

# TROUT

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# Ted and Trout

**Ted Turner's Quest to  
Create Native Trout  
Strongholds in the West**

BY TODD WILKINSON



**“No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it’s not the same river and he’s not the same man.” — Heraclitus**

**W**hen Ted Turner slips like Heraclitus into his favorite stretch of cold water—in his case, a twisting swirl of Cherry Creek known as “The Butler”—he’ll be casting for some of the rarest fishes in Montana.

The stream he encounters this year, however, is not the same one as last. Giddy at the prospect of coaxing westslope cutthroat trout to rise, he regards the glittery transplants as pieces in a larger biological jigsaw puzzle.

“As good as it will be to catch these fish,” he says. “I’ll feel even better every time I turn them back into their new home and watch their numbers grow.”

Some 65 liquid miles have become a new protected stronghold for pure-strain westslopes that did not exist two years ago. Originating in the rugged snow-fed hinders of Cherry Lake in the Gallatin National Forest, and then tumbling west toward a confluence with the Madison River, the lion’s share of the drainage resides on Turner’s Flying D Ranch.

Restoring native westslopes is part of Turner’s ongoing commitment to landscape-level conservation. The Flying D, his 113,000-acre flagship, is emblematic of how the former media mogul has made his lands available, like Noah and his ark, to harbor species in need of secure habitat.



PHOTOS BY TODD WILKINSON







From red-streaked salmonids to naturally colonizing grizzly bears, gray wolves, elk, moose, pronghorn and dozens of other creatures, the ranch is something of a modern marvel. Like America's mother park, Yellowstone, Turner's spread is inhabited by every major faunal denizen that existed here prior to the arrival of Europeans.

Turner, now in his 70s, credits fly fishing with opening his eyes to a deeper sense of stewardship. "In the beginning, when I first came to the West, my objective was simply to have a few recreational retreats where I could

overgrazing by cattle before Turner bought it in 1989. Earlier management practices had left the banks of Cherry Creek denuded of vegetation and its cobble encased in a layer of silt.

While bringing back westslope is the latest initiative in a long list of projects, it represents a milestone for native trout conservation on private land, says Bruce Farling, director of TU's Montana State Council.

Farling has worked closely with Turner's lead biologist Carter Kruse and Pat Clancey, the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Department's west-

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catch some fish," he says. "But the more that you become familiar with the land at river level, and contemplate all of the things that go into creating a healthy trout stream, your thinking naturally expands. Then it's your choice to act on it, or not."

His principle objective, as a green-minded capitalist, is leaving his properties in better condition than he found them, restoring extirpated species along the way and achieving profitability by using a balance sheet that emphasizes ecological sustainability. Considering that he owns two million acres in the U.S. and has a bison herd that is 50,000 animals strong—on both fronts, the most of any individual landholder—he has an epic agenda.

### **A milestone for trout conservation**

Set at the foot of the majestic Spanish Peaks and sprawling into the middle of the Gallatin Valley west of Bozeman, the Flying D suffered from decades of

slope reintroduction coordinator. Turner's youngest son, Beau, an avid outdoorsman, is helping to coordinate the reintroductions on his father's properties in the West.

"The battle to save wild trout has struggled mightily to find significant success stories, but this is huge," Farling says, "Its scale is unprecedented."

At one time, westslope proliferated across western Montana, but human-caused habitat changes and stocking of brown, rainbow and brook trout drove these natives out of their historical reaches and caused problems with hybridization. Farling notes that just four percent of westslope are genetically pure in the upper Missouri Basin.

In 2007, a conservation agreement and memorandum of understanding were signed by federal and state government agencies as well as conservation organizations like TU, to plot a rescue for the fish before it became too late.

Beyond Cherry Creek, the entire Madison River drainage has only three significant clusters of genetically pure



westslopes, collectively occupying about seven total miles of stream. To put that in perspective, Farling says, an estimated 1,200 miles of stream in the Madison drainage had westslopes 150 years ago.

“Ted always says that where it’s possible to have a positive impact, let’s make it the biggest we can. His land and goodwill are tremendous opportunities,” explains Kruse.

At another Turner ranch in Montana, the Snowcrest, the billionaire

has carried out a landmark riparian willow and bank restoration along the Ruby River, with Arctic grayling being one of the beneficiaries. The Turner Family Foundation also has helped support salmon preservation on Russia’s Kamchatka Peninsula.

“Ted gets the big picture of conservation,” Kruse notes, saying it parallels what Turner the businessman did in harnessing local TV channels in Atlanta to satellites and creating both CNN and

the SuperStation. “In almost everything we do, he personifies the slogan, “Think Globally, Act Locally.””

Native trout are an important part of the mystique of the West just like bison are, Turner says. “We don’t let other pieces of our heritage slip away. Why should trout be any different?”

West slopes endured profound changes in their environment dating back to the last ice-age, including droughts, floods and wildfires. They persisted because they had access to a large fabric of interwoven habitat and could move freely—individual fish as much as 100 stream miles—between big rivers and tributaries.

Farling invokes an analogy to outdoors enthusiasts who question the intangible value of natives, or retort that a trout is merely a trout. Imagine how elk hunters would respond, he asks, if elk were replaced by European red deer?

### Using science to guide restoration

If only rescuing native fish was as simple as rallying together passionate people with good intentions. Unfortunately, it’s not.

Before west slopes could be brought back, rainbows, non-indigenous cutthroats and brook trout had to be completely eliminated from all reaches of Cherry Creek. The only surefire means of accomplishing that task was by chemically treating the stream using the piscicides antimycin and rotenone. Those agents are fast-acting, break down quickly in sunlight and have no long-term effects on water quality or non-target species, including amphibians and macro-invertebrates.

At first, Turner hesitated to treat the stream because of his sentimental attachment to the fish. The fish in “The Butler” were of particular concern. There he has enjoyed fishing with former President and First Lady Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter, former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev (who is helping Turner pursue his goal of



**In total, Cherry Creek’s 65 water mile system will yield a tenfold increase in west slope habitat.**

PHOTO BY PAT CLAYTON, FISHERY PHOTOGRAPHY.COM ILLUSTRATION BY SKETCHANDRELEASE.COM

achieving a nuclear free world) and a slew of other world leaders, but most satisfying has been casting lines with his grandchildren.

At first, some tried to stop the Cherry Creek project from moving forward based on unfounded concerns about the chemicals used to treat the stream. Sound science prevailed.

In 2010, the last vestiges of unwanted fish were removed. Now Cherry Creek features a generation of pure-strain west slopes drawn from several different native populations, says Clancey. Other trout cannot re-enter Cherry Creek out of the Madison due to a small waterfall that serves as a natural barrier.

“This project succeeded because Turner and, in particular, Carter Kruse

and Pat Clancey, had foresight that, admittedly at first, seemed incredibly far-fetched,” Farling says, describing the outcomes as a win for fish and for the landowner, and most of all, for a public that cares about its wildlife legacy.

Chris Wood, president and CEO of Trout Unlimited, says Turner’s work is a model for the nation. “It’s one thing to work to recover native species on publicly-owned lands,” notes Wood, “but when private landowners such as Turner embrace conservation and restoration, that’s when we really begin to see watershed-level recovery occurring.”

Turner not only came up with much of the estimated \$500,000 cost of restoration, but Cherry Creek today represents the largest refugia for

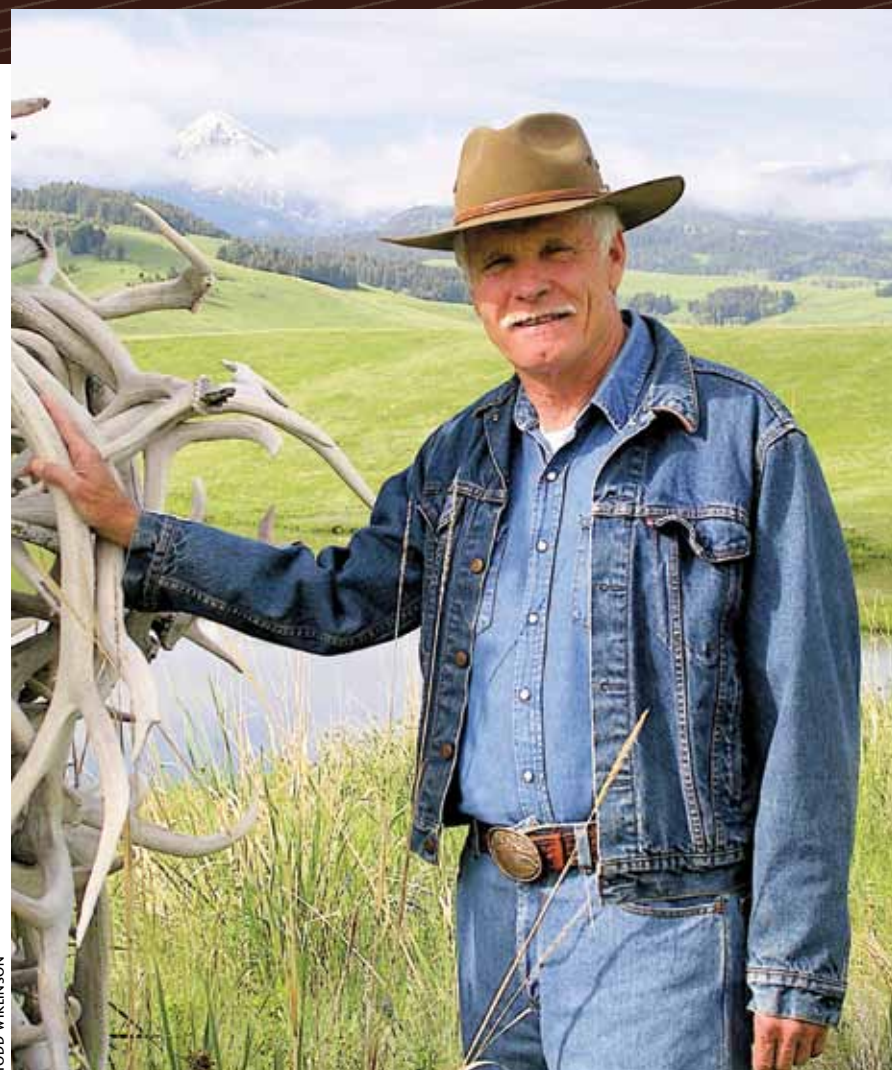
west slopes in the Upper Missouri Basin and a new reservoir of fish that can be used to anchor other reintroductions. In total, Cherry Creek’s 65 water mile system will yield a tenfold increase in west slope habitat.

“This offers a lesson that we can do this stuff,” says Clancey. “What happened at Cherry Creek is rare, but it doesn’t have to be.”

Pat Flowers, a regional director with the Montana Fish Wildlife & Parks Department, says Cherry Creek establishes an important precedent. “I think this project was full of tough decisions, all of which played out very publicly as they should.”

“In the end,” he adds, “our ability to maintain or restore species in peril

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is going to require many more such decisions and we'll need to have robust public debates to get it done. It won't be easy, but if we're not willing to take on tough projects, we are going to lose most of these species and subspecies."

### Restoring Rio Grande cutthroat

TU's relationship with Turner started in the 1980s when Turner became a member of the organization, and it extends today far beyond Montana, says Joe McGurrin, TU's national director of resources.

"I remember when Ted showed up at one of our TU annual meetings and then at a trout conference in the 1990s," says McGurrin. "What surprised me is that here was this legendary larger-than-life business figure in the midst of traveling around the world meeting world lead-

ers, yet he decides to stop in and rub shoulders with anglers. The message he delivered was, 'I'm a citizen volunteer who cares about the environment just like you all do and I just want to help.'"

Mirroring his work in Montana, Turner assigned Kruse to be his aquatic point person in the Southwest. He instructed him to forge collaborative private-public partnerships so that Turner's 590,000-acre Vermejo Park Ranch outside Raton along the Sangre de Cristo mountains in the north and his 210,000-acre Ladder Ranch near Truth Or Consequences could aid in the recovery of native Rio Grande cutthroat trout, New Mexico's state fish.

Piscicide treatments to eradicate rainbows and browns have occurred in roughly 10 percent of the upper Costilla Creek drainage within Vermejo Park. It is part of a larger, ambitious restoration blueprint that could eventually help to

recover the Rio Grande to a 100 mile web of tributaries to Costilla Creek.

As in Montana, public concern over the proposed use of piscicides held restoration of Rio Grande to Animas Creek on Turner's Ladder Ranch. But that effort may be back on a track.

"If we are serious about recovering native species, we must be able to work on public lands as well as with willing private landowners. Going forward, the gains we can realize for native trout are significant, with options that weren't available even 10 years ago," says Wood. "What we really needed was a catalyst. It would be hard to find a more dedicated catalyst than Ted Turner."

Getting Rio Grande cutthroat trout re-established in Costilla Creek is momentous, says Kevin Reilly, who serves on TU's National Leadership Council and has been one of the crucial grassroots players in New Mexico.



ILLUSTRATION BY SKETCHANDRELEASE.COM

A decade from now, if things proceed smoothly, 100 miles of waterway will be opened up for the Rio Grande, setting the stage, potentially, for the trout's return to the 110,000-acre Valle Vidal special management area on the Carson National Forest adjacent to Turner's ranch.

"Our native trout belong here, just like the mule deer and the coyote," says

Reilly. "They are uniquely adapted to this environment. Their existence is only threatened by the activities of people, and I think people need to do what they can to protect and secure them."


It's about more than fish, Reilly adds. "Native trout thrive only in the most beautiful places, where pure water flows through healthy watersheds. What's good for Rio Grande cutthroats deliv-

ers dividends for the quality of water reaching the tap of people in our large cities downstream."

### A toast to the future

This summer, when Turner escorts his ranch guests to "The Butler," they won't be drinking in the flows, but rather raising their fly rods in a daily toast, led by Turner, to the future.

Globally, Turner is also devoting time to working with bi-partisan political leaders to reduce the spread of nuclear weapons, which he believes is one of the gravest threats facing humanity. Locally, he says, the majesty of a favorite fishing hole, filled with original species, is a reminder of what humans are saving the world for.

"I'm trying to do the exact opposite with westslope cutthroats than what we're trying to achieve with nukes. I'm anti-proliferation with bombs. I'm pro-proliferation with native trout. If we all think big and work together, we can accomplish anything." 



**What's good for Rio Grande cutthroats delivers dividends for the quality of water reaching the tap of people in our large cities downstream.**



Sante de Cristo Mountains