AN EERIE ORANGE EVENING ON THE TUOLUMNE RIVER.

BRIAN IRWIN

Smoke and Water

The aftermath of Yosemite's Rim Fire BY BRIAN IRWIN

THE TUOLUMNE RIVER begins in the Yosemite high country, threading through broad meadows and around giant granite domes, before making its way west into the Grand Canyon of the Tuolumne, where skinny pocketwater grows into roiling haystacks and deep meanders. In the meadow, Rick Mazaria and I were flipping Stimmies to selective wild fish, tiny and bright. As we skipped from pool to pool, our sinuses burned with the thick stench of smoke. Just downstream, the sky glowed an eerie orange.

On August 17, 2013, a bowhunter lost control of his illegal campfire, sparking the Rim Fire, the fifth largest forest fire in California history. Flames raged up the throat of the Tuolumne River, destroying more than four hundred square miles of woods. Ninety-six percent of the Rim fire's embers have burned within the Tuolumne watershed.

The fire's ramifications stretch far beyond the loss of revenue suffered by rafting companies, lodging operations, and tourism outlets. Much like last summer's High Park Fire threatened northern Colorado's Poudre River, the charred trees and beds of charcoal they lay on will likely flush into the Tuolumne when precipitation arrives this winter.

Members of the Tuolumne River Trust plan to enter the drainage this fall to start replanting trees. "When we get in there, the initial step will be damage assessment," says Executive Director Eric Wesselman. "The concern for the waterway and fishery is erosion in the coming year. When the ashy runoff comes, pH, water turbidity [leading to gill abrasion] and other problems are likely."

Watching a forest burn is an awe inspiring sight, one that brings a certain nausea as you witness ancient trees popping and cracking, flames seeping from deep grooves in their bark. More than five thousand Hotshot firefighters from around the country were flown in to fight the Rim beast, which has cost over a hundred million dollars to *contain*, not extinguish.

You can't put out a forest fire. Instead, you keep it corralled by burning a border around it, then waiting for it to fall tame, allowing fighters to heap burning logs into piles that speed the exhaustion of fuel. This process can takes months, sometimes lives, and a lot of money. In the end, countless animals, many finned, lay dead.

But in the upper Tuolumne the water still runs clear and cold, with small trout sipping PMDs off the surface. The bed is sandy between rock benches, each having a smooth trough carved in its belly from years of gentle erosion. The fish here aren't natives, but they are wild—browns, brookies, and rainbows. The history of trout introduction into the Tuolumne is a bit grey, the accurate archives having been long lost in a tin of cowboy beans or the bottom of a bottle of mash. But it's largely accepted that stocking started in some of the high alpine lakes in 1877 by cattlemen or early explorers toting cans of fingerlings, much as Finis Mitchell famously stocked Wyoming's Wind River Range.

Some believe that early sheepherders angled for and transplanted trout into the local rivers, the Tuolumne included, in an attempt to generate a food supply. Reports claim that roughly ten years later, placement of eastern brook trout into the Lyell Fork, a tributary of the Tuolumne, began in earnest. And although there hasn't been any stocking since 1991, these species survive today.

The Tuolumne watershed has been altered many times by man, the Rim Fire being only the most recent and severe. These lessons smack hard when they lead to catastrophic damage of a broad fishery. But as trout of the Tuolumne meadows dart from rock to rock, avoiding the flames from below and my flies from above, they remain an inspiration, reminding us to be patient, delicate, and most of all, careful.