

There's a creek that slips down out of the mountains near my Montana home, a little thief of a creek that steals between lodgepole thickets, lichen-tinged cliffs and the petrified mastodon boulders left behind by the glaciers that carved the valley. It's known hereabouts as Slim Creek, a poor name that reveals little of the water's true nature – of the secrets that reside in its occasional depths or the spirits that course through its boreal flows.

As a fishery, Slim is what we call a late bloomer, a freestone stream that's at its best when the high meadow grasses have gone to seed and the hoppers buzz in the late-afternoon sun. It stays cool because the trees and the cliffs conspire to shade its passage, and the tiny rainbows that hide behind most every rock have an air of unfettered wildness, an almost manic disregard for the danger posed by rods and hooks and lines.

We have to eat!" they cry. "Winter's coming, we have to eat!" And they do, with a ferocity that belies their diminutive size.

To tell the truth, I don't generally visit Slim Creek for its trout, although the little fellows are certainly part of its charm. Instead, it's one of those rare places where I'm happy to relax on the bank while the sun shines down and the afternoon zephyrs whisper through the pines. I've found that if I sit long enough, I can quiet the jitterbug thoughts inside my head and ease into the serenity of a sunny summer afternoon – no one to see, no where to go, nothing of particular importance to do.

On those occasions when the spirit does move me to fish, I like to disregard the high-tech trappings of modern angling – that overwhelming emphasis on technique, equipment and performance that blurs the distinction between fishing and the rest of our greyhound society. All I need is a rod, a reel and a couple of ratty old flies, and I can slip back to a time when life progressed at a gentler pace and the measure of a man's success could be taken from his smile and the heft of his fern-lined creel.

A couple of weeks ago I tramped in to Slim to visit the pocket-water downstream from Miller's Falls. The path from the trail-head was dry and hardpacked, topped by a layer of fine brown dust that covered my shoes before I'd gone a hundred yards. The bare dirt showed the occasional deer track but no recent human use, and I can't

say I was surprised when I rounded the last bend above the creek and nearly stepped in a pile of fresh bear scat.

Miller's Falls isn't high, maybe twelve or fifteen feet, but it anchors your eye like a sunset or a wide-racked elk. The water above the falls glides down over a series of broad, shallow terraces shouldered by lodgepole, then splits into two channels around a mountainous, moss-covered boulder. The left side plunges immediately into a frothy whitewater chute, while the right spreads out and falls in a delicate curtain over a sculpted rock face. They come together at the base of the boulder, reuniting like lovers after a spat, and

then the creek flows out into a shallow, rocky bowl before it narrows once more and charges off between red-grey cliffs.

I started fishing at the bottom end of the bowl, the late afternoon sun at my back, and waded upstream, flicking out short casts and working my way toward the falls. The rainbows I caught were small and silvery, the color of steelhead just in from the salt, and they came to hand not so much alarmed as disappointed, unable to believe that the juicy morsel they'd just snatched from the surface had dragged them away from their ice-water home.

After an hour or so my fly was in tatters, and I'd landed

and released more of the little bows than I cared to count. I waded over to the bank, leaned my rod against a tree branch and sat down on a smooth, gray rock that afforded a view of the twin cascades. The seam where the two currents joined caught my eye, and I knew that Slim's biggest fish – a solid twelve-incher – would be holding there, waiting for a crack at whatever floated by.

I sat for a while contemplating that seam, thinking about the trout that sheltered there in the water below the falls, and then my thoughts wandered as the sun sank below the hills and the shadows thickened, until finally it was time to go home. ➡

Slim Creek

It's a humble little stream, but with enough secrets and character to carry you back to a time when life moved at a gentler pace and the measure of a man's success was in his smile.

by Todd Tanner

