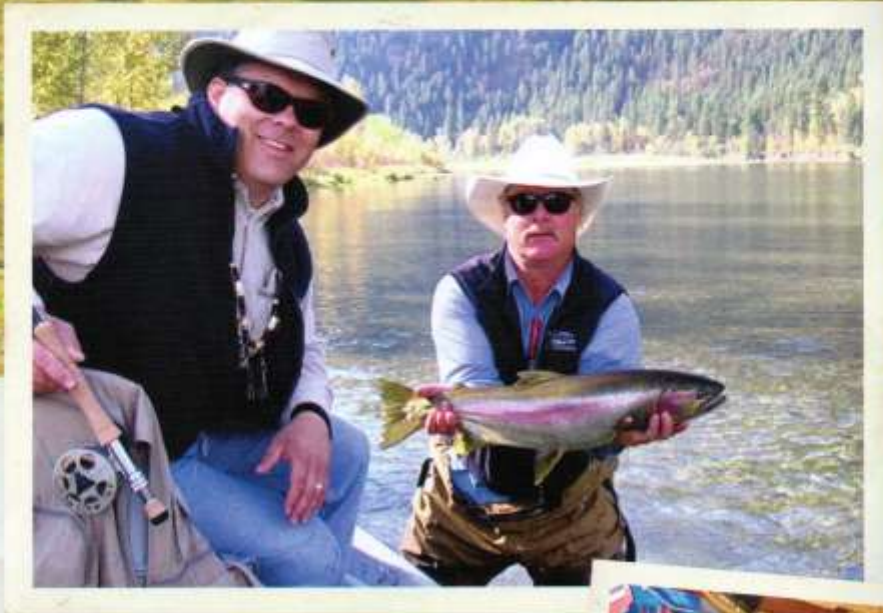
# Where Time Stands Still

BY DOUG MCNICOLL

There are some places and people you just remember. You remember when you met them, where you were, and what you talked about. Dave Blackburn, owner of the Kootenai Angler Fly Shop 10 miles up-river from Libby, is one of those people. And the Kootenai River is one of those places. One of the few places left where it seems time just stands still.

PHOTO: BRIAN O'KEEFE

PHOTO: CLYDE WALKER



“ Libby, which sits just south of the Canadian Border between the Cabinet and the Purcell Mountains, is a hunting and fishing town that rivals any in Montana. ”





**M**y introduction to Blackburn first came in 1996 at a Fly Fishing Expo in Chicago. When we got to talking, his description of Libby, the Cabinet Mountains, the incredible fishing, and its people sounded a little like a "back in time" story, and I just had to visit.

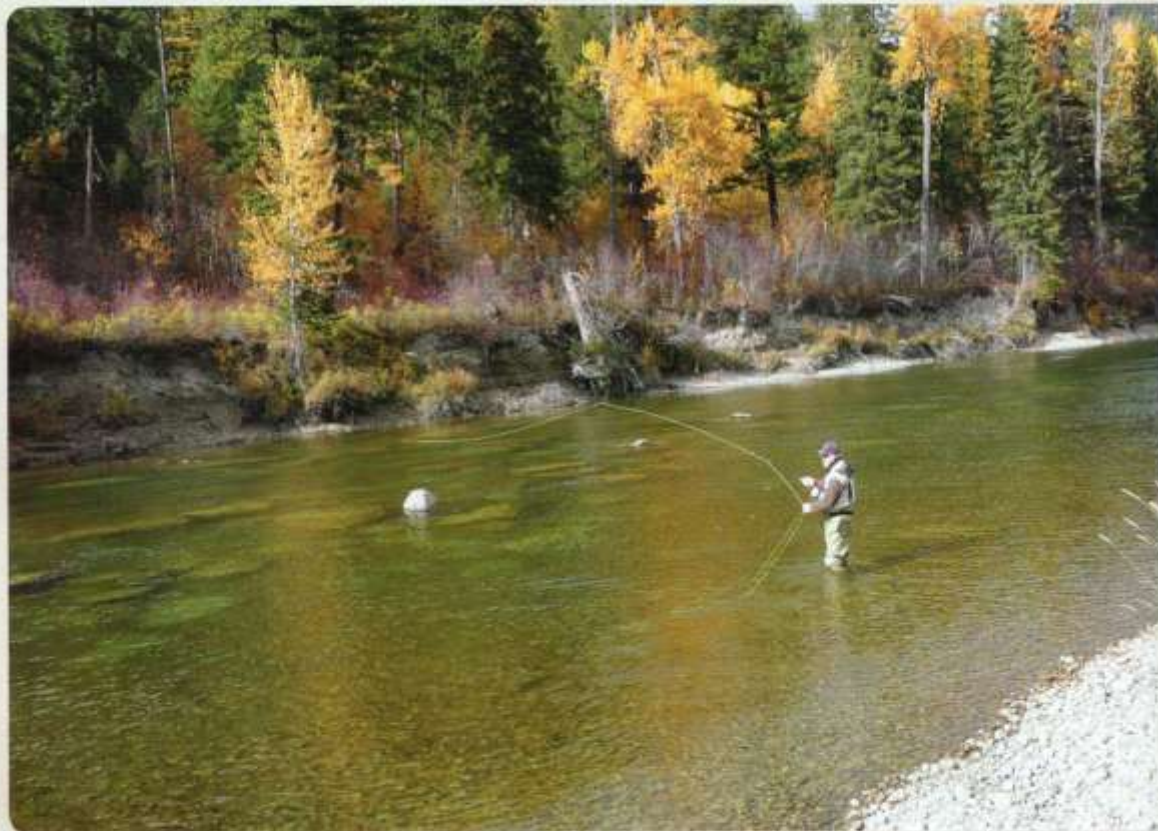
Libby, which sits just south of the Canadian Border between the Cabinet and the Purcell Mountains, is a hunting and fishing town that rivals any in Montana. The upper section of the Kootenai River is tail water and begins at Kootenai Dam just outside the town of Libby. I was amazed that I hadn't heard



PHOTO: CLIFF WALKER

of the Kootenai, located just an hour and a half northwest of Kalispell, in the many times I had landed in the Flathead Valley. After all, an hour and a half is right around the corner in Montana. Since my first trip to Blackburn's shop in some 13 years ago, I have been back each and every year, through every season.

Dave Blackburn and his wife, Tammy, have lived on the river in the same house since 1982. Since buying the original three acres, they have assembled an additional 58 acres, and now, after 27 years of guiding and running the shop, they have successfully turned what I call the River Bend fishing experience





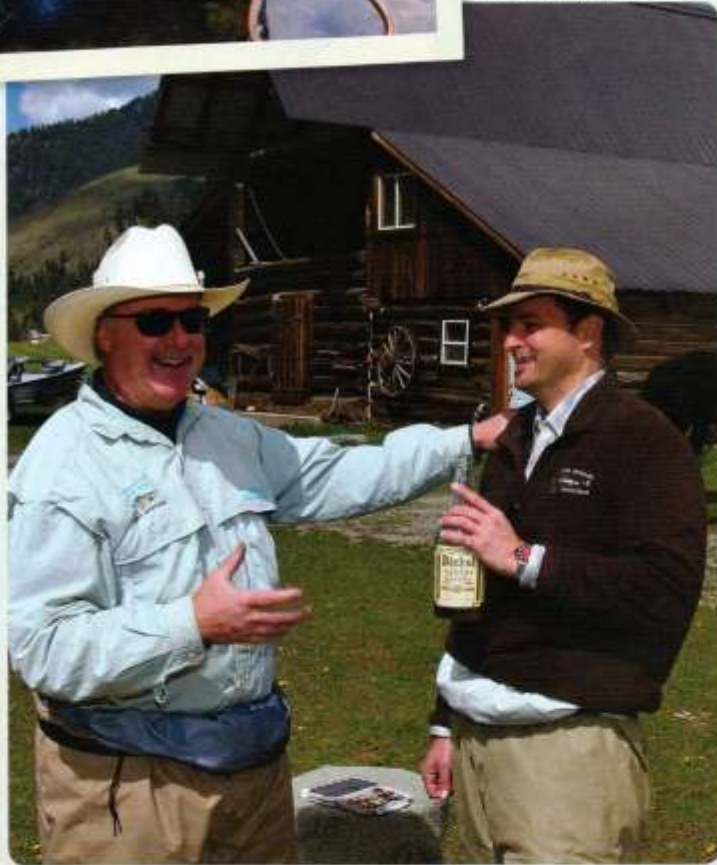
*Kootenai  
Bull Trout  
seconds before  
release.*

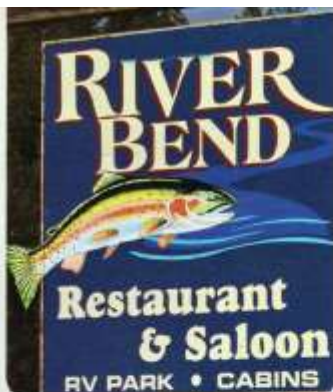


PHOTOS: CLINT WALKER

into one of the most unique in the state.

Putting in just below the dam at the Lagoon, you need to be ready. You should have multiple rods strung and a good guide supplied by Blackburn on the sticks. The state record rainbow trout was taken in 1997 at the dam put in and it weighed 33.1 pounds. You need to know, if you're throwing deep streamers (because all records are made to be broken) and you incidentally get hooked up with a bull trout while going after another species, you must immediately and successfully release it as fishing for bulls is illegal. Once below the dam, long runs, midstream boulders, deep holes, and super long river curves dominate the float until you hit "Dave's Home Pool." As close as I can figure, the Home Pool starts somewhere before the Route 37 Bridge and ends somewhere around lunchtime. Lunch, at Blackburn's River Bend Restaurant, is like no other in the middle of a "back in time" float.





This is not your typical brown bag shore lunch of grocery store-made sandwiches and a bag of chips. At the River Bend Hole, you anchor your drift boat, walk 50 yards to the River Bend Restaurant, and order from a full menu and bar. A menu that includes many different cuts of meat, pastas, and burgers. In the past, we typically have gone for a pasta such as the chicken fettuccini with a gorgonzola Alfredo, or a red, white, and blue burger, fries, and salad. It's delicious, and it certainly counts as the best shore lunch available because it's on the river. It's all part of Blackburn's vision. Dinner is worth trying, too. I wouldn't blame any angler for rushing the last part of the float to hit the prime rib special.



PHOTO: HEIKO OHLER

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PHOTO: CLINT WALKER



## FISHING TALES



PHOTO: CLINT WALSER



PHOTO: CLINT WALSER



Accommodations include many great camping sites along the river, which are safe and easy to find. Or, for the complete River Bend experience, I suggest arranging with Blackburn a stay in a riverside cabin. If the bunkhouse is booked, stay in the barn. It's the original homestead built in 1889 and is expertly remodeled. It just adds to the lore.



PHOTO: CLINT WALSER



PHOTO: BRUCE GRIFFIN



PHOTO: JUDY WALKER



“ Blackburn will tell you that the “PMD is the bread and butter hatch” and you better come ready with a large selection. ”

After a day on the river, there is nothing like going through your selections of PMDs in the evening, at the bar, or in the bunkhouse. Blackburn will tell you that the “PMD is the bread and butter hatch” and you better come ready with a large selection. They change in color and size throughout

the season, and you need to really match the insects on short notice. The Kootenai can be a tricky river at times to figure out, but with 27 years of rowing the river, Blackburn will have you on fish, food, and a River Bend experience that only has gotten better with time—even though it stands still.

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