



April, Life & Style

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The Lure of the River

A novice discovers fly fishing in the Northwest

By: Crai S. Bower

Dean Dorcas doesn't fish in Washington without first hiking in for at least an hour, and not because he craves the exercise. He heads upriver away from other anglers, a strategy that pays off with a satisfying day on a stream.

Dorcas, CEO of Integrated Management Systems, a Seattlebased company that specializes in warehouse staffing, grew up fishing with his grandfather.

Anyone who's ever cast a fly understands the challenges of the sport. Otherwise, we wouldn't return or, in the case of most fly fishermen I've met, become obsessed with the pastime. Time of day, season, water depth and date make up just a partial list of variables that may separate a day to brag about from striking out. Of course, picking the right nymph, laying your line subtly upon the water, and knowing when to pull on a hit also come into play.

Fishing is in the blood of the Dorcas family. Dean Dorcas' brother, Dale, created a nonprofit website, fishingcoaches.org, dedicated to sorting out the variables. Fishing Coaches, which describes itself as a group of "fishermen helping fishermen," has developed an algorithm of some 50 variables to consider before heading out to one's preferred riverbank.

Dorcas contends that Washington's relatively few rivers, the extreme popularity of fly fishing and our anadromous fish combine to set local angling apart. These elements may make it more challenging, but like most locals, Dorcas is lured by the opportunity to catch several species of salmon on a fly.

"I like the Snoqualmie. The fish aren't as big, but it's a nice setting in which to fish," he observes. "And I love fishing the smaller streams on the east side" of the Cascades.

Most Washingtonians believe the finest trout fishing in the state can be had on the Yakima River, rich in rainbows with some cutthroats and browns as well. Roads parallel most of the river and numerous public access points make it fairly easy to get to the water. You can either cast from a float boat or wade up the river.

Farther from home, the waters of Jackson Hole, Wyo., and Bend, Ore., offer bountiful opportunities for anglers. A pilgrimage to either high-altitude locale promises exceptional dry fly casting; hitting both areas in a single season is a fly fisherman's fantasy.

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Justin Yax, a Seattle transplant and partner in an advertising and PR agency in Bend, waded into this fantasy last fall. Although Yax didn't fish when he moved to Oregon six years ago, it only took a couple of outings before his vacation schedule began to reflect the trout runs. Heading to the Snake River and its tributaries added another notch on his fly rod.

Mention Flat Creek or Henry's Fork in a crowded room and the fly fishermen rise to the surface.

"But my favorite fishing was just north of Jackson, in the Snake River," Yax says. "You can practically reach out and touch the peaks of the Tetons."

Sam Clapp, a former guide, has lived in Wyoming for 20 years. He averages about "six-plus days a week" fishing in Jackson, where "you have this huge diversity within a couple of hundred miles and every location is 'oh-my-God' beautiful." Clapp's enthusiasm for fishing the Wyoming-Idaho border is only surpassed by his knowledge. "The key here is that you're sitting in the middle of about 10 million acres of national forest, park and wilderness lands. Head in any direction and you find amazing fishing.

"For instance, to the north you can fish Yellowstone Lake or Henry's Lake for large, hybrid cutthroat rainbows up to 15 pounds. Then you have Hebgen and Earthquake Lakes for classic gulpers. Keep going and you hit the Madison River for great brown trout wade-ins or floats."

Clapp describes Henry's Fork of the Snake as fly fishing's mecca. "It's taboo in that stretch of river to fish anything but dry fly. You may go through 10 different flies trying to match the hatch before you even get a tug. But the 28-inch rainbows make it worth all the work. There are other local purists here who will only fish Flat Creek, ever, even though Flat Creek has a narrow fishing season. Floating the south fork of the Snake is also a perfect way to spend a few days, whether you're fishing or not."

Like Jackson, Bend is a bonanza for the outdoorsman or woman. It's a city where you can ski in the morning, fish in the afternoon, and go trail riding into the evening. Fishing in the Great Basin feels like tricking nature, the rivers slipping quietly through the plateau. The meandering flows appear calm, yet these rivers teem with rainbow trout, mountain whitefish and the rare bull trout.

Yax knows this stretch of the Crooked River well, but only from a distance. He rides past here as part of his monthly Prineville Reservoir Loop, an exhilarating and harrowing 100-mile road cycle through the Crooked River Canyon.

He finally stepped into the river last fall and was not disappointed.

Every Northwest fisherman knows the Deschutes, which pairs with the southern Rogue River to form Oregon's Dynamic Duo and boasts some of the finest fish habitats this side of New Zealand. But the Crooked River is a different riparian zone, cleaving the desert environs accompanied by broad basalt outcroppings that loom above like a grand jury from Easter Island. It could also not be more different than the Fall River an hour to the southwest, where we head the following afternoon.

We turn off onto a forest service road near Sun River, Bend's four-season resort community (complete with its own airport). It feels right to take a dirt road to a fishing hole, a little bit of Huck Finn in central Oregon. Fishing the Fall River requires a short back-cast and precise fore-cast. The branches lurk above, behind and before us. As in most athletic endeavors, confidence matters. Start thinking the casting area is too shallow, and start thumbing your line to that thistle snag.

The Fall River is too swift to enter, but the Deschutes is ideal for wading or floating. We step through brush and into the river. Here the waters narrow and widen; flows divert into the marsh via tiny waterfalls, stalling into mud banks until the pools overflow and the powerful river proceeds once more.

The fish runs may not dictate my schedule yet, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't awaiting spring with excitement, already plotting my next fishing trip. I'm eager to explore my own backyard here in Washington, but not before checking in with Dean Dorcas to make sure the fish are biting.

Crai Bower is a Seattle-based freelance writer.

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