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# RETURN OF THE NATIVES

Rio Grande cutthroat reclaim their watershed

BY ELIZABETH MILLER PHOTOS BY ERIK MYHRE





Only the breeze broke the surface of Lower Sand Creek Lake, but Andrew Todd and I stood staring at the water anyway. The wind peeled up waves and prompted us to put on the jackets we shed hiking up to the lake, which pools at the base of the 13,000-foot Tijeras Peak in central Colorado. Where the mountain's rocky slopes spilled out past the shore, Todd told me, the fishing had often been good. His fly rod poked out of his backpack, but instead of notching it together and casting, he hugged his shivering terrier, Eddie Vedder. We stood near an inlet where trout used to spawn along the gravel bank or line up to feast on the insects washing downstream. We watched the shallows carefully.

Todd leads Running Rivers, a nonprofit that recently absorbed the popular Flyathlon events as part of its efforts dedicated to restoring native trout. The Rio Grande cutthroat trout (RGCT), with black spots on a green-gray body and a namesake slash of red near its gills, lives only in Colorado and New Mexico, giving it the southernmost distribution of any cutthroat. Over the last century, RGCT populations shrank to just 12 percent of their historic habitat as other uses drained streams and as introduced fish outcompeted this native species.

Now there's a massive, cooperative effort underway to reverse the tides. The wildlife agencies, land managers, and non-profits looking to secure a brighter, long-term future for Rio Grande cutthroat chose the Sand Creek watershed in Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve as a target location. As one of the largest watersheds on the western side of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, the high alpine valley presented a remote, challenging place for this kind of work. But as researchers studying the basin would discover, the high alpine valley's coldwater streams and lakes also proved stubbornly resistant to climate change's efforts to warm and dry the world. A win wouldn't come easy, but if secured, it would be sizeable and lasting.

After nearly twenty years of study, discussions, and lining up various pieces for a closely timed series of events, Rio Grande cutthroat—one of Colorado's three native trout species—were finally given a clear shot at reclaiming that basin last summer. Todd and I had hiked to Lower Sand Creek Lake in the fall to see if we could get some sense for how things were going, perhaps by spotting the shimmer and shadow of a cutthroat from the shore. For some time, though, we stood there thinking we might have had a long walk in the woods for a whole lot of nothing.

I had hopped into Todd's black Four Runner near where autumn-crisped ranchland runs into dense pine forest on the eastern edge of the Sangre de Cristos. He drove to a trailhead up a rough, ice-slicked road, Pearl Jam playing as he dodged rocks, until a freshly downed tree dictated that he park, and we shoulder packs and start hiking. A layer of snow crunched under our boots.

"It's not too far up," he told me, while pointing toward Music Pass, a low saddle in the ridge in front of us. "Just there." Todd has lost count of how many times he's hiked these trails. He's gone in as a research biologist with the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), working with the National Park Service to assess this watershed's suitability as a restoration site for RGCTs. Then, as an active participant in that effort, he hiked in hauling gear and supplies. Since 2016, he has led Running Rivers—one of the nonprofits that has jumped in at critical junctures to speed this project along. But his work with Running Rivers is done on the side of his day job—leading the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's regional water-quality section.

"Our nonprofit is really looking for projects that will move the needle for Rio Grande cutthroat," Todd said. Sometimes, that's fundraising through races, like the Flyathlon events that tag-team trail-running races and fishing competitions. Or it's a bit of field science, like logging stream temperatures or identifying fish species in places Running Rivers volunteers were out running or fishing anyway. "We're still a juvenile nonprofit, and, right now, all-volunteer," Todd said.

He's hiked into this drainage in hail and lightning, and trail-run nearby. Sometimes, he's pushed the limits in ways that blur the line between "it'll be fine" and "it may not be fine." His fly rod comes with him on every trip.

President Herbert Hoover, also an ardent flyfisher, designated the Great Sand Dunes as a national monument in 1932 to protect the dunes, the sand in which had been coveted for making cement and glass. In 2000, Congress voted to make the monument a national park and expand the boundaries to include the adjacent watershed as a preserve. This place doesn't look like it sounds—it isn't covered in endless dunes rolling on like an ocean of sand: The preserve is territory for dense pine forests, half a dozen peaks over 13,000 feet, and rippling, finger-numbing streams.

With the expansion, restoring the ecosystem and its complement of native fish became both an opportunity and a mandate. At least, that's the viewpoint of Fred Bunch, resource management specialist for the National Park Service at the Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve. Bunch holds this view in part because the enabling legislation for national parks calls for creating recreational opportunities, including fishing. "That is, to me, a real value—that somebody can come to a wilderness area in the Great Sand Dunes Preserve and catch a native fish," Bunch said. "You catch a brookie or a rainbow or a brown—those aren't as beautiful as the fish that *should* be here."

So Bunch began attending annual meetings of the Rio Grande Cutthroat Trout Conservation Team, a multi-state, multi-agency group formed in 2003 as part of a conservation agreement signed between state, federal, and tribal resource

BEN MCGEE APPROACHES LOWER SAND CREEK LAKE IN COLORADO'S 221,000-ACRE SANGRE DE CRISTO WILDERNESS AREA, ABOUT 200 MILES SOUTH OF DENVER.





A DISPLAY OF THE DISTINCT AND VIVID COLORING OF THE NATIVE RIO GRANDE CUTTHROAT TROUT, AMERICA'S SOUTHERNMOST DISTRIBUTED CUTTHROAT.

agencies. (This agreement was itself prompted by another action—or inaction—the previous year: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's decision that listing the RGCT under the Endangered Species Act wasn't warranted.)

The RGCT Conservation Team gathered each January to review the species' status and projects underway to *keep* it from the endangered species list. "Every year, I'd get up at the meeting and say, 'Yeah, we still want to do Sand Creek,'" Bunch said. "They'd hear me and say, 'Wow, you've been trying to push that rock uphill for a long time.'"

Bunch only needed to look one valley south from Sand Creek—to Medano Creek, where Rio Grandes were successfully restored in the 1990s—for proof of what was possible. This gave him the will to continue pushing. "Success breeds success," Bunch said. For Colorado Parks and Wildlife and the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, which are tasked with restoring the entire Rio Grande Basin, he added, "This is just one piece of it, but when this is successful, it'll be huge."

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BROWN—THOSE  
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Among those listening to Bunch's uphill-rock-rolling pleas at the annual cutthroat meetings was a man named Kevin Terry, who lives across the San Luis Valley's potato and alfalfa fields from the Great Sand Dunes. Terry was hired by Trout Unlimited in 2013 to work with farmers and other users

to direct more water into streams and rivers for fish. But he'd been working with the Conservation Team since 2006, so he brought with him a passion for the project and the motivation to grant-fund his time to work on it.

Initially, the Sand Creek watershed seemed "too big and daunting," Terry said—it was sidelined in favor of less complicated

projects. "It's very hard to contemplate doing what we're doing without really knowing if it's feasible or not," said Terry, "the actual, physical nuts and bolts of the watershed—where the fish are, where they aren't, where there are barriers that allow us to break it up."

They needed better data from the ground. That meant Terry, Todd, Running Rivers board member Ben McGee, and Dewane Mosher—a biologist for





Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve—spending enough time in the watershed to map every thread of a creek and inspect each of them for fish. The search yielded more than even what previous USGS surveys had mapped: They found bodies of water those surveyors missed. This was some of the work that first took Todd over Music Pass—and saw him huddled in a tent puddling with water after a particularly heavy rainstorm.

Their search found that the high-elevation valley's northern slopes held snow to feed seeps, springs, and the pair of lakes well into the summer months. Creeks there also consistently ran bigger than other nearby streams, some of which registered just a single cubic foot per second. That meant in dry summers to come, those tributaries had a better chance of holding onto water and fish. "The ultimate buffer are those lakes sitting at the top," Todd said. "Even if the creeks dry up for part of the year, when they're wet again, fish can move downstream out of the lakes. They'll populate from the top down."

Some creeks proved even too cold for trout, at least for now. But those coldest of creeks provide insurance against a warming planet, able to buffer temperatures in the lakes from rising too much, and may eventually become ideal trout habitat. The tangled nature of those streams, which had initially

made the place read as too complicated, would also protect trout from the growing threat of wildfire. When a species exists in a single stream, a wildfire in its headwaters can send so much sediment and ash downstream that it chokes out the entire population.

"Many of the current Rio Grande cutthroat populations are in much smaller watersheds," Todd said. "The bigger the watershed, the better their chances if, say, a fire came through here—which it did in Medano Creek—it's unlikely to burn the entire watershed. So, then you have pieces that can be part of repopulating, which is exactly what happened in Medano. It burned severely in some areas and we had, before the fire, data showing roughly four hundred fish per mile. After the fire, that number was zero in those heavily impacted areas. But then a couple years later, numbers were going back up because those parts that didn't burn were contributing fish."

A hundred-foot waterfall also created a natural barrier for fish about midway down the valley. That would allow for completing work in phases, rather than trying to handle the whole watershed in a single season, or constructing an earthen dam that would later have to be bulldozed. At the very bottom, thirty miles of dunes block any invasive species from swimming upstream and erasing progress for the natives.

COLORADO'S 70-MILE-LONG SANGRE DE CRISTO WILDERNESS WAS DESIGNATED BY CONGRESS IN 1993. AT 226,420 ACRES, IT IS THE STATE'S THIRD LARGEST WILDERNESS AREA—16,000 ACRES LARGER THAN ROCKY MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK. ON NOV. 22, 2000, 41,676 ACRES OF THE GREAT SAND DUNES NATIONAL MONUMENT WAS REDESIGNATED AS PART OF THE 149,028-ACRE GREAT SAND DUNES NATIONAL PARK AND PRESERVE. THE PRESERVE IS NOW PART OF THE SANGRE DE CRISTO WILDERNESS AREA. GOT IT?



# RETURN OF THE NATIVES



13,610-FOOT TUERAS PEAK IS LIKE  
A SNOW-CAPTURING SAIL THAT  
HELPS KEEP THE WATERS OF  
SAND CREEK ICY COLD, EVEN IN  
THE FACE OF CLIMATE CHANGE.



Some local-flavored assistance also eased this location as a research site. Starting research at a different national park had required wading through a pile of paperwork. When Todd first stopped by the Sand Dunes offices to fill out whatever lengthy forms he knew would be necessary to head into the field, the man behind the counter told him, "Wait here, I'll get you the paperwork you need." He returned with a yellow sticky note for Todd's windshield that read, "Working with Fred." Mr. Bunch finally had someone helping him nudge that rock up the hill.

**A**s we crested the pass, Todd stepped off trail through the trees to an overlook. To our right, the valley ended in a glacier-scoured basin. Early autumn snowfall highlighted the mountains' striations and swooping gullies. The lakes were invisible, just a sense of spaciousness between where the mountainsides ended and the woods began. In the valley floor, Sand Creek flickered among the pines, a trail stitched alongside it. To our left, the mountains swept around a corner, the ridge marking the boundary with the Medano Creek watershed. Past the bend, the creek plunged downhill through the trees, heading toward the sand dunes that bury it. We were entering the Sand Creek watershed from a side door, walking from the Arkansas River side—the greenback cutthroat domain—into the Rio Grande's headwaters.

Sand Creek and the lakes were previously inhabited by non-native cutthroat, including Yellowstone and Pikes Peak strains that were stocked for years by Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW). The agency switched to releasing only Rio Grande cutthroat into the lakes more than two decades ago, and in 2018, staff captured 30 fish and tested their genetics "to see if 20-plus years of stocking Rio Grande cutthroat was enough to swamp out those legacy genetics," Todd said. "Long story short: It was not."

The resident non-native fish seemed to either be out-breeding the natives, or eating the fingerlings shortly after they dropped from the fish-stocking planes. But the genetic blends proved, at least, that fish were reproducing in those lakes—a signal that reintroduced cutthroat could become self-sustaining. But it also made clear that non-native strains couldn't be quietly erased. Instead, the "cutt-mutts," as Bunch calls them, would have to be poisoned. For that, they turned to rotenone, a plant-based toxin used among South American tribes to hunt fish, and used by U.S. fisheries agencies as a sometimes controversial piscicide to rid waters of unwanted species. (See: Yellowstone National Park's Soda Butte Creek.)

Rotenone suffocates gill-breathing aquatic life. To calculate how much of the piscicide they would need, Todd once again hiked over Music Pass hauling a pack raft and sonar system to measure

the lakes' volume. In the creeks, rotenone would need to drip downstream for four hours at a specific concentration of parts per billion, which required tracking exactly how much water each creek was moving at the time the piscicide was released.

After being postponed once by heavy snowfall and once by a shortage of cutthroat to restock, they finally set to the task in late summer of 2020. More than forty people, mostly other biologists and technicians from state and federal agencies, hiked over Music Pass. They pitched tents in a meadow near where the trail splits, one fork climbing two miles to Upper Sand Creek Lake, and the other zigzagging uphill for a mile to Lower Sand Creek Lake. Colorado Division of Fire Prevention and Control helicopters, typically used for fighting wildfires—and some of the only helicopters with enough power to lift equipment to 11,000 feet—were recruited to deliver supplies. The crew waited several windy days for the helis to be cleared to fly. Then, the helicopters lowered a net-load of aluminum boats with gas motors, electric pumps, and buckets of chemicals to the lake shore. But when the boats were hauled out of the willows,

the crew found they'd landed sideways. Alas, all the motor oil had drained out. So, like some hapless backpacker who'd left all his food in his truck, Todd hustled back up and over the pass, racing closing-time at the nearest hardware store, then hiked back in with quarts of oil.

Technicians poured rotenone into Lower and Upper Sand Creek lakes from the boats, then drove the boats in circles to effectively stir it into the water. Along creek banks, five-gallon buckets of

rotenone were stationed at intervals for four miles of timed release. The creeks ran a brilliant emerald green with dye, which is used to double-check that the treatment matched current stream flow and that it stayed in the water the required hours to be effective.

Todd and Terry were tasked with hiking downstream and searching out seeps, springs, and side channels where fish might seek refuge, survive, and foul the effort. They bushwhacked through streamside brush and clambered over downed trees and moss-glazed rocks with backpack-sized applicators, taking turns spraying pockets of water.

"It's hot and sweaty, you're in a Tyvek suit, with a bunch of protective equipment covering your eyes, your hands, basically every square inch of your body, and you have a backpack sprayer that looks the same as any kind of sprayer for noxious-weed treatment or similar work," Terry said. "It just *looks* scary, like *Ghostbusters* or something."

The chemicals work fast, then quickly dissipate. "You immediately see a bunch of dead fish, and it can be rough," Terry said. "Some bugs get hit, too, and worms, of all things." When I asked if there's an alternative to this approach, Todd quickly replied, "The alternative is that you don't do it." As in, you leave







ALPENGLOW ON COLORADO'S  
SANGRE DE CRISTO MOUNTAINS.  
(IN ENGLISH, SANGRE DE CRISTO  
MEANS "BLOOD OF CHRIST.")

the hybrid fish and accept the consequences of degradation or loss of the native species; one more extinction in the Anthropocene's growing tally of human impacts on the environment.

The lakes waited out a quiet winter. The day the rotenone was applied, test cages of fish were sunk into the lakes' depths to verify the results. "In the lower one, they were stone cold dead, and in the upper one, they were still kind of... they were alive, but really struggling," Todd said. "So that planted a seed of doubt."

To confirm their success, the team would use environmental DNA, testing water samples for trace DNA from species living there. It's not uncommon for waters to require treatment two years in a row, doubling the cost of a project and delaying recovery by another year. In early summer 2021, they hiked in for a look. On the way, Todd said, they ran into a woman hiking out who was certain she'd seen fish in the lower lake.

"Everyone's heart kind of sank," Todd said. But at the lake, he found it thick only with scud. Fourteen environmental DNA samples from the lakes and creeks, electro-fishing the creeks (to stun any inhabitants so they surfaced and could be easily seen), and gillnets strung across the lakes confirmed it: no fish. Only a bounty of mayflies and stoneflies dappled the surface; plentiful food

for any Rio Grande cutthroat. "It's going to be like the Garden of Eden for them in there," Bunch said.

Now, they just had to get fish back in the water. On August 23, 2021, a CPW crew hiked into Medano Creek, the drainage south of Sand Creek, where Rio Grande cutthroat were already thriving. They electrically stunned about 200 adult fish, then hiked them back out for an overnight stay in a fish-hatchery truck fitted with water tanks. The next morning, the hatchery truck drove to a helipad. A helicopter hung with a 400-gallon bucket that looks like an upside-down umbrella and is similarly collapsible—typically used to pour water on wildfires—met the truck. With the fold-up container filled with rare, sexually mature, Rio Grande cutthroat, the pilot flew up the mountain valley, then submerged the bucket into the lakes, allowing the fish to swim out.

"We wanted to jump-start recovery," said John Alves, a CPW senior biologist who supervises Southwest division projects. "Versus stocking young-of-the-year, where it would take three years before they're sexually mature and can spawn."

In early October, the adults were joined by 500 two-inch-long fingerlings born last spring at Haypress Lake near Creede, Colorado. The cutthroats were loaded at an air strip into a small, fixed-wing plane with installed fish-hauling tanks,





A WIDE RANGE OF CONSERVATION GROUPS HAVE WORKED TOGETHER SINCE 2003 TO RESTORE THE NATIVE RIO GRANDE CUTTHROAT.

routinely used to stock alpine lakes. Then the plane skimmed over the ridgetops, dropped down toward the lakes, and released the fingerlings into the water before the pilot yanked the plane skyward again to dodge the fast-approaching mountainsides.

The plan calls for stocking fish in Sand Creek for up to five years to help the population take hold. "What we don't want to do is have to stock annually, because then that's more of an artificial population and not really saving the species," said Estevan Vigil, an aquatic biologist for San Luis Valley who led CPW's work on this project.

This summer, the project will focus on the stretches of Sand Creek below the 100-foot waterfall. Brook and rainbow trout living there now will have to go, stream flows will be measured, and brush thinned to create space for crews applying the chemical treatment. CPW plans to start stocking the lower reaches in 2023. With no lakes to drop them into, these fish will likely be loaded into plastic bags pumped tight with oxygen like a balloon—similar to how fish travel home from a pet store—and backpacked in for as many as five miles. Alves, who recruited the wildfire helicopter crews to the project, may see if they can be spared again to cut that distance down, noting that five miles of hiking is a long time for trout to jostle around in a steadily warming bag of water

with no fresh oxygen supply.

In total, the project will add two lakes and thirteen miles of stream to Rio Grande cutthroat habitat. "The end goal for me is to make sure these fish persist and that they're there for future generations," Vigil said. "We also don't want them to become federally listed as endangered. That would tell us that we're not doing our job right. I think being proactive is a better way to go about it."

**N**ot everyone was stoked on this project. Sand Creek lakes hosted some high quality, relatively easy-access fishing in the Sangre de Cristos. The trails in require only three to four miles of intermittent climbing, while other lakes nearby demand five or more miles that steadily gain 3,000 to 4,000 feet. The lower lake was home to more fish, while the upper held fish that were more wily and often bigger—some up to twenty inches. "You could go hours without hooking one," Todd said.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife followed the required public process of advertising and hosting generally poorly attended meetings. "It's a tough conversation; telling people that you're killing their favorite trout fishery just to put in a different trout," Todd said. "People didn't like that." But



# RETURN OF THE NATIVES



RELEGATED TO ONLY 15 PERCENT  
OF THEIR HISTORIC DISTRIBUTION,  
RIO GRANDE CUTTHROAT WERE  
HISTORICALLY REPORTED TO  
GET BIG, AND POSSIBLY MIGRATE  
ALONG THE RIO GRANDE RIVER.



the outcome was set: "This is too important a watershed from a conservation standpoint."

Giving time for the new arrivals to establish themselves means it'll be years before these lakes should be fished again. And even then, Alves said, catch-and-release will be critical: "Otherwise, we're wasting our time." A lifelong Coloradan unfamiliar with the history of specific species could easily mistake the prevalent rainbows, brook trout, and browns as native. But the reality is, they were introduced in the late 1800s for four main reasons: Either they grew bigger (browns and rainbows); grew faster (brookies can mature in a year, a cutthroat takes three or four); survived better; or were simply considered more fun to catch.

In the years since, these introduced species have out-competed indigenous fish, including an unknown number of cutthroat subspecies. Some re-appear: In 2012, Dr. Jessica Metcalf discovered true Greenback Cutthroat—the Colorado State Fish—which had been deemed extinct since 1937. And a Colorado River cutthroat lineage unique to the San Juan, which was also long thought extinct, was confirmed in 2018. Colorado now lists eight distinct cutthroat lineages, each subspecies evolving in its own river basin. There could be more. In July 2016, CPW staff rushed in front of wildfire flames from the Hayden Pass Fire to capture as many of a genetically unique cutthroat as possible before ash and debris flooded the subspecies' only known habitat. In fall 2021, the agency returned that unique subspecies to a few remote wild creeks.

Todd feels people don't always understand the logic behind making their favorite fishing spot unfishable for a few years in exchange for returning native fish to those waters. "Many people don't even know whether the trout they're fishing for are native or not," Todd said. "You can catch a rainbow trout anywhere. Catching a Rio Grande cutthroat is a unique experience."

People can also be angry or insulted when told that the brookies they've enjoyed catching for years need to be removed, Terry said. Vigil, with CPW, said he's seen familiar, invasive species moved back into waters after a native restoration effort like this one. It doesn't take much to undo the kind of work done at Sand Creek: A few brook trout can take over an entire drainage in less than a decade. Even if just a couple survived, Vigil said, they'll basically eat the cutthroat out of existence.

More than the aesthetics, existential questions come into play. "The Rio Grande cutthroat trout is in an estimated fifteen percent of its historic distribution, so if we don't do these projects, they may not be around," Todd said. "If they're not in better habitat, climate change could cause that fifteen percent to go down to ten or five."

Most Rio Grande cutthroat found now are in headwater streams. But they once lived in the Rio Grande mainstem as

well—at least, according to anecdotes from fishing magazines (if those can be trusted...). They were reported to get big, and possibly even migrate along the Rio Grande.

"Where these fish are now is not where they want to be, it's just where they've survived," Terry said. "They're in the upper reaches of their habitat because all of the lower parts of those watersheds were changed by humans. And cutthroat lost—whether it was due to harvest, poor water, no water, or non-native fish."

The future also poses a devilish choice. As the climate changes, some trout will be cooked out of their historic waters. Historic ranges for Apache and Gila trout in Arizona and New Mexico will likely become inhospitable to those species. They'd be better off moving to traditional Rio Grande cutthroat habitat. But then what of the cutthroat? What is the extent to which the human hand should reach in and move these things around? Is there a moral obligation to mend what we've severed, or attempt to reset the unforeseen consequences of our previous actions? Or have we meddled enough already, and now it's time to step back and let nature steer

## "IT'S A TOUGH CONVERSATION; TELLING PEOPLE THAT YOU'RE KILLING THEIR FAVORITE TROUT FISHERY JUST TO PUT IN A DIFFERENT TROUT."

itself for a while?

"The truth is, it's easier *not* to do these projects," says park biologist Dewane Mosher. "But I think it's a big conservation win to restore a native species within this national park and preserve. Reading the headlines... I think it's easy to be pessimistic about things, but there are a lot of opportunities still out there."

From the grassy basin where the group camp had been, Todd and I crossed Sand Creek, dark water moving under a white frosting of ice and snow. We rock- and snowbank-hopped across it, one crust so fragile that my toe pushed through to the water below. From there, the trail climbed through east-facing switchbacks punched ankle-deep by some other hiker's feet.

"What's your bet?" Todd asked. "Will the upper lake be open or iced over?" Standing with both feet in the snow, I bet iced. We hiked parallel to Little Sand Creek, which flows out of the upper lake. Then we rounded a crest. Through the trees, we caught the dark glint of water.

"It's open," Todd said. As he walked along a faint perimeter trail ringing the lakeshore, he leaned over to peer into the water. Near the willows where the boats had been dropped, we stood waiting, watching empty water. A pika, not yet deep in its winter slumber, chirped from the boulders.

Then Todd spotted it—a six-inch, Rio Grande cutthroat swimming through the shallows, the sunlight catching on its speckled sides and the pink near its gills. "What are the odds?" he asked, as the fish turned and disappeared into the dark. "And that's probably one of the bigger ones in here, just swimming by to let us know it's working." 🐟