



Good To Be Back

A quick trip to paradise in early September. [By Sam Jefferies](#)

My dad calls me a lot, and it's not hard to understand why. After decades of living in suburban Seattle, he moved to the Tobacco Valley near Eureka in far northwestern Montana several years ago. Ever since, his life has been one outdoor adventure after another.

His stories should constitute harassment, trapped as I am in the urban confines of Washington, D.C., with too-clean shotguns and unscuffed boots reminding me that professional choices have personal consequences. As if I needed reminding.

Calls from the old man, whose nickname is "Chubbs," mean some story is bursting to be told: a beautiful strutting tom turkey he harvested with a bow, an enormous trout that shook his fly free just as it nosed toward the net, snuffling grizzly bears that forced recess to be canceled at the local elementary school, and on and on. Week after week I have to listen to his high-country exploits, usually as I'm choking on exhaust fumes and cursing our forefathers for building the nation's capital atop a godforsaken swamp.

Still, my frustration doesn't make me any less eager to hear from him and grin, despite myself, as he regales me with another wild tale of clambering down a steep-sided river valley to prospect for massive rainbows. Nor do his calls ever fail to give me itchy feet and a desperate need to return to my beloved West. Finally, last September, I did just that, cashing in carefully hoarded vacation days and flying with my wife to Kalispell.

One glance at Chubb's pickup was plenty to remind us how far we had traveled and how good it was to be in Montana. A battered canoe hung from the top of the truck, covered in dust and soot, a sign of the wildfires ravaging the state's beautiful northwestern region all summer. The thumping of tails gave away two retrievers in the truck bed, one wise and creaky jointed, the other youthful and reckless, both thrilled at the prospect of chasing game birds, heralded by the arrival of guests this time of year. A few broad smiles and back slaps later, we were heading north along U.S. Highway 93.

Eager to get cracking, my wife and I wasted no time. We shot our limit of ruffed grouse and caught enough panfish for several meals within our first few days in the valley. We were happy and refreshed, but hadn't nearly gotten our fill. Fortunately, Montana is a land that welcomes the restless and rewards the bold. Fresh September snow be damned, the three of us headed into the mountains with full packs and an equal blend of determination and foolishness.

One of the many amazing things about Montana is the vast

abundance of beautiful places that are publicly available yet rarely visited. Without risking a family excommunication, I'll just say that the highway led us to a jumping-off point for a mountain hike to a U.S. Forest Service cabin.

Daylight was slipping away and we had a mountain to climb, but as I unloaded my pack from the truck I spotted a beautiful little stream below the road. Raised to never pass up good-looking trout water, I couldn't help but snatch my rod, reel, and fly box and stealthily make my way down to the bank. Being a rusty city slicker, of course my first cast tangled in the only bush along 100 feet of clear bank. But the next try found water, and as my fly drifted past a promising-looking boulder, a trout rose and grabbed it. My tippet straightened and line started to sing off the reel. It had been years since I'd landed a trout, but muscle memory kicked in and, after a brief tussle, I brought the fat cutthroat into the net. I snapped a quick picture before easing it back into the current. If they don't have fly-fishing and gullible cutthroat trout in heaven, I'll just head out West when my time comes.

My pack felt light as I loaded it onto my shoulders, heart still racing from my riverbank triumph. Now carrying my 20-gauge, I stomped my way along the mountain trail through two inches of new snow, the chilly mountain air cutting through my wool jacket.

"Psst!" Chubb called from down the trail, and I snuck up to him as he pointed out a beautiful dusky (blue) grouse perched on a branch 20 yards away. I took careful aim, fired—and missed! The grouse sailed, slowly and gently, down the mountain. Shaking his head in disbelief, my dad chuckled, clapped me on the shoulder, and urged me on, calling the dogs back from chasing the unharmed bird.

As I trudged along at the head of our group, a dog flanking me on each side, the young black Lab started to get birdy. As her head went down into a clump of brush, three spruce grouse burst from the vegetation. I swung and sent two loads of No. 6 shot after them, tumbling a bird with each shot. I couldn't believe it: a double on the mountainside—with a pack on my back! My reverie was instantly broken by Chubb's call to grab the older dog to prevent it from racing after the birds down the steep ridge. I tumbled toward the dog, grabbing its collar. The old dog and I then plopped down on the path and watched the younger Lab mark the grouse and bring each one back to where my dad stood waiting.

It was well below freezing that night, and the wind rattled the thin panes of our cabin windows. To think that only a day before I'd been stuck in traffic in downtown Washington, D.C., wearing a suit and late for a meeting. As I lay next to the cast-iron stove, burrowed deep in my sleeping bag, I couldn't help but shake my head and marvel at the riches I'd been lucky enough to touch that day. 🐾

Originally from Washington State, Sam Jefferies is a "recovering" lobbyist now working as a freelance writer in Washington, D.C.

CABINET MOUNTAIN RANGE BY JOHN LAMBERG