Big Creek has been on my destination list since I started fly fishing. In my mind, it’s Idaho’s premier wild Westslope Cutthroat fishery with stiff competition from Kelly Creek. The Lochsa and Selway Rivers aren’t far behind. I have always been leery of making the long backcountry drive not knowing if my truck could handle it. Come to find out - the roads weren’t that bad. Big Creek is the largest tributary to the Middle Fork of the Salmon River in the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness. It’s the farthest I’ve been from civilization in the lower forty eight.
Robert and I left Wednesday at lunch and returned Saturday night. It’s a five hour drive from Boise to the trailhead but Robert made better time. We stopped along the way to see spawning Chinook Salmon in the SF Salmon River. They have traveled hundreds of miles from the ocean and it shows. They are pretty beat up and a fraction of their original size once they reach the headwater streams in Idaho. We briefly fished Johnson Creek on the way up. We caught a few Steelhead smolt and a small Cutthroat. It didn’t peak my interest much. It was time to get to the better fishing at Big Creek.

I wasn’t sure what the roads would be like once we passed the small town of Yellow Pine. As we drove I expected the roads to deteriorate. They narrowed but never got that bad. We reached the little town of Big Creek and knew we were almost there. There was a Forest Service Guard Station, an airstrip and a few cabins.

It was a great feeling once we reached the trailhead. What a glorious moment to think I was actually there. We were so excited that we decided to hike that night with the two hours of daylight we had left. Our destination for the following day was Monumental Creek. It was ten miles downstream so a few miles today meant more fishing tomorrow. We found a nice place to camp a few miles downstream. I hurried and set up my tent and fished with the few minutes I had before dark. It was long enough to catch my first 11” Cutthroat from a small pool where we filtered our water.
The following morning we made our way down stream fishing the most accessible pools. We caught a fair share of Cutthroat but nothing to brag about. They were typically 10”-12” but had a good fight for their size. We met a forest service crew clearing trails. They were making their way back to Big Creek on the last day of their ten day assignment.

It was at that point that I saw a large female King Salmon on her Redd. A Redd is a nest created by a female Salmon. She sweeps her tail to create a nest in the shallow gravel. Once the eggs are deposited, nearby males fertilize the eggs. Gravel is then swept back over the eggs and the female guards the nest. Redds are visible since the gravel is cleaner than the surrounding gravel appearing lighter. It’s important for fisherman to avoid these locations.

We made our way to Monumental Creek to find campers already there. We actually didn’t see many people on the trip. We decided to continue down river fishing here and there until we found a good place to camp. After three more miles and several small Cutthroat and Steelhead smolt, we found a good spot at Mile Bar. It had a nice flat area for the tents and a very nice plunge pool and run for fishing.
Robert made his way to the fishing hole first. It wasn’t long before he was calling my name. He was excited to tell me that there were some large 18” Cutthroat sipping flies at the top of the hole. He had caught a smaller fish that had put the big fish down. It was nice to know they were in there. I fished it for a while and came out with a 14” Cut and a few smaller ones. I caught a few more nice Cuts down through the run on dries (Hopper & Caddis) and Robert followed behind me with nymphs.

It wasn’t long before Robert hooked into something BIG! I was watching his reaction and the rod and wondered what in the world could be that big as the fight continued. After a good fight we both got a quick glimpse of the silhouette as it briefly came up from the depths. Robert had hooked into a King Salmon on his fly rod! Holy Cow!

The excitement increased as the struggle continued. He eventually landed a small male that he quickly released back into the river. I was not expecting that at all.

We decided to let the hole rest for a while and hike downstream eventually coming to an airstrip. It was 13 miles from the trailhead which is the farthest downstream we hiked. It was 35 miles from the trailhead to get to the Middle Fork of the Salmon. My understanding is that bigger fish are more common in the lower stretches along with more Bull Trout.
We both found the airstrip to be very amazing and we wondered how pilots could actually land and take off. It was a strip of hillside that had been mowed as it slanted down toward the river. There was a cliff at the bottom of the runway and a hillside at the top. It didn’t seem like much room for error to me. There weren’t any holes in this stretch so it wasn’t long before we returned to camp.

I decided to get a bite to eat and head downstream near camp to try a few holes that we had skipped. Robert decided to fish the big hole some more with streamers and nymphs. While downstream I caught a few nice Cuts before returning to camp. Robert told me of a 19” Bull Trout he caught on a streamer. He said it hit as he was stripping it back to shore. That was five species for him in one day: King, Bull Trout, Cut, White Fish & Steelhead smolt. There was also a chance for a few Brook Trout but we didn’t catch any on the trip.

We caught more nice Cutthroat from the hole throughout the day but never did see the 18 inchers again. As we filtered water I noticed a Black Bear walking down to the river about 100 yards below camp. We made our way down stream to get a closer look but never did see it again.

It felt like true wilderness seeing a Bear and hooking into a Bull Trout and King Salmon. It was also fun watching male Salmon fight for their chance to fertilize the Redd as they chased each other away; a ritual that continued all day. The only thing missing was the howl of a Wolf that I’ve yet to hear even though I’ve seen them. It’s the farthest I’ve been from civilization and it felt like we were alone. I remember noticing the brightness of the Milky Way as I watched for falling stars. I’m very grateful for these kinds of experiences.
We decided to start making our way back toward the trailhead the next morning and hit the big holes and out-of-the-way areas we had passed on the way down. Much of the river seemed flat without much character even though fish could still be had. Much of that type of water didn’t interest us so we hiked long distances at times to find water that had the character we liked. People speak of having 40 fish days but we were probably in the low twenties.

My greatest experience was deciding, after much thought, to bushwhack through some miserable thicket and downed logs to get to some meanders away from the trail. It really paid off. We found a stretch of water where I caught several nice Cutthroat on the dry. Robert fished nymphs and came away with two nice 16” Bull Trout along with some Cuts.
I made my way downstream to a log jam that created a nice hole and run. I caught several nice Cuts at the top of the hole and a few at the bottom. Before leaving, I tried another cast near the log in a back eddy. A big fish came up and smacked my Caddis. After a very fun fight on my 3wt fly rod I landed a nice 17” Cut. The fishing improved tremendously as we hit the hard-to-get-to places.

Along the trail upstream was a long stretch of plunge pools where the canyon narrowed. There were a lot of nice holes but we just caught average size Cuts. I’m sure this is mostly due to fishing pressure as everyone passes this section as they hike downstream. We spent the last evening fishing this stretch while camped nearby.

We didn’t bother fishing this stretch the following morning as we decided to hike out and try fishing the EF of the SF Salmon River. We found some excellent holes with great fishing and some that weren’t so great. I managed to land a 15” Cutthroat. I loved watching the fish follow my fly across the stream and then smack it in a hole where I caught five fish.

We also fished the SF Salmon River which seemed too sandy to me and didn’t interest me. We did find a good hole where Robert caught a 16” Cutthroat. I’ve heard that the hikeable stretch downstream is awesome if you are willing to hike a ways.
The time we spent on Big Creek was a very memorable experience. The one thing I learned is that it takes a lot of work to catch the big fish but you can catch as many small fish as you want. There is plenty of dry fly action which makes this place so special.