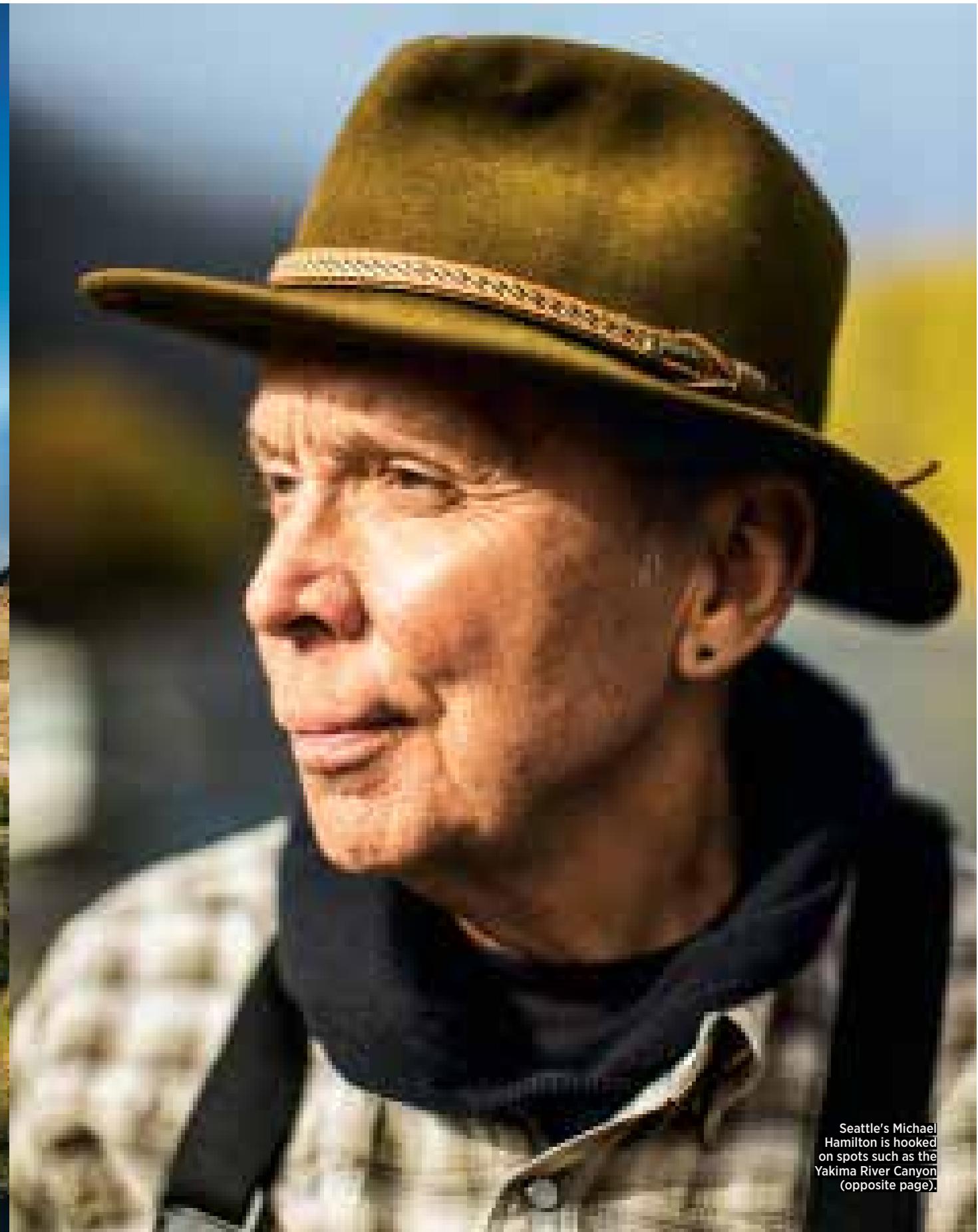


confessions of a
**FEATHER
& FIN
ADDICT**

MICHAEL HAMILTON SPILLS THE SECRETS
BEHIND HIS PASSION FOR FLY-FISHING

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL HANSON



Seattle's Michael Hamilton is hooked on spots such as the Yakima River Canyon (opposite page).



A pale morning
dun mayfly should
do the trick.



People often ask me why I am a fly-fishing fanatic. The answer comes easily: Fish live in beautiful places. Purple-fired sunsets; jagged snow-laden peaks; cloudless skies so blue they appear black; the sounds of rushing water; the touch of heat, wind and cold; the fresh smells of new rain. These elements fuel my passion for life by intimately connecting me to a world of natural beauty where time disappears.

The other answer is more complex, maybe even primal. Gently releasing a wild native fish is a moment mixed with joy and wonder. Each fish is unique with stunning displays of color. Head and shoulders peppered with irregularly shaped black spots layered over a landscape of violets, blues and greens, like the colors of the rainbow, evoke a time when man was not present.

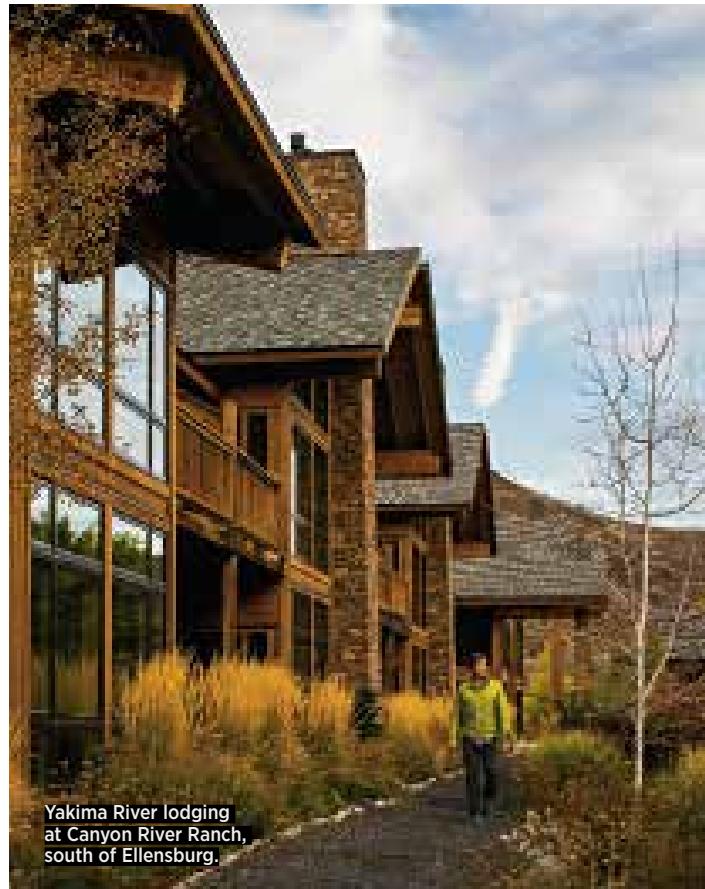
My dad, Mark Sr., was my fly-fishing guru. He was one tall drink of water. At 6 feet 8 inches tall, he could cast a fly rod effortlessly. The line would move back and forth with the grace of a dancer, then shoot out straight as an arrow, delivering the artificial fly dead on target every time. After the April opening of trout season for three straight springs beginning in sixth grade, I traded my catechism for a 9-foot, split-bamboo Fenwick fly rod and joined my dad fly-fishing Washington's Deschutes River in Thurston County's Bald Hills. Only Monsignor McFadden and Sister Mary Charles knew my

whereabouts. We were on a mission to fill the parish freezer at Tacoma's St. Patrick Church & School with fresh trout. Those eight or nine Fridays were no ordinary fishing trips. Each outing was a marvelous adventure that transported me to a new world of unknown beauty and solitude and sent me on a lifelong journey to discover the deep connections between man and trout. Five decades later, I still dream about fly-fishing. I see trout rising up to sip unsuspecting insects with strange names like blue-winged olives, March browns, pale morning duns and green drakes. Heck, half the fun of chasing trout on the fly is discovering a new world of bugs with downright weird-sounding names.

Fly-fishing has long been portrayed in books, articles and motion pictures. Most notably, the 1992 film classic *A River Runs Through It*, adapted from Norman MacLean's book of the same name, fueled a wildfire of dreamy romanticism and awkward longing that swept across the land. After watching Brad Pitt stand in the Gallatin River and cast his fly line (he had a double, by the way) under a glistening Montana sky, thousands of young and old alike—mesmerized by the fluid, rhythmic motion of casting and the natural beauty where fly-fishing thrives—flocked to the sport. Women now represent the fastest-growing demographic in this centuries-old pursuit. Casting for Recovery, serving breast cancer survivors, and the Wounded Warrior Project are among the organizations that recognize the physically



A wild rainbow almost ready to be released.



Yakima River lodging at Canyon River Ranch, south of Ellensburg.

and mentally therapeutic values of the sport, incorporating fly-fishing outings into the healing process for their respective clients.

In the Pacific Northwest, we are blessed with many legendary trout streams within a day's journey. Washington's Yakima and Naches rivers; Idaho's St. Joe, Hells Canyon of the Snake, middle fork of the Salmon and select sections of the Coeur d'Alene; Montana's Blackfoot, Bitterroot, Rock Creek and famed Missouri; and Oregon's Deschutes, Crooked, and gin-clear Metolius all offer excellent fly-fishing for rainbow, cutthroat and brown trout.

Since I probably fly-fish 200 days a year, mostly chasing trout across rivers of the West, I am fortunate to have many *A River Runs Through It* moments. One that stands out is a spring day about two years ago in the Yakima River Canyon.

It was about 6:30 a.m. on that memorable March morning, and my 15-foot Hyde Drift Boat was hooked up to the back of my SUV. Wet, quarter-sized snowflakes mixed with sleet splattered on my windshield. Turning off the two-lane Canyon Road, I saw Steve

Joyce, longtime Montana and Washington fly-fishing guide, dressed in his waders, rain coat and wool cap, with two fly rods in his hand, waiting for me above the Big Horn boat launch. We'd been planning this trip for a month. Finally our schedules were in sync. I was as excited as a kid going to Disneyland. It's always been this way, ever since my first fly-fishing adventure. Backing my trailer to the water's edge, I unhooked my drift boat and slid it into the river. Steve, part owner of the nearby Canyon River Ranch, stepped into the bow, stowed his gear, and readied his fly rod. I slipped into the rower's seat, pulled up the anchor, and maneuvered my drift boat out into the current. Steve turned to get my attention and then pointed his rod tip down and across the river. I looked up in time to see platoons of adult stone flies landing on the surface. "Holy cow! [or words to that effect]," I said. "It's a skwala [pronounced *squaw-la*] hatch." A skwala is a stone fly that lives in Western rivers and hatches in the spring, and I'd never seen this many on the surface (think: Holy Grail!). Everywhere we looked, the river was alive with violent splashes as rainbow trout of every shape

and size gorged themselves on the unsuspecting insects. Immediately we started casting. "Fish on," I shouted. I set the hook and felt the raw power of the wild trout as it jumped and cartwheeled to escape. That rush alone was worth the numb fingers and cold feet. Steve expertly netted my catch. "Okay, your turn," I told him. Within two casts, a huge rainbow slurped Steve's fly. His reel sang as the fish took the fly line downriver. It was the sound that is music to the ears of all anglers. Throughout the morning, we hooked and released one trout after another, completely oblivious of our surroundings, focused only on the rising fish and the flotilla of hatching insects.

Suddenly a wind-whipped rain squall barreled upriver like a runaway freight train and shut down the fishing. Exhausted, euphoric and lost in a world of our own thoughts, we put down our fly rods. At almost the same instant, a deer bolted out of thick underbrush not 15 feet from where we were anchored and swam across the river directly in front of us. We just looked at each other in utter disbelief. Overhead, a young eagle screeched and landed in a giant nest atop a towering pine. The river's surface glistened with silence. Steve would always remember saying that such moments are filled with magic. I just looked at him and smiled.

Like any new sport, you will need special gear. A fly rod, reel, fly line, leader tippet and artificial flies. You can purchase a rod (never call it a pole, please), reel and fly line in a combo set for under \$200. You don't need to spend a ton of money to get into the game. Just remember your first fly rod, like your first set of skis, should match your ability and reflect the type of conditions you will face. After years of taking folks fishing, I highly recommend hiring a guide for a day on the river, regardless of your skill level. A good guide will teach you how to cast (and untangle), serve you lunch, take your photo and give you the gift of a wonderful day you will long remember. I believe that any activity that you are deeply passionate about, be it hiking, snowshoeing, skiing, sailing, bird watching or anything else that connects you with your true self, exposes your feelings, and leaves you exhilarated, peaceful and happier than you are at most other times, is worth the effort to experience. Wouldn't you agree? **1**

AAA member **MICHAEL HAMILTON**, a former broadcast journalist and fly-fishing guide, writes for outdoor and travel publications. He lives in Seattle with his wife, Pam, and their two cats, Cooper and Mini Cooper.

Pick Six

MICHAEL HAMILTON'S FAVORITE FISHING SPOTS (AND RELIABLE FLY SHOPS NEAR EACH):

BITTERROOT RIVER

HAMILTON, MT
Wally Crawford to Bell Crossing
MARCH/APRIL HATCHES:
Skwala stones and March browns
⑤ *Osprey Outfitters*, 1936 N. 1st St., 406.363.1000, ospreyoutfittersflyshop.com.

MISSOURI RIVER

CRAIG, MT
Holter Dam to Cascade
MAY/JUNE HATCHES:
Caddis and pale morning duns
⑤ *Headhunters Fly Shop*, 145 Bridge St., 406.235.3447, headhuntersflyshop.com.

DESCHUTES RIVER

BEND, OR
Lower Canyon
MAY/JUNE HATCHES:
Salmon flies
⑤ *Deep Canyon Outfitters*, 375 S.W. Powerhouse Dr., 541.323.3007, deepcanyonoutfitters.com.

THE ST. JOE RIVER

ST. MARIES, ID
Upper section, Red Ives to Avery
JULY HATCHES:
Summer stones, caddis, pale morning duns
⑤ *Silver Bow Fly Shop*, 13210 E. Indiana Ave., 509.924.9998, silverbowflyshop.com.

YAKIMA RIVER

ELLENSBURG, WA
Yakima River Canyon, Ringer Road to Roza Dam
JULY/AUGUST HATCHES:
Golden stones and grasshoppers
⑤ *Red's Fly Shop at Canyon River Ranch*, 14706 S.R. 821, 509.933.2300, redsflyshop.com.

BLACKFOOT RIVER

MISSOULA, MT
Box Canyon, River Junction to Russell Gates
OCTOBER HATCHES:
October caddis
⑤ *Grizzly Hackle Fly Shop*, 215 W. Front St., 406.721.8996, grizzlyhackle.com.

