

# Big Fish Hunt on the **BIG HOLE**

by TOM WENDELBURG

*These high-sided Mackenzie river boats have become popular with anglers floating the Big Hole. Very stable and maneuverable, they skim the water as the guide moves from pocket to pocket, holding easily against the current to afford the angler several casts instead of one quick one. Knee-locks in the bow add to angler's casting stability. Photos by Tom Wendelburg.*

“HAVEN'T HOOKED A TROUT in a couple hours,” I mumbled under my breath. My mind had wandered away from fishing during that dry spell as we floated and cast bass-size flies to the banks for big brownies on Montana's Big Hole River.

Even as I spoke I was looking down the river at an angler in a black raft with his fly rod bowed into a trout. But it took a second for the picture to register in my mind.

Then I dropped an oar and pointed, “He's got a trout on!” In that second the turbulent river, running bank-full with the spring snow melt from the mountains, twisted our little 10-foot inflated nylon boat sideways.

Dale Burk, seated downstream from me and his 10-year-old son Bruce, behind me, and I in the middle at the oars, all had on life preservers. But a dunking could mean drowning in the flooded river, so I quickly grabbed the oar and swung us parallel again with the white-water bend.

The angler in the black raft 50 yards ahead was doing his own twisting. He passed his fly rod over the ducking heads of two other people in the raft as the trout circled it. Then as the fish ran across river, I heard the wail of the reel above the gurgling waters.

“That's a big fish — let's follow them,” Dale said.

The angler who had captured our attention hung on as the trout ran out the fly line like a clothesline while our boats bounced down from bend to pool.

After covering about a quarter mile, the angler's guide beached their raft on a gravel bar. It was a gamble, for the fish might keep on going downriver.

Our raft skidded onto the bar just upstream from the angler as he climbed out and waded in up to his knees. The fish streaked. It shook its head and yanked away, causing knuckle-knocking backward spins of the reel handle. Finally he pulled back on the fly rod to snub the trout's run, the tackle held, and he was able to turn the fish. By spooling a few turns of line as he lowered the rod tip, then pulling back on the rod again, he had the trout slowly coming his way.

We got our first look at the fish as it porpoised out almost at the angler's feet. Then the leader hissed, cutting water as that brownie that you'd need a yardstick to measure plowed out deep. But the angler played his hand cautiously. Minutes later the tired trout capsized, filling the guide's big net. The smiling, out-of-breath angler strained to lift up the hook-jawed male. It was one of those Montana browns you read about with “spots as big as dimes” — a 26-incher and 6½ pounds.

He said, “That fish hit a dry fly, a #2 Sofa Pillow on 10-pound leader. It sure makes my trip from California to Montana seem short.”

His name was Jack Fishburn, Jr. and he was fishing with his wife, Jean. They had traveled to Montana to float-fish the Big Hole during the June salmon fly hatch, with guide Randy Rathie out of Anglers' Paradise Lodge near Melrose on the river.

“I got a four-pounder an hour ago,” Jean said enthusiastically.

“We've had good luck on the big fish with floating Sofa Pillows,” Jack added.

In larger sizes on no. 2, 4, or 6 long-shank hooks, this popular Western bucktail-type fly has a squirrel-tail wing a couple of inches long. Greased with line paste to float on turbulent waters, it resembles a live salmon fly.

And that's the finger-long stonefly which the Big Hole's lunker browns and rainbows rise to take on the surface for two or three weeks each June. On a good day's float with a guide who knows the river, the trout may, average two

pounds. But you've got to bring back a 5-pounder or larger trophy before a veteran angler of the salmon fly hatch will raise his eyebrows. The best fish I personally know of being landed during the salmon fly hatch on an artificial fly weighed nearly 15 pounds; it hit a wet fly.

I know of no surer time or place for the moderately experienced fly fisherman, or even the novice, to tangle with a trophy trout on a fly in a stream. The fast-water ride for big trout beneath steep canyon walls and along cottonwood-lined meadows with a rugged mountain backdrop draws anglers from around the country to the Big Hole in the southwest



*The giant Big Hole “salmon” flies, actually stoneflies, can be nearly three inches long, and can be picked off your shirt during a hatch and used live as bait if angler wishes (although the author does not admit to such low practices).*

corner of Montana. Even local residents who don't fish much during the year go for lunker trout during the salmon fly hatch.

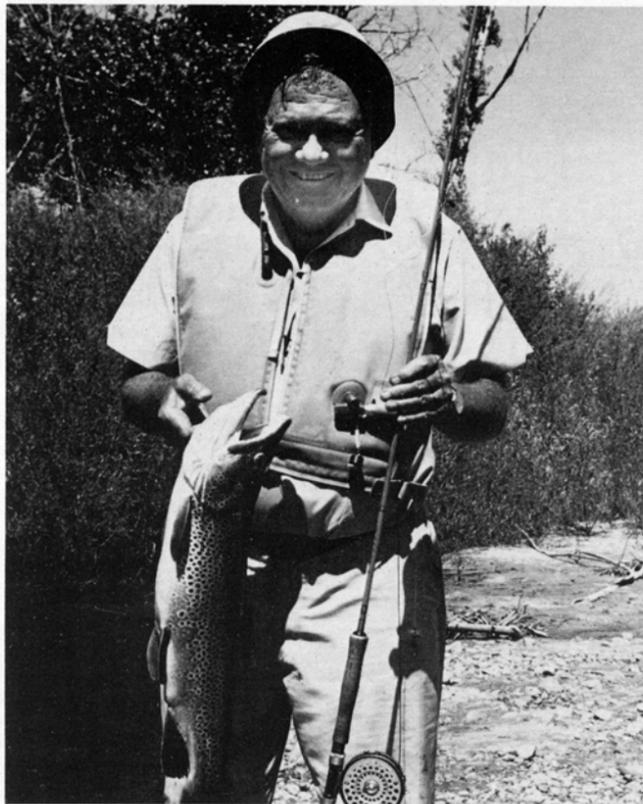
Dale Burk and I were at the time working out of Missoula at the west edge of Montana, a couple hour drive west of the Big Hole.

But our trip had been one of the slowest mornings of fishing that Dale could remember after float-fishing in the salmon fly hatch for a dozen years. Though we had plied the same 12 miles of river as the Fishburn party had, from Divide to a few miles below the fishing-center town of Melrose, we hadn't boated a trout over a pound.

Several miles upriver from the gravel bar where we stood, the salmon flies were soaring in great numbers over the water. Along that five-mile stretch the flies were out in droves. This finger-long fly is the largest of the Western stoneflies. It is clumsy, and many careen onto the water. Dozens of the flies live and mate on a single overhanging willow, and often they fall from their perches onto the surface. Females in flight hover low over the water, dipping their abdomens under to lay eggs. Waiting trout gobble up the flies.

Trout are most likely to feed actively on the surface upstream few miles from where the flies have recently hatched out. On water where we were now, the upstream-moving hatch had already passed through days ago and the trout had

**Tom Wendelburg** has contributed many articles to FFM. An English teacher and a former Montana guide, Tom now “resides” in Wisconsin but “lives” only when he's fishing in Montana, which he does regularly.



California angler Jack Fishburn, Jr., recovering from a case of hysteria triggered by a 6½-pound brownie, a product of the Big Hole salmon hatch.

brush, of course you'll lose a few — and win a few! When a fly snagged on a willow, I pointed the rod tip straight at the hookup so the leader would snap as the raft sped downstream. Otherwise, the fly rod would break or be yanked away.

Time taken to knot on a new fly is precious fishing moments lost, for you cast quickly and hit as many pockets with a fly as you can. So it pays to have a half-dozen or more flies at hand; hook them in my hat band.

AT THE END of our all-day float I was disappointed I hadn't had Sofa Pillows in my hat band, for the big trout didn't want our Bunyan Bugs. Though we floated more than 20 miles downstream to Glen, we hadn't caught a trout of much more than a pound. The long trip had been tiring in the hot sun, and the kamikaze mosquitos were waiting on the banks when we took out. The day was a lesson that whenever big trout are the game, you can strike out, even though the other guy scores heavily.

That evening, a fishing friend of Dale's arrived in our camp on Bureau of Land Management land at the bridge near Divide. He was Buck Collier, from Kalispell in northern Montana, where he fishes for Dolly Varden trout which run to over 15 pounds in the Flathead River. Buck was going to try for his first Big Hole trout.

In the last light of dusk we found salmon fly nymphs crawling out of the river and onto willows. When we got up the next morning with the sun on the water, they had already hatched into adult flies and were flying in great numbers over the river.

Not long after we put in, a trout splashed at my Bunyan Bug along a grassy bank. I set the hook hard, and a 2-pound brownie pounded through a rapids behind my bowed fly rod. On the next cast, I caught a 15-incher.

"Two trout in two casts — that's how we should be catching fish," Dale said.

As we sped down one narrow channel, cold water slogged over the sides and spray showered us. We rocked down into a pool and Buck snapped his Bunyan Bug into an eddy circling off the incoming rapids. In a flash, a 4-pound brownie rolled over it. Before either of us could hit the spot again, we had zipped by.

An hour passed until another big trout splashed at Buck's fly on a flat run along a meadow. Instinctively he cast the fly out right away, and a second trout pushed up a mushroom of water under it. Buck hung on and played it down a couple bends until Dale scooped the 3-pounder into a net.

Not a bad trout on a first float down a river we all agreed.

We beached at Melrose after the three-hour float, and drove back upstream to our camp. Then we had to drive two trucks back to the public landing at Melrose, leave one there, and return again to camp in the other. We would make our last float of the trip, a repeat run, in the afternoon.

As we launched, thunderheads drifted in overhead. A drizzle began, and soon turned to steady rain. We pulled over to shore and put on rain parkas. Just about the time we figured it was the damp ending of the trip, the lunker trout began rising to our Bunyan Bugs through the rain. Six trout, each one of which would have been admired mounted on the wall, punched tire-size rings on the water swirling at Buck's Bug. The one fish he got a hook into tail-walked upstream as our boat bounced away downstream. One fish that I hooked, my biggest during the two-day trip, drilled bottom until the hook pulled out.

It had been an exciting time float fishing in the salmon fly waxed fat feasting on the flies. But the salmon fly hatch signals the trout that another dry fly season is under way again, and an old lunker will still rise — Jack's 6½-pounder took a dry fly, though the salmon flies had died off days ago on this stretch.

Since a salmon fly hatch moves upriver it takes a bit of attention to learn how to fish it. Usually early in June, the nymphs crawl up out of the river near the mouth. They hatch into winged adults on a log, rock or willow, by slowly working loose from their outer shell. Each day the flies appear along bankside foliage a few miles farther upriver.

As the hatch moves progressively upstream, the lowermost flies die off after living a week or two. The progress of a hatch can be likened to a line of slowly falling dominoes. However, in a cold spell of a day or more, a hatch may slow down or seem to become scattered. On a warm night or day, the hatch may shoot upriver several miles. The hatch has been known to run its course up the river in several days, but this usually occurs over several weeks. The flies move up the 51 miles of the blue-ribbon reach of the Big Hole to Divide, and eventually die out some miles upstream by the end of the month or early in July.

"You can't predict what big browns will do next, so we'll keep after them," Dale commented. "One day last June on this stretch we're floating another angler and I caught and released several dozen browns running 2- to 4-pounds. We were using Bunyan Bugs, just like today."

The Bunyan Bug is a stand-by for the salmon fly hatch. This unusual Western fly has a balsa body and bristle wings mimicking a salmon fly with its wings flared, struggling on the surface.

Dale took over the oars, and as we floated on, I snapped a Bunyan Bug under willows until my arm ached, twitching it across pockets to imitate a struggling salmon fly. If you fish a fly where you should in the salmon fly hatch, up under the

hatch, and already I was looking forward to next June and another trip floating the flooded river. When these big trout rise to large flies, sooner or later one would end up in my net.

If you want to make a trip during the salmon fly hatch, remember to bring a stiff 8- or 8½-foot fly rod with real backbone for casting large flies on #2 and 4 hooks. You'll need bucktail types like Sofa Pillow and Bloody Butcher, fished dry or wet; the Bunyan Bug, floated dry; and weighted, Woolly Worms and Marabou streamers, fished wet.

The number-one rule for this fishing is to float the river with a guide or an angler experienced in navigating high water on the Big Hole. The oarsman really controls the fishing by drifting the craft a short way out from the bank so an angler can pop quick casts repeatedly onto desk-sized pockets. When a fish hits suddenly, tossing spray and running in the turbulent water, the 10- or 20-pound leader may

absorb the shock better than the surprised fisherman. While the fish is on the line, at any time the man on the oars must be able to row the boat across a pool so that it floats around the inside of a bend. Rough currents on the outside curve could smash a boat against a snaggy undercut.

The Montana Fish and Game Dept. in Helena, Montana 59601, will send you a list of guides. Float-fishing trips for the salmon fly hatch are also offered by several resorts, including Canyon Creek Guest Ranch near Melrose, and Anglers' Paradise Lodge on the river downstream from town. The Sportsman's Motel in Melrose caters to anglers. Frank's Sport Shop in Twin Bridges at the mouth of the river has tackle. Butte, north of Divide, or Dillon, south of Melrose, are the nearest cities reached via U.S. 91 (Interstate 15). Each city has tackle shops and is little more than a half-hour drive from the Big Hole. Inquire locally about private and Fish and Game Dept. camps on the river. ■

Author pitched tent along Big Hole and used inflatable boat for several days of productive angling with companion.



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