

Around the Northwest

News, Views, and Piscatorial Pursuits



Spring on the Missouri River, MT By Michael Hamilton

Sometimes it's almost impossible to comprehend the wonder of a trout stream as it awakens from winter's solitude. For me, the newness of spring on the lower Missouri River, above the tiny berg of Cascade, Montana, ignites all of my senses, like catching the acrid sweet smells of woodsmoke on the wind. My mantra for the past four early springs has been "Go low on the Mo," with guide Jared Edens, (406) 599-3913, jared.fishmt@gmail.com. Combine little angling pressure with short-leash nymphing techniques and dry lines on top targeting the season's first Blue-Winged Olive emergence, and you have what I call Missouri's magic season.

Edens and his chocolate Lab, Moose, are waiting for me outside the Trout Montana Motel in Cascade (this motel, www.troutmontana.com, is a gem—clean, quiet, convenient, and completely remodeled with fly anglers in mind). Our reunion is brief. A handshake and a head pat for Moose and we are ready to go. In April, it's all about water temperatures; 42 degrees is the magic number to jump-start the hatch of Blue-Winged Olives. "With warmer spring weather, everything seems to be happening earlier," notes Edens. "Fish will respond when the BWOs emerge, moving up out of deep water looking for a meal bigger than a midge."

Warmer water temperatures, he adds, can also get hungry browns chasing Skwala stoneflies. Seldom seen on the Missouri, the hatch is underfished; adult stonefly patterns (sizes 8 through 12), cast tight to the bank, sporadically attract marauding browns. "The Missouri is not a stonefly river. It's not a hatch that anyone can bank on," notes Edens.

Anglers bold enough to venture to the Missouri in early April should be prepared for snow, sleet, sun, wind, and thunderstorms—often all in a single day. True to form, as we launch at Mountain Palace, 8 miles above Cascade, sheets of virga rain driven by a steady wind drift lazily above the landscape, trailing ghostly, gauzelike tentacles that brush the earth with millions of microscopic droplets. Moose sticks his snout in the air as if to test the wind. Satisfied, he scampers onto his place atop the Yeti cooler. We string three rods. On one, we rig a short-leash nymph setup, with a size 16 Amex Czech Nymph and a size 18 Bloom's Hot Orange Tungsten Beadhead, which can be deadly before a Baetis hatch. On another, we tie a Skwala dry, just in case. On the third rod, we attach a 9-foot leader and a size 16 Sparkle Flag. Other productive Baetis dries include Smoke Jumpers, Quigley Cripples, CDC Comparaduns, and spinner patterns.

We start with the short leash. Water temps are hovering near 41. Just after launching, the Palsa strike indicator dips. "Set," shouts Edens. A cartwheeling 17-inch rainbow comes to the net after two hard-charging runs. "Moose, don't lick the fish!" I will hear that a lot through the day. We fish diligently over the next four hours with constant action. We stop for lunch about 2 p.m. Partial sun breaks through. After I take two bites of my ham and cheese, we both see heads popping up along the bank below the boat: rising trout. BWOs are emerging and fish are sipping. Lunch can wait. Edens eases the boat into position and anchors up. I make an upstream reach cast, dumping the Sparkle Flag 10 feet above a riser. "Feed line, feed line," Edens whispers. I watch the bug drift down and get sucked under. I lift my rod tip gently. The line goes tight. Fish on! Moose barks approval. The emergence lasts over an hour. Several rainbows and a few browns are eager players. I don't think we ever finished lunch.

