

Catching a Legend



Trying to guess the end of runoff in Montana to fish the storied salmon fly hatch on the West Fork of the Bitterroot, from 2 states away, is akin to picking a super bowl winner before the football season starts. Sure, there's volumes of data that show 10 year trends, but every year is different, especially now, with unpredictable climate changes. But if you are lucky enough to time it right, the rewards of watching fat cutthroat,

rainbows and big browns, explode on your 3" long salmon fly imitation far outweigh the risks of encountering high flows. So, when the second week in June arrived, I decided to roll the dice.

The West Fork (WF) has two distinct personalities. It begins as a small freestone, hugging the southwest border of Montana, eventually flowing into Painted Rocks Reservoir (PRR). Constructed in 1939 by the Montana State Water Conservation Board, the 143-foot high, 800-foot long dam sits 40 miles south of Hamilton, Montana, adjacent to the Bitterroot National Forest. The WF above Painted Rocks is a classic walk and wade fishery. Good numbers of wild trout average 8" to 12" and willingly rise to a smorgasbord of dry flies.



Four mountain high creeks located within the watershed—West Fork, Slate, Blue Joint, and Overwhich, fill the reservoir each year. At full capacity, the reservoir can store close to 45,000 acre feet of water. Managed releases irrigate Bitterroot Valley farms as well as protect fish during hot summers. Below Painted Rocks Reservoir, the WF, assumes a totally different character. Undercut banks, boulder drops, tight pockets, deep pools, rock garden rap-

ids, riffles and numerous log jams, hold hefty numbers of thick bodied West Slope Cutthroat, feisty rainbows, big browns, mountain white fish and small populations of federally protected bull trout, that must be released immediately.

Three days before I arrived, my guide friend, Andrew Hettick, part of the guide contingent from Freestone Fly Shop, in Hamilton, MT (www.freestoneflyshop.com) left me a voice mail with disturbing news. "Flows are way above normal, pushing 2,000 cfs. No sign of salmon flies. Nada. Not even shucks on the banks or in the bushes. But the weather is supposed to shift." Shift turned out to be a major understatement. Over the next 72 hours, overnight lows jumped 10 degrees. Day time highs skyrocketed into the 80's. West Fork flows fell below 1,000 cfs. Welcome to late spring in Montana!

It was cloudy and humid when Andrew picked me up. We headed out of Hamilton, and drove south on Highway 93. We passed through the small berg of Darby. Three miles out of town, we turned south onto to the West Fork Road. As Andrew was explaining our game plan to put in just below the reservoir, we were startled by a loud pop, followed by another "splat." Now, when a 3 inch long insect meets your windshield, while traveling at 50 mph, it gets your attention. We both yelled "Salmon Flies" simultaneously.

We slid Andrew's raft down a steep bank and into the river downstream from Painted Rocks. Squadrons of Salmon Fly's zig zagged overhead. I rigged my 9' Sage X 5 weight with a 7 1/2 ' 3x leader. I tied on Andrew's home tie with no tippet. "Make short reach casts, tight to the bank," he advised. We pushed off. The swift current flung us downstream. On my third cast, a huge brown trout chased my fly over a boulder. I set and the fish rocketed upstream. No way Andrew could stop. I dropped my rod tip, like fighting a steelhead, trying to turn the fish downstream. A good three hundred yards down river from the eat, Andrew navigated his raft into a slow pocket behind a boulder. He dropped anchor. As if on cue, the fish swam by the raft. I pulled his head up. Andrew scooped it up in the net. The next several hours were non stop action. Salmon flies buzzed above. I hooked fish after fish below. It was a constant rush of pure adrenaline.

For many fly fishers, catching the salmon fly hatch just right, is like discovering the location of the holy grail. However, all it takes is one unforgettable day, where the incredible sight of seeing magnificent trout open their mouths and inhale your presentation, to make the legend real.

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