

"Now the dream is within your grasp . . ."

Autumn Browns

JESS R. LEE

VICTOR ICHIOKA

A COLD BLAST OF SNOW-SPICED WIND rocked the pickup as it crossed the divide out of Hoback Basin. Ahead lay the Green River Basin, a thousand square miles of rolling sagebrush-covered hills. The basin looked blue-gray in the half light of the November dawn, a stark contrast to the timber- and meadow-edged river course the highway had followed the past hundred miles. To the east we could just make out the snow-mantled peaks of the Wind River Range. Clear skies ahead kindled hope that the storm we had run through during the night was over. As we reached the basin floor we could see small herds of antelope slowly grazing toward their winter range in the low hills near Pinedale.

After the first sip of hot coffee we sat back relaxed, comfortable in the warmth of the Stockmen's Cafe. On the street, it looked as though all the ranchers in western Wyoming were in town to prepare for an early winter.

Over breakfast Rene Harrop and I debated where we should try first. We had come to fish the Green in the hay meadows below town, but there were other possibilities. We could try the New Fork, where it runs along the mesa south of the airport. And there was the Little Boulder, with its willowed banks that sheltered as many moose as trophy browns. We whispered our special places. When the wait-

ress laid the check on the table she smiled and joked that only fools would try for the big browns of the Green with flies since the thermometer had dipped to three degrees the night before.

Harrop allowed that even fools occasionally catch Green River fish.

Stepping outside, we were greeted by nearly an inch of fresh snow. "Feels like this may last awhile," I mumbled, turning up the collar of my Mackinaw. "Probably until the middle of May," Rene said, grinning back through his beard.

Thankfully, my autumn brown trout expeditions don't always start on such a chilling note. Usually the weather is refreshingly brisk, the sky has taken on a royal-blue cast, and the afternoon sun seems almost warm just before it dips behind snow-capped peaks.

Fall is the time to fish the Rockies; the picnic areas are abandoned, tourist fishermen have left and big mallards and Canada geese are following the river courses south. By the time the big browns really get serious about their autumn business, the aspen leaves will have covered the ground with gold and the first snow will have melted from the bottomlands.

In September, when the weather begins to cool and the days grow shorter, the normally nocturnal browns become more active, feeding more freely during the day. No longer will the really big trout reside exclusively under a deeply cut bank or sulk beneath some unfishable snag. As autumn

JESS R. LEE lives in Idaho Falls, Idaho. This is his first contribution to FFM.

draws near, the big browns venture into the mainstream, become bolder and even more predacious than normal, always looking for a large easy meal. Something, maybe the shorter days, or possibly the fresh chill of the river, has triggered an age-old desire to stock up now. The spawning time is at hand and the winter will be long and lean.

When the spawning instinct is triggered male browns become vicious, sometimes fighting among themselves more like bull elk than trout. Their hooked jaws become more pronounced, heads look more like reptile heads than fish. I still have scars on my hands to remind me of a long-toothed male who mistook my thumb for a fat sculpin as I tried to remove a #2 Matuka from his horny jaw.



PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

Autumn fishing can be finger freezing in the morning and almost warm just before the sun sets, but it's rarely dull when the big browns are on the move.





MIKE STIDHAM WATERCOLOR

Streamers are good bets this time of year, but don't bother with anything smaller than #2 if you're looking for four-pound browns.

FROM OCTOBER TO AS LATE AS DECEMBER, in some streams, the fall browns are on the move, always upstream, prowling, seeking suitable spawning water, often migrating 25 miles or more—not much of a migration for a salmon or steelhead, but still quite a trip for a stay-at-home fish. In other places the migration is only a matter of moving to the nearest riffle to find a good spawning water. But whether it's 25 miles or 25 yards, these are the conditions that make trophy-size browns vulnerable to the fly fisher. Now the dream is within your grasp—a truly huge brown on a fly.

Be cautioned though, making this dream a reality is not easy. The days are not all golden. There will be the cold,

blustery days; days with freezing rain; or surprisingly more comfortable snow. There are times when you may go many days without seeing your rod guides completely free of ice. Remember, there is the seemingly ever present wind, at times threatening you with the possibility of driving a weighted 2/0 fly into the back of your neck.

Remember also that the fish are there and, if you are determined or obsessed, you just might succeed.

To gird yourself against the harshness that often accompanies fall fishing, proper clothing is required. No matter how stream-wise a fisherman is, the main ingredients in the formula to catching trophy fish are to fish long hours and to disregard the weather. Often the most productive time is when a storm front is moving in. For reasons known only to the fish, storms often trigger a "bite period."

A proper hat is a neglected article of clothing for many

fall fishermen. Yes, every fisherman has a hat, but the right headgear for late fall in the Rockies is a wool watch cap or even better, a wool balaclava preferred by mountain climbers and cross-country skiers.

The balaclava can be pulled down completely over the neck and around the face and it is usually made of a long wool fleece, the best material for shedding rain and wind while retaining body heat.

Well-made down or fiber-filled jackets will keep you comfortable during most cold snaps, but if wind-driven rain or snow hits you on the stream, you won't be able to fish long unless you have a rain jacket handy. The shorty rain jackets made for deep-wading anglers are functional in the stream because they don't drag in the current. But wader-length rain jackets are not worth a damn for anything else. If you've ever tried wearing one of these belly-

button-length jackets around camp, even during a drizzle, you know what I mean.

Along with insulated waders, sweaters and longjohns be sure to include an adequate pair of gloves with your other gear. Fingerless wool gloves are fine for milder days, but when ice freezes your line in the rod guides I know of no truly adequate solution for the numb-finger problem. I've settled on using medium-weight wool gloves with a pair of rubber dishwashing gloves over them. This has worked for me for two seasons, with only mild frustration when changing flies.

WHEN SELECTING FLIES for autumn browns two categories are usually considered: nymphs and streamers.

Nymph fishing, in my experience, should be used only in areas which are heavily populated with stoneflies. Re-



member, at this time of year particularly, a large fish wants a large meal, and in most areas the stonefly is the only nymph which meets that measure. Determining whether or not an area has stoneflies is quite simple. Just turn over a few rocks in a fast-moving section of stream to see if they are clinging to the underside of those rocks.

Streamers imitate small fish and it is most uncommon to find a stream capable of producing trophy-size trout without that stream also having a large population of small fish. Typical streamers should be tied in sizes to imitate fish in the two- through four-inch range, although both larger and smaller patterns can be effective at times.

Streamer pattern selection is a very personal thing with autumn brown trout fly fishers. This fall you may find that the man in the Stetson, fishing the waist-deep run below you, believes a honey blond bucktail is the best fly on the river, while his companion across the river says a gray-green Matuka is the most productive fly.

When fished properly, most well-tied streamers and bucktails are effective. But trout can be as fickle as a 16-year-old maiden. I always feel secure with a selection of Muddler Minnows and its variations, Matukas in the mostly somber colors, and bucktails in most any color. During this time of the year I seldom bother with flies tied in sizes smaller than #2 because I am not looking for fish under four pounds. My streamers and bucktails are always tied in both weighted and unweighted versions, to meet the needs of various currents.

In order to cast these oversized, and sometimes heavily-weighted flies properly, a powerful rod is required. Rods that are balanced to an 8-weight line are considered minimum, and 10-foot rods for 10-weight lines are not too large if long casts are required on windy days. Most fly fishers enjoy the beauty and feel of fine cane, practicality must be given serious consideration. A bamboo rod in large sizes is a very heavy stick and will leave all but the most rugged anglers ready to head for camp after a few hours of fishing. Fiberglass and graphite offer the common

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advantage of being lighter than bamboo. Graphite is the lightweight of the trio; it tends to cast farther and with it, mending and pickup is easier. Fiberglass is not as aesthetically pleasing as bamboo, nor is it as light as graphite, but it is an excellent compromise, being lighter than cane and more rugged than graphite while less expensive than both.

No matter which type of rod you choose, fly presentation is the key to catching trophy browns and if you do your part any well-made rod will deliver the goods. Presentation need not be delicate in these large Western rivers at this time of year. Proper presentation under these circumstances is to get the fly down to the level of the fish. This is

Use sight, not feel, to detect strikes on streamers and you'll be rewarded.

most easily accomplished in heavy current by using the high-density shooting-taper technique pioneered by west coast steelheaders. In some areas of heavy-flowing rivers, such as the Missouri and the Yellowstone, you may find it necessary to use a lead-core or a high-density, fast-sinking line. With such lines, a leader less than six feet long, should be used, as the nylon tends to be buoyant. It can't be over emphasized that the formula for success under these conditions is to get your fly deep. When you begin false-striking bedrocks, you are there.

'As autumn draws near, the big browns venture into the mainstream, become bolder and even more predatory than normal, always looking for a large easy meal'

Not all Western brown trout rivers require these heavy-water steelhead tactics. Rivers such as the Madison and the Green, while large in their own right, normally don't require fast-sinking line. On rivers such as these, where both riffles and the holding waters tend to be shallower, a wet-tip line on which the first ten feet sinks usually will present a weighted fly deeply enough. Many autumn brown trout anglers find that the wet-tip line or the wet-belly line (on which the first twenty feet of line sinks) are much easier to handle than the full-sinking line or a sinking shooting-taper line. Some anglers feel the floating portion of such lines allows for easier pickup. While this is an important consideration, there is an even better reason to use sinking-tip lines. They give the angler a much better idea of what his sunken fly is doing. By carefully watching the point where the floating portion of the line enters the water you can strike a fish long before he feels the take. Although brown trout are bolder at this time of year, they will often take a fly and reject it without the fisherman feeling any strike.

I learned this lesson one day several autumns ago as I watched from a high bank while Mike Lawson fished below to a pair of large browns in shallow water. As I watched, it was obvious from my vantage point that as long as Lawson's fly was presented at the level of the trout they both became interested in it. Soon one of the fish took the fly in its mouth but spit it out before the line could begin to tighten. Mike could not detect the strike. After several more casts the other fish took—with the same results. When it happened again I shouted "strike" to Lawson and he was promptly into a brown trout that escaped during its fourth jump. Since this observation, Lawson and I have concentrated on our lines by sight rather than feel while streamer fishing. We've been rewarded by an increase in the number of fish landed and a decrease in those maddening short strikes and pulled-out hooks.

Big brown trout are not simpletons, but there are no secrets to catching them. All you must do is endure early and late hours during every kind of weather, use proper presentation, and be in the right place at the right time.

It is no easy sport, but autumn browns can become a lovely addiction if you can stand the pain.

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