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# **Anglers' Ability to Identify Bull Trout and Other Montana Salmonids**

by

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### Abstract

Bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*) and westslope cutthroat trout (*Oncorhynchus clarki lewisi*) have received increasing attention due to declining populations. There are a number of contributing factors causing the decline. One potential cause of these declines is pressure from angling and illegal harvest. Legal harvesting of bull trout has been increasingly restricted or completely eliminated in an attempt to restore the spawning populations of these native fish. One concern is that anglers are illegally and unintentionally harvesting these trout due to their inability to properly identify these and other salmonids. The current study examined the ability of anglers to identify six salmonid species found in west central Montana. Results indicate that anglers correctly identified salmonid species approximately half of the time, with frequent confusion of related species. Residents and nonresidents show significant differences in ability to identify salmonids, and ability to identify salmonids appeared to be related to the angler's experience level, with fewer errors committed by more experienced anglers.

### Introduction

In recent years, increasing attention has been given to declining native fish populations in western Montana. Concerns include reduction in sporting/recreation opportunities due to declining gamefish populations, ecological concerns including stream habitat, water quality, exotic introductions, and concern about genetic purity and

*Angler's Ability to Identify  
Bull Trout and Other Salmonid Species  
Found in Northwest Montana*

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**Bull Trout Identification 1****Abstract**

The bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*) has received increased attention recently due to declining populations. One potential cause of these declines is pressure from angling and poaching. In recent years bag limits have been reduced in an attempt to restore the spawning populations of this native fish. However, these populations have not increased regularly since the changes in reported harvesting of bull trout. One concern is that anglers are illegally and unintentionally harvesting bull trout due to misidentification of these fish as other species. The current study examined the ability of anglers to identify six salmonid species found within Montana's region 1, which is home to the strongest and largest bull trout populations in the state. Results indicate that anglers correctly identify salmonid species approximately half of the time, with frequent confusion of related species. Residents and nonresidents show significant differences in ability to identify salmonids and patterns of errors. Implications for educational activities and future research are discussed.