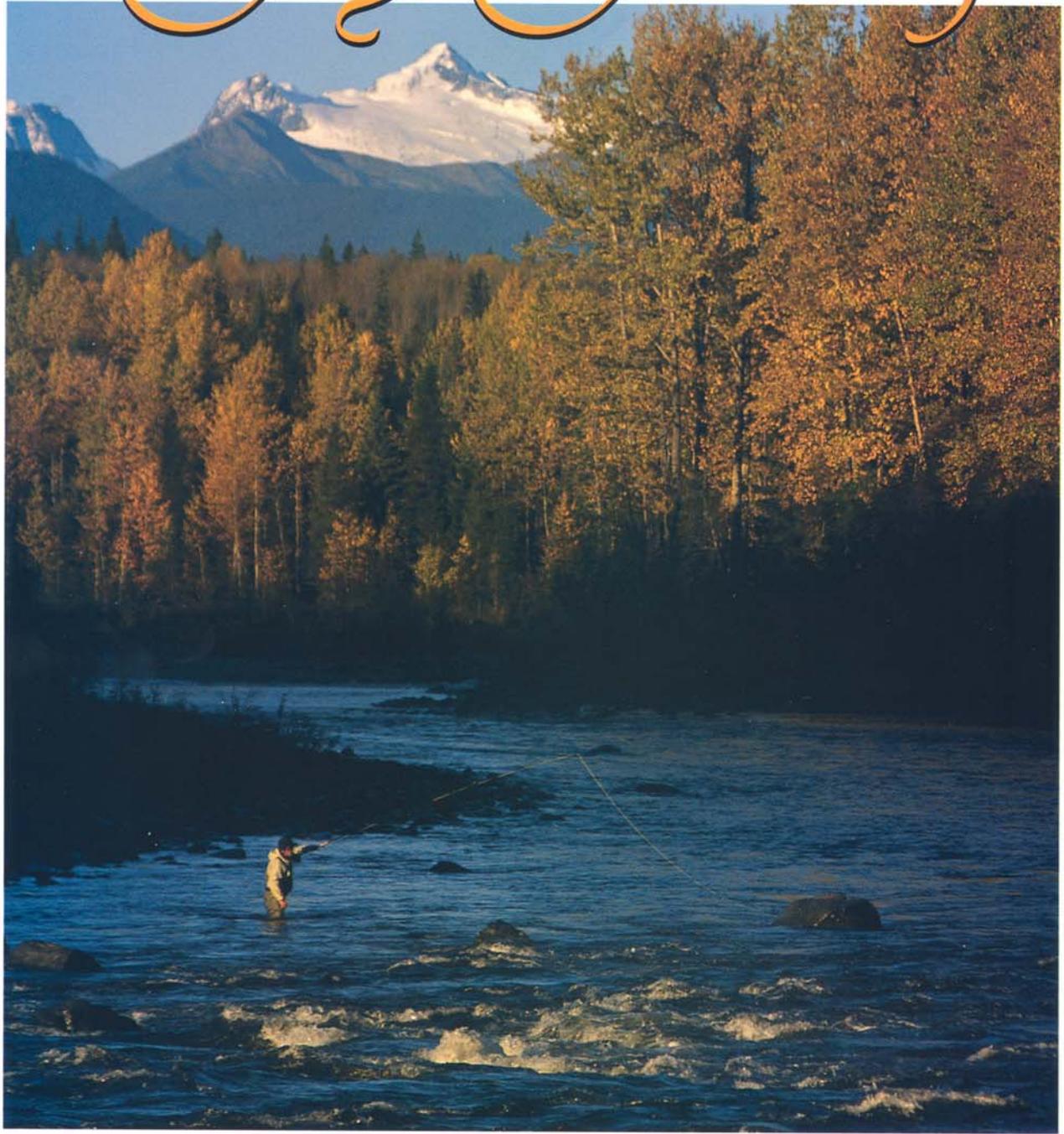


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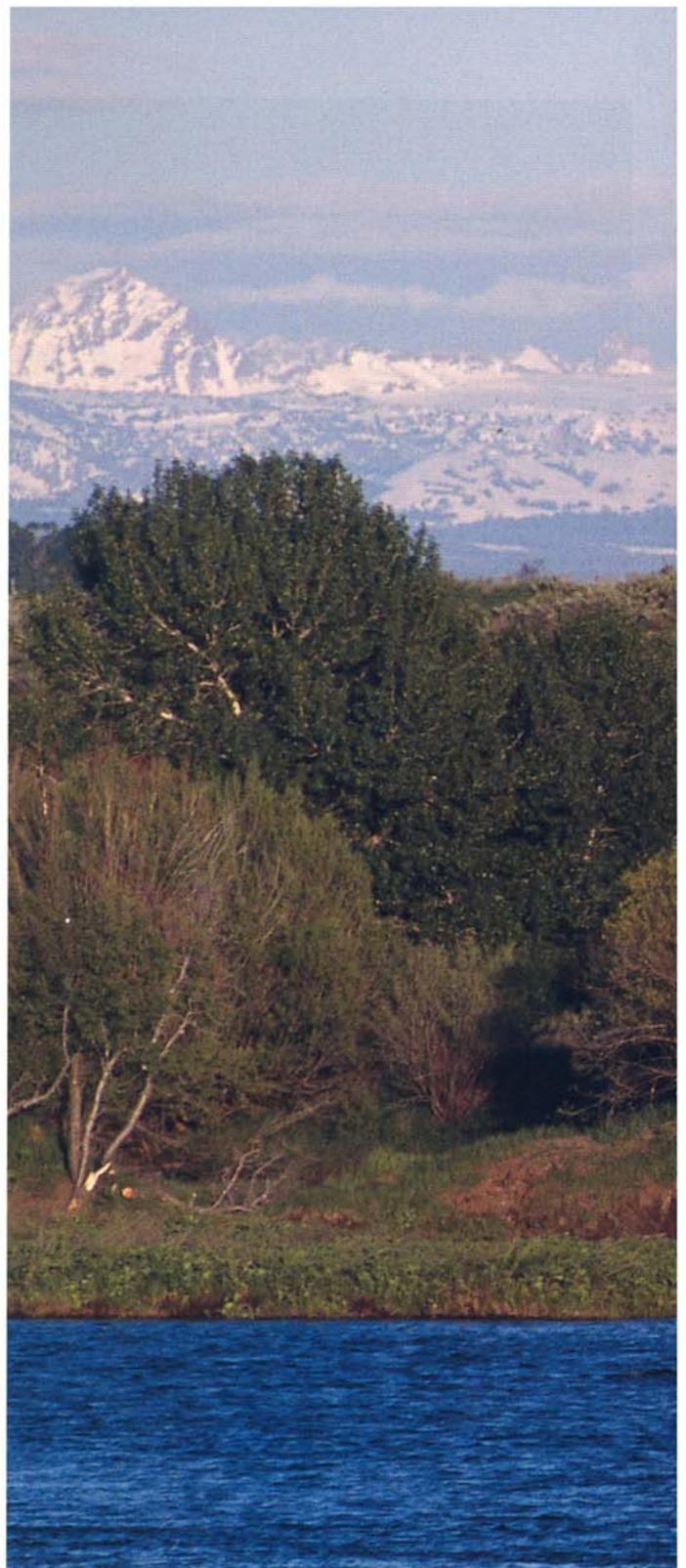
Henrys Fork, ID

Another Face of Fame

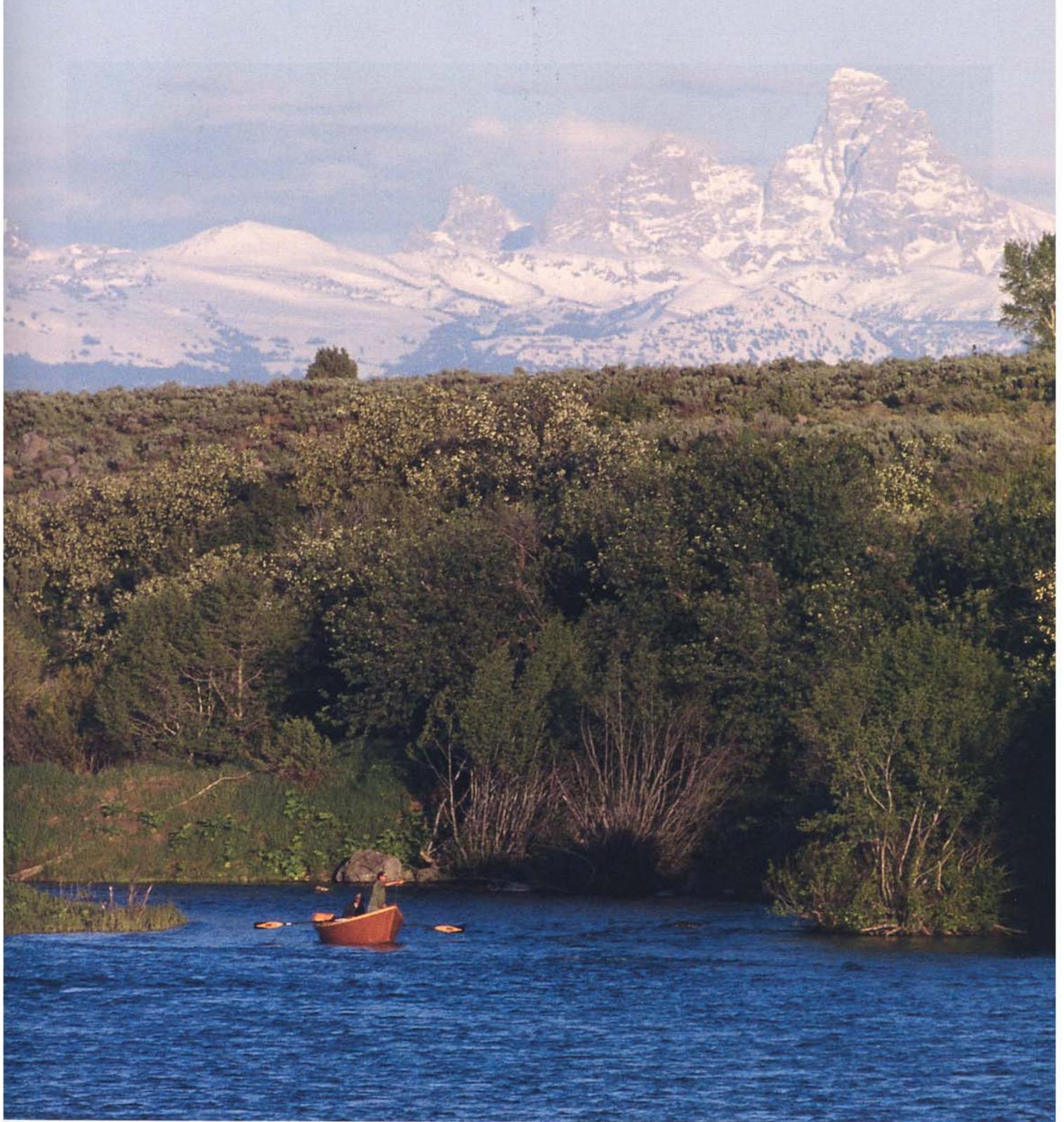
By W. Michael Hamilton

The jagged, spiny peaks of the Tetons remained snowcapped, testifying to a late-spring storm that had dumped 4 inches the week before we arrived in Island Park, a collection of small settlements on the banks of the legendary Henrys Fork of the Snake. Even with meadows awash in waves of white dwarf mountain daisies—their long stems, ray-like petals, and button centers open to the sky—weather in this high volcanic caldera can be as unpredictable as fishing a rising river.

The lower Henrys Fork supports dense populations of aquatic insects, supporting a thriving fishery for strong, fast-growing wild rainbow trout (below). Snow lingers on the Teton Range as an angler casts from a drift boat on the lower Henrys Fork just upstream of the Ashton Bridge during the salmonfly hatch, which runs from late May through early June (right).



I had returned to the Henrys Fork with photographer Chase Jarvis, invited by my friend Philip Chavez, manager of Hyde's Last Chance Lodge. Chavez has spent seven winters in Island Park. He has seen firsthand how three years of drought and degradation have affected the upper river. He wanted us to help test his theory that the lower sections of the river, below Mesa Falls, which don't get much publicity and pressure, are emerging as strong producers of quality fish. In addition, to make the game more interesting, Chavez wanted us to fish wet flies instead



of dries—almost heresy on the Henrys Fork.

Now, you just can't ask someone to fly almost a thousand miles from Seattle to Idaho Falls, rent a car, and drive another 90 miles to Last Chance, only to fish nymphs on one of the most legendary dry-fly rivers in the world. Or can you? I love dry-fly fishing, and in years past I've enjoyed memorable days fishing dries on the Henrys Fork, but I've never intentionally fished nymphs there. But why not? Besides, Chavez did soften a bit, agreeing that we could cast dry flies if we encountered a hatch. So that's

how we came up with this idea of exploring the Henrys Fork from a subsurface perspective.

The morning we arrived in mid-June, Chavez summed it up over a cup of strong coffee, explaining, "The lower river is often left behind and doesn't get the respect it deserves, and neither does nymphing."

The Henrys Fork, incidentally, is named for Andrew Henry, an eccentric explorer and fur trader who left rare and impermanent records of some of his many exploits and adventures by scratching the details in chalk on random

rocks. Seven such rocks have been found so far. Since his time, the Henrys Fork has inspired writers, painters, and poets to tout the river's prolific bug hatches while portraying its trout as persnickety feeders able to frustrate the most avid dry-fly (and soon to be wet-fly) angler.

From its source at Henrys Lake, the Henrys Fork flows almost 20 miles before reaching Island Park Reservoir. Twelve miles downstream from the lake outlet, the river is joined by Big Springs, the largest inflow. Between Big Springs and Island Park Reservoir, the river's fishery has declined significantly over the past few years. Here the stream is heavily silted and shallow, and its insect hatches have all but disappeared. The Henry's Fork Foundation is currently assessing the hydrology, fishery, and water quality, and plans ultimately to restore this section of the river.

Below Island Park Reservoir begins one of the most popular and heavily fished sections of the river. It starts with the legendary boulder-strewn pocket water of Box Canyon, known to locals as "The Box," and then enters the renowned spring-creek-like stretch encompassed by Harriman State Park and often called Railroad Ranch, recalling the Union Pacific Railroad ties of the Harriman family, which donated to the state of Idaho the lands now included in the park.

Beyond Harriman Park, the river picks up speed, flows through Riverside Campground, and enters Cardiac Canyon. The canyon provides exciting wet- and dry-fly fishing for nearly 9 miles before reaching Upper and Lower Mesa Falls. Below the 115-foot Mesa Falls, the river runs swift and scenic, flanked by steep canyon walls of black volcanic rock. Many anglers consider this the most picturesque section of the entire river.

At the confluence with Warm River, the Henrys Fork widens into increasingly long riffles, runs, and deep pools as it flows toward Ashton Reservoir. The 7-mile stretch from Ashton to Chester Reservoir, with a takeout at Vernon Bridge, is an excellent tailwater fishery that gets scant

attention compared to the crowded and much ballyhooed upriver waters of Box Canyon and Harriman State Park. When locals speak of the Chester Backwaters, they are referring to the lower end of this reach.

From Chester Reservoir the river widens dramatically and meanders to the Fun Farm takeout. Why the Fun Farm? you ask. No, it's not a place where cows and pigs frolic, but instead the site where, decades ago, a local dairy

farmer once dreamed of creating a petting zoo for families and kids. By the 1970s, the Packard family offered trailer space, trail rides, and rental canoes.

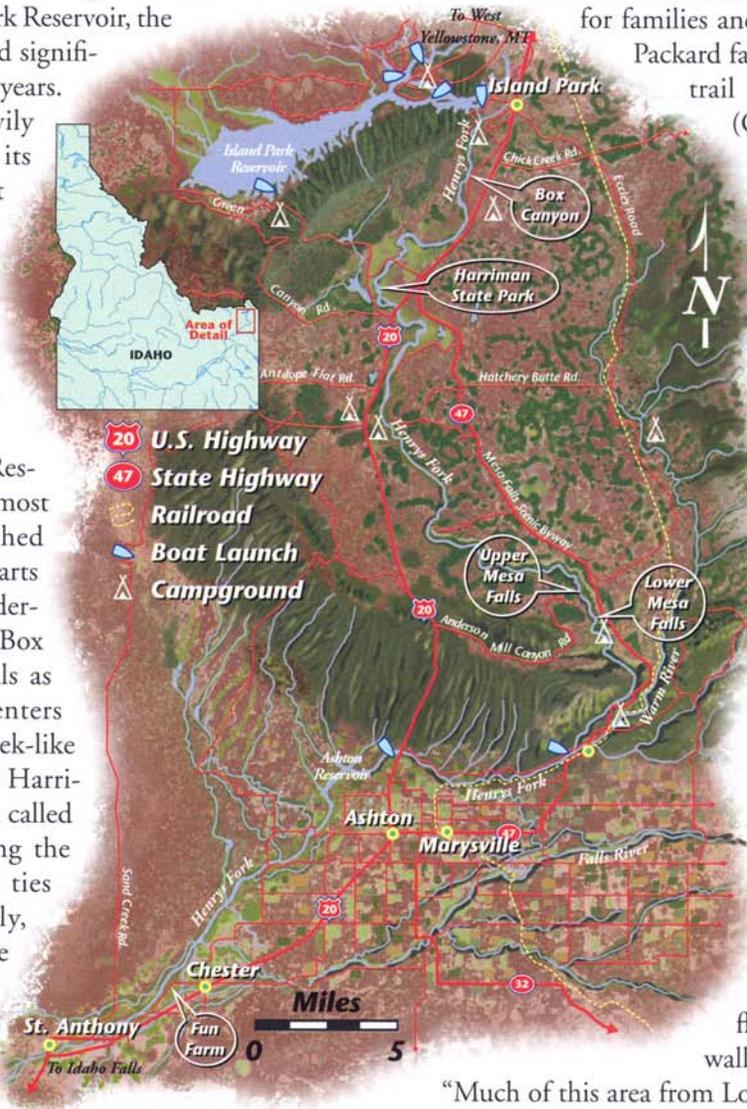
(Got to love the entrepreneurial spirit!) Personally, I have not fished the river below this point, but it reputedly produces a few big browns for those who can figure out the limited access.

Lower Mesa to Warm River

"We're going down there," exclaimed Jarvis, the photographer. "Down there" was a twisted and jagged trail, scarred by deep ruts that ran over a steep embankment, that seemed to disappear into thin air, only to reemerge several hundred vertical feet below. Standing on the edge of the drop, we could hear the faint rush of rapids and see the river flowing between steep rock walls far below.

"Much of this area from Lower Mesa to Warm River is inaccessible and requires hiking into a steep canyon," explained Pat Bennett, our guide. "I think it's the most scenic and the least-fished portion of the river." Bennett is a retired lieutenant colonel who has spent 20 years guiding anglers on the Henrys Fork, the South Fork of the Snake, and the Madison River near West Yellowstone. He's personable and knowledgeable and loves to laugh—as we would discover over the next three days.

Bennett dragged an 18-foot inflatable catamaran off its trailer and pointed the bow down the side of the mountain. "Ready?" he inquired. Before we could answer, he was pushing the boat down the rut, his heels digging into the brown wet soil and one gloved hand holding on



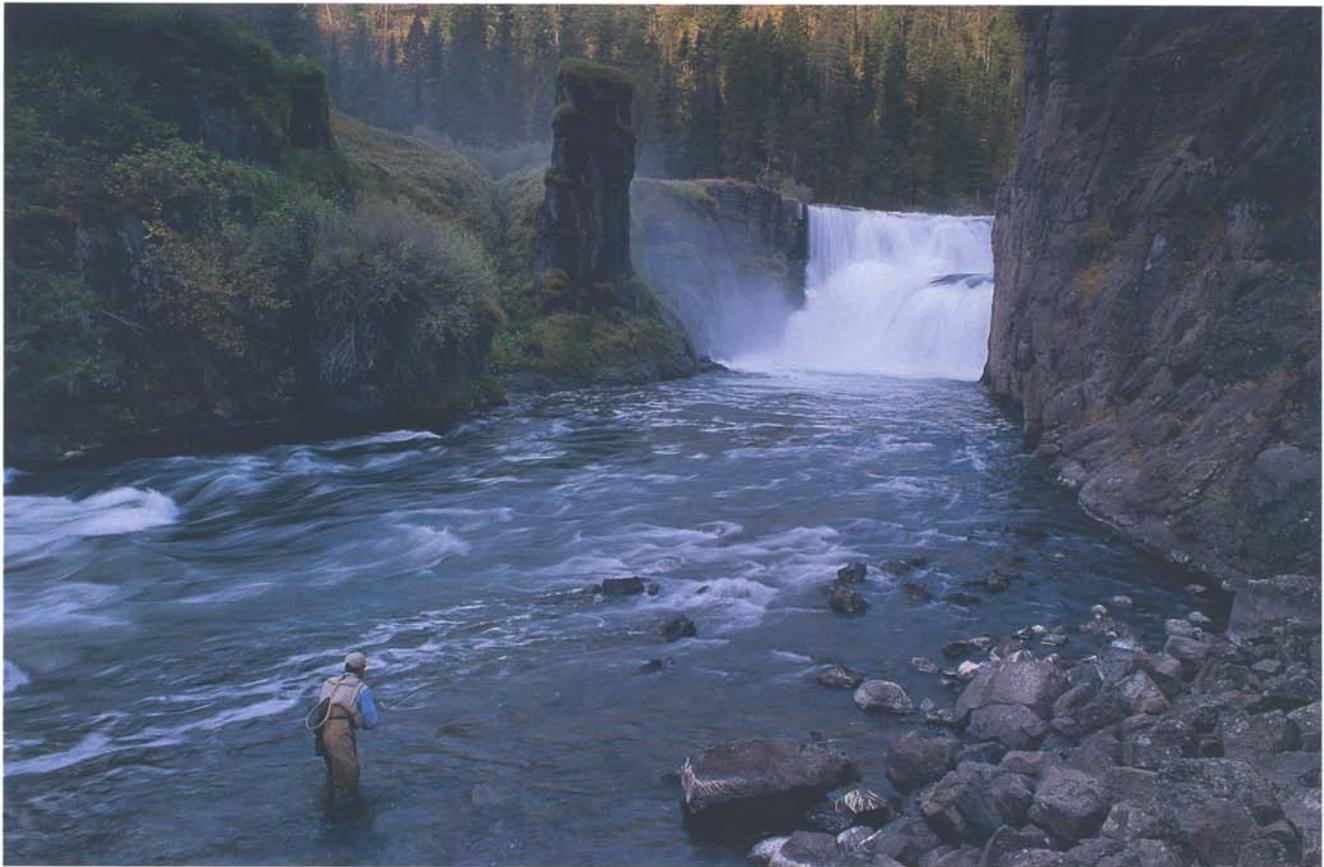


PHOTO BY JAMES NELSON

Marty Reed, a guide for Trouthunter on the Henrys Fork, nymphs a promising run just downstream from Lower Mesa Falls, which, along with Upper Mesa Falls, divides the upper and lower sections of the river (above). Downstream from Lower Mesa Falls, the “slide,” which leads precipitously down to an unimproved launch site, requires mountain goat–like sure-footedness (below).

to the stern rope. He manhandled the bucking raft the way a rodeo cowboy handles a cinched-up bronco busting out of the chute. We wondered if we would see him again as we slung on our gear bags, picked up our fly rods, and began carefully negotiating the “trail” toward the river some 500 feet below.

This was my second venture down the “slide,” as Bennett calls it. Four years previous, my wife, Pam—who loves the front of the boat, throws a tight loop to the bank, and refuses to learn to row (smart woman, right?)—joined me on an expedition here during the salmonfly hatch of late May. We floated the same stretch, and did we ever catch the hatch! Salmonflies swarmed all over the river, landing on our shirts, bouncing off our hats, and plopping uninvited in our food when we stopped for lunch. Out on the river, huge rainbows rocketed into the air, like a piscatorial trapeze act from

Cirque du Soleil, snatching unsuspecting bugs. We landed several ’bows that day, as fat as pigs and weighing as much as 5 pounds. But that was prime salmonfly time around Memorial Day. In mid-June, after the salmonfly hatch

has moved upriver, big nymphs are standard fare for fly fishers below Lower Mesa Falls.

“Fishing nymphs deep can consistently produce the biggest fish in the river,” Bennett explained, as he handed us each a large bug that looked like a miniature pipe cleaner with rubber legs. “Tie this on as your lead nymph, then string a second fly about 24 inches below it,” he added. “Use a Pheasant Tail, Lightning Bug, or Trina’s Bubble Back in a size 18 as the trailer.”

I had to ask, “What do you call this thing?”

“Pat’s Rubber Legs,” he replied. Jarvis and I exchanged surprised looks. “Is this your fly?” I queried further.

“Yep,” he said. “Early in the



PHOTO BY CRAIG PERIS

along with lots of whitefish up to 4 pounds. (I promised Bennett I wouldn't say how many "whities" we hooked.)

We kept hoping for a big brown trout. Midway through the float my indicator jerked violently down. I set the hook and watched my line scream across 50 yards of river, make a U-turn upstream, and stop stone cold for a nanosecond before disappearing behind a big rock. With the raft moving swiftly downstream, I had two choices: break off the fly or risk losing the entire line and backing, which was now peeling off the reel at an alarming rate. *Snap!* The sad sound of the proper choice.

Our float ended just below the Warm River–Henry's Fork confluence, at the Stone Bridge launch. A word of caution: if you float this section, don't be surprised by Surprise Falls, a heart-in-the-throat, 5-foot drop that appears out of nowhere. That's one good reason to hire a guide your first time through. Our 60-plus fish, all taken on nymph patterns (we saw just two mayflies), was a fine start at proving the theory that brought us here in the first place. As we drove back to Island Park, we could see Philip Chavez smiling. And so were we.

Detour to The Box

Over dinner that night at Hyde's Last Chance Lodge, Bennett said he wanted to continue our downstream journey by floating from Warm River to Ashton Reservoir.

In between bites, he extolled the great summer fishing on this stretch for lots of 12- to 13-inch trout and a few larger fish. He explained how inflows from Warm River and Robinson Creek insulate this stretch of the Henry's Fork from drought and drought-related dam releases. Plus, he explained, this lower reach is open all year and boasts the highest brown trout population in the Henry's Fork.

Despite the 30-some-degree chill, the next morning found us eagerly seated in the truck when Bennett emerged from the fly shop wearing an expression that gathered nearly palpable storm clouds above his hat. He opened the door to his rig and jumped in. "We can't float Warm River to Ashton because there are already three boats from the lodge booked into the stretch." An apparent miscommunication had altered our plans. Because the river gets a lot of boat traffic from several local fly shops and outfitters, only three boats from each outfit are allowed onto a specific stretch of the river each day. We were the odd boat out.

But the Henry's Fork country offers lots of options, and Bennett suggested we fish nearby Box Canyon. Why not? If it fished poorly we might have tangible proof to

support Chavez's theory that drought had been negatively affecting the upper river. Bennett explained that we would still have time to make an afternoon drive south toward the towns of Ashton and St. Anthony—long the site of the much-anticipated Fishermen's Breakfast each opening day of trout season—and fish the run from Chester Dam to the Fun Farm.

The Box has been called a fish factory. It spans only about 3 miles from the put-in below Island Park Reservoir to the takeout at Last Chance. But over the years these 3 miles of fast-flowing pocket water have produced huge rainbows, including brutes up to 10 pounds and heavier. Eroded in volcanic strata, The Box offers a truly scenic float, something that most anglers miss because they are too busy casting and catching.

We had replaced the cumbersome raft with Bennett's 16-foot drift boat. Bennett said big nymphs were standard fare in mid-June, so we stuck with Pat's Rubber Legs. Though we focused on wet-fly fishing, The Box is known for exceptional dry-fly action during the early-summer stonefly hatches.

Guides on the Henry's Fork often spend more time out of the boat than in. Seems they love to "walk" the boat from behind, holding on to the stern. With water close to the top of his waders, Bennett bobbed up and down as he deftly walked the boat downriver.

We soon discovered the demanding nature of nymphing The Box. The

big rainbows can hold anywhere. We covered run after run with hundreds of casts and mends and boatloads of anticipation. *Nada.* Finally, an hour into the float, we hooked three 10- to 12-inch fish at the head of a long riffle—hardly the leviathans on whose shoulders The Box gained its lofty reputation. Bennett speculated that recent water releases from Island Park Reservoir had discolored the water. But the real culprit, he said, was the lingering effects from three years of drought. "Winter flow releases were cut too low below Island Park Reservoir," he explained. "There was not enough water to maintain critical habitat for fish and bugs. Low flows during the critical winter months meant that the water was too cold and ice formations destroyed trout and insect habitat." (2004 brought some relief, with winter and spring snow in the mountains and summer rain in August and September.)

That afternoon we returned to our game plan of fishing the lower river. After a 40-mile drive south on U.S. Highway 20, we launched at Chester Dam. The weather had turned cloudy and muggy. Maybe we would get a mayfly hatch after all.

Pat's Rubber Legs

By Pat Bennett



PHOTO BY NORTHWEST FLY FISHING

- Hook:** Dai-Riki 710, sizes 2–8
Thread: Black 6/0
Body: Brown or black/brown variegated chenille, weighted with nontoxic fuse wire
Legs/tail/antenna: Angler's Choice Super Floss, brown

Bennett rowed across the river and we began casting to the far bank. On my second cast I hooked an explosive rainbow that tail-slapped the air in an amazing display of aerobatics. Jarvis followed suit and we had our first double. This was more like it! We continued the doubles game into late afternoon, each time whooping it up with peals of laughter. It was a special two-hour window, and moments like that are always best shared.

As dusk approached we started seeing caddisflies and rising fish, and, despite Chavez's insistence on nymph fishing, on went a size-16 X-Caddis. *Wham!* A monster rainbow swirled, taking the fly, and promptly broke off. Fish were dimpling all over the river, and Jarvis wanted to get out of the boat to take shots of the sunset. He was a photographer on assignment, after all. With the Fun Farm takeout in sight, we deposited him and his cameras on a grassy island, and Bennett and I took turns casting dries to rising fish.

After several releases, and with our photographer back in the boat, we simply quit fishing, preferring instead to bask in the wondrous evening sky, a fiery palette of crimson smeared with purple and shades of gray. Jarvis was in heaven. Jagged streaks of lightning flashed in the distance, striking unexpectedly and with little warning. Startled and pleasantly surprised by nature's display, we looked at each other and laughed aloud, the sounds of our laughter dissipating into the immensity of the moment.

Ashton Reservoir to Vernon Bridge

The next day we were feeling pretty cocky as we launched at Ora Bridge, downstream from Ashton Reservoir. This has always been my favorite float. It's only about 3 miles to the takeout at Vernon Bridge, but one can easily spend an entire day in this section and hook some amazing fish.

We dropped the boat into the river, then pulled and pushed our way upriver close to the bank for about 400 yards until we came to a stretch of water directly below Ashton Dam. Honestly, if you saw this riffle, your heart would sing with joy. It's long and deep, with just the right

amount of current, so that you can fish it as you would a classic steelhead run—step, cast, step, cast, fish on!

With no bugs about in the morning chill, we started fishing with Pat's Rubber Legs and were immediately rewarded with four rainbows in 10 casts, each fish racing, leaping, and cartwheeling before silently surrendering to be released to fight another day. At about 10:30, we saw the first PMDs. Gradually, fish began dimpling the surface. Ben-

nett unveiled his PMD emerger pattern and worked two large trout in a foot of water not 20 feet from our anchorage.

On his third cast, a snout sucked down his fly and a strong rainbow shot out into the current. We watched as he worked the fish back and forth, tiring it after each powerful run. It was a beauty! Twenty-two inches of speckles, spots, and the colors of the rainbow. Gently holding one of these strong, powerful fish after it had just fought its heart out is a spiritual moment. To honor the spirit of our professed game on this, our last day of fishing, Jarvis and I stuck with nymphs the rest of the day. Turned out to be the right choice. We landed about 10 rainbows in the 18- to 23-inch range.

The Future

At this point, I could wrap up the story and "head for the barn," as we used to say in TV newsrooms. But the Henrys

Fork's future deserves plenty of ink.

Steve Trafton, executive director of the Henry's Fork Foundation and chair of the Henry's Fork Watershed Council, says, "For decades, the handful of anglers who fished the lower Henrys Fork did so thanks to handshake agreements with local landowners. Today, however, those ties are dangerously strained.

"It doesn't take great imagination to realize that trash in parking areas, dogs chasing livestock, fences torn down, and illegal hunting are all very good reasons for any landowner to decide that his generosity in providing public access is nothing but a headache at best, and a liability at worst."

Trafton says these and other factors led to the foundation's decision to purchase the Stone Bridge access just below the Warm River confluence with the Henrys Fork. Maybe



During May and June, the mountain meadows and slopes of the Henrys Fork drainage burst into mosaics of colorful wildflowers like these white dwarf daisies.

PHOTO BY CHASE JARVIS

Maybe the foundation can also help regain public access to the aforementioned Vernon Bridge takeout (See Conservation, page20.)

Access is just one 21st-century issue threatening the Henrys Fork. Other key stakeholders, including Trout Unlimited (TU), are working on a number of projects to keep the watershed healthy. "We're conducting an economic analysis of the recreational value of the upper Snake River," says TU's Scott Yates. "We are seeking common ground among the ranching, farming, and fisheries communities to protect stream flows on the Henrys Fork and South Fork of the Snake as well as other rivers in central and southeast Idaho." To learn how you can support these efforts, contact Steve Trafton, (208) 652-3567, and Scott Yates, (208) 552-0899.

Now it's time to head to the barn. So what did we learn? We caught a lot of great fish on Pat's Rubber Legs, with the "nymph man" himself on the oars, confirming the great subsurface fishing touted by Chavez and Bennett. We learned that the lower river is a real "jewel in the crown." Professional photographer Jarvis, I might add, learned to check his passport and make sure it hadn't expired three days before he was to leave on a big overseas shoot. As for me, I discovered that words seem to escape me when I confront the awesome beauty of a river like the Henrys Fork. As anglers, we listen to the rhythms a river plays, and we fish in the context of these rhythms, ready to repeat the cycle again and again, allowing ourselves to meld into the moment. The Henrys Fork, from its renowned flat-water expanses to its little-known lower reaches, offers perhaps the ultimate harmony. 🐟

W. Michael Hamilton is a freelance writer who lives in Seattle, Washington.

HENRYS FORK NOTEBOOK

When: Memorial Day–Nov. 30; check current synopsis for specific sections of the river.

Where: Eastern Idaho, 75 mi. north of Idaho Falls, 35 mi. south of West Yellowstone, MT.

Headquarters: All services available in Island Park, Ashton, and St. Anthony. Island Park Chamber of Commerce, (208) 558-7755; Island Park Ranger Station, (208) 558-7301; Ashton Chamber of Commerce, (208) 652-3355, www.ashtonidaho.com; Greater St. Anthony Chamber of Commerce, (208) 624-4870.

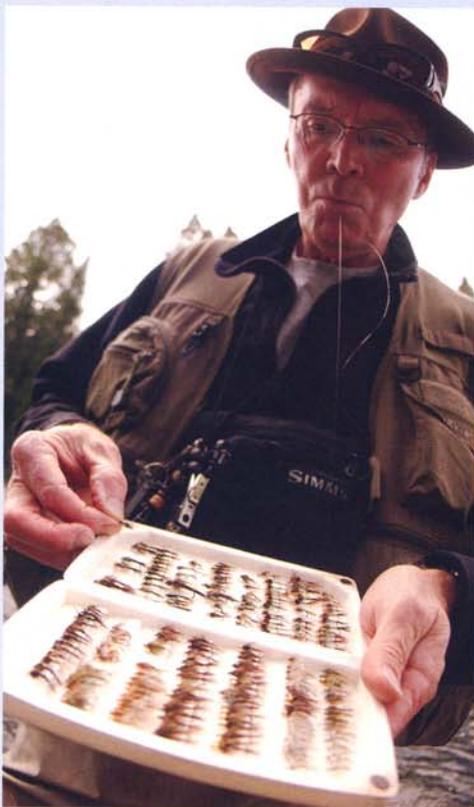
Appropriate gear: 4- to 6-wt. rods, floating and sinking-tip lines.

Useful fly patterns: *Nymphs:* Pat's Rubber Legs, Bitch Creek, Kaufmann Stone, Peacock Simulator, Golden Stone Nymph, Prince Nymph, Zug Bug, Peeking Caddis, Hare's Ear, CDC Pheasant Tail, Trina's Bubble Back. *Streamers:* Muddler Minnow, Bead Head and Cone Head Buggers, Woolhead Sculpin, Zonker, Marabou Leech, bunny flies. *Dry flies:* Depending on time of year, carry patterns to match salmonflies, Golden Stoneflies, PMDs, BWOs, various caddisflies, Brown and Green Drakes, Slate-Winged Olives (*Drunella flavilinea*), Tricos, *Callibaetis*, Mahogany Duns, grasshoppers and other terrestrials.

Necessary accessories: Waders, sturdy wading boots, sunglasses, sunscreen, rain gear, wide-brimmed hat, insect repellent.

Nonresident license: \$10.50/1 day plus \$4/each additional day, \$74.50/annual.

Fly shops/guides: *Island Park:* Henry's Fork Anglers, (208) 558-7525, www.henrysforkanglers.com; Henry's Fork Lodge, (208) 558-7953, www.henrysforklodge.com; Hyde Outfitters & Last Chance Lodge, (800) 428-8338, www.hydelodge.com; Truthhunter on the Henry's Fork, (208) 558-9900, www.truthhunt.com. *Ashton:* Three Rivers Ranch, (208) 652-3750, www.threeriversranch.com. *Idaho Falls:* Jimmy's All Seasons Angler, (208) 524-7160, www.jimmysflyshop.com. *West Yellowstone, MT:* Firehole Ranch, (406) 646-7294, www.fireholeranch.com. Additional fly shops/guides available in West Yellowstone.



Books/maps: *Fly Fishing the Henry's Fork* by Mike Lawson and Gary LaFontaine; *Flyfisher's Guide to Idaho* by Ken Retallic, Rocky Barker, and R. D. Dye; *Spring Creeks* by Mike Lawson; *Idaho Atlas & Gazetteer* by DeLorme Mapping; *Idaho Seamless USGS Topographical Maps* by National Geographic.