



Illustration by John Pimlott

The Seasonable Angler

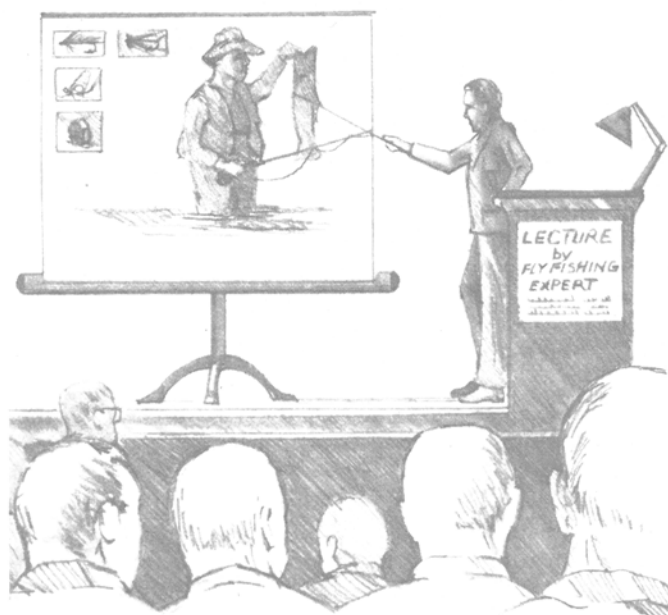
NICK LYONS
Contributing Editor

Experteasing

THERE ARE ADVANTAGES TO BEING KNOWN as a fly-fishing expert. People send you free flies and ask for your opinion of the thorax tie; you get to try out (and keep) marvelous new equipment and to take paid trips to storied rivers where brown trout grow as long as one of Wilt's stilts; other fly fishermen make a happy fuss over your mere presence; you can become a well-paid consultant, a lecturer on the trout-talk beat, an author, a panelist, a clinic instructor. Being an expert massages the wallet and the ego. Some people even make a living at it.

I always wanted to be an expert. It seemed a good kind of creature to be. I especially dreamed of being asked to fish in Argentina, New Zealand, Iceland, Wales. But though it grieves me to do so, I am forced to confess that I am not—and never will be—an expert. Not only am I an amateur but I am about to become an apologist for amateurs. Amateur fly-fishers, that is. For if a man is going to write or act or sing or paint or fix plumbing or carburetors for his supper—or his soul—he had better well try to be the very best he can at it, the best there is. "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with all thy might," saith the preacher—and he is no doubt right.

But *not* about fly fishing?



Illustrations by Bill Elliott

Well, we do it chiefly for recreation, don't we? It is, in the best sense of the word, a pastime, isn't it? Most of us fly fish for the sheer pleasure of it, to heal the sores of work—to refresh, to make whole again. At least that's what I thought until I started trying too hard to become an expert.

Frankly, the problem became this: near and far, as far as two thousand miles from home, friends and perfect strangers—out of a variety of false assumptions (including being *titled* by association)—actually considered me an expert. Alas. There is a time in every man's life when he must see himself for what he is. It is not so. My entomological Latin is rotten and improves not at all; I spend too little time on the stream; I am positively inept, careless; I mismatch the hatch and slap the backcast; despite my most patient patching, even my waders leak.

WITNESS THIS BOGUS EXPERT during a splendid caddis hatch on a popular section of the Yellowstone River in the Park. The little gray whirlers are coming off in clouds. Cutthroats—fifteen, sixteen, seventeen inchers—are lying high in the water, tipping their pretty snouts up to take the duns. Everywhere you look, trout are rising in the clear, riffled flow. Charlie Brooks has brought me; he has seen this before; I have not. My blood, which should be cool, turns to a swift boil. Did I actually froth at the mouth? Maybe. It would have been consonant with the mood. I rummage in my vest and pluck out the only reel I've brought, forgetting until that moment that I'd lent the reel to one of my boys, who'd gotten such a brilliantly complex series of wind knots in it that I'd cut it through a foot below the nail knot. I have no spare, only loose material.

My hands tremble. I look out at the Yellowstone and these cutthroats have gone berserk. There must be a thousand of them. Charlie, who has indeed seen this before, says: "Problem with your leader? Let me tie a new one to that stub." He has—may his leaders never rot!—a special knot for tying thinner-diameter monofilament to twenty-five-pound-test butts. Who'd have thought the problem would ever come up? Who'd have thought that an expert like me would be ignorant enough to come to the river without an adequate leader? Actually, I had been on the verge of trying to push that fat stub through the eye of one of George Bodmer's deadly Colorado Kings, size 16.

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I have come here as Charlie's editor, and though I have made no boasts, I fear he now thinks me the perfect fool.

Well, he gets the thing done, patiently instructing me as he does—though I hear none of it since I'm looking mostly at the river—and I string up the rod, turn and head for the stream, turn again to thank him, trip and nearly bust my rod, and arrive at what must be the closest thing to heaven: a river alive with feeding trout.

Two casts, from the bank, and I've got something: a seventy-foot pine tree. Unlike most of the large things I hook, it does not shake free—nor can I disengage it before Charlie comes over and politely plucks it out for me. The third cast stays, cunningly, out of the trees and hooks me neatly in the earlobe. I have fished for more than thirty-five years and have only heard of this phenomenon. *Play it very nonchalant, Nick*, I think, and say: "Got a clipper, Charlie? I just want to snip this barb. . ."

The man still hasn't rigged his rod—is he human?—so he comes over, looks at the sweet little thing in my ear, and says: "Out here we just pull them straight back out."

"Real-ly?"

"Sure. Only stings for a moment."

"That's the way they do it, is it? Straight back—"

And the thing is out.

Though these huge cutthroats are rising no more than a foot from shore, in the little eddies beside our bank, in the first riffles, I decide to wade out. Perhaps it's safer out there. But the current is stronger than it looked and naturally I have not replaced my worn felts this year; soon I'm

safely stuck between two rocks, there for the afternoon, or longer, and flailing away. When I manage to snag a few of these generous fish, and see that Charlie has caught a few and put down his rod, I feel much more comfortable. He's a friend, after all, not a judge. But turning toward the bank after releasing a fish, I notice that Charlie is now talking to several fishermen. They begin to watch me intently—and promptly everything goes wrong again. My line tangles in my net; I try to take a step and nearly keel over in the current. Then I try an especially long cast and the line does not come forward after the backcast: I have hooked another cutthroat—on the slap, as it were—and try desperately to pretend I'd fished it that way. Do they know? Do they see the blood on my ear? Did one of them have a camera?

SO MUCH FOR WOULD-BE EXPERTS, who had once the longing but never the hand. What about the real thing?

A friend of mine once spotted—far downriver on some choice club water in the East—a genuine, *bona fide* Famous Expert. From coast to coast the bards sang of this man's exploits in the white-wine-tinted glides. So my friend relinquished a perfectly good evening of fishing and, like a sleuth or secret agent, crept into the bushes and took up his surveillance. It might prove more valuable than any book he'd ever read to watch this Expert in action—to see his method of approach, the way he cast a fly and where, to chart his success.

Anyway, he was curious as all hell.

He'd heard a great deal about this Expert. We all have.

So he parked himself uncomfortably behind the bushes and cravenly watched as The Expert came around

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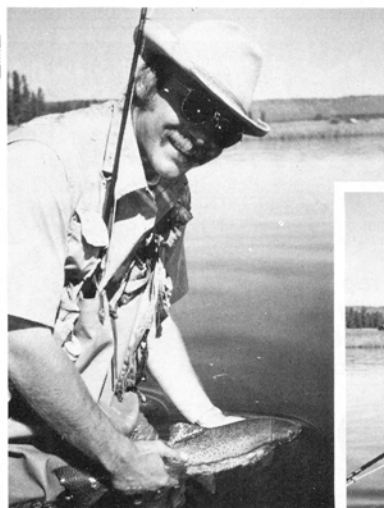
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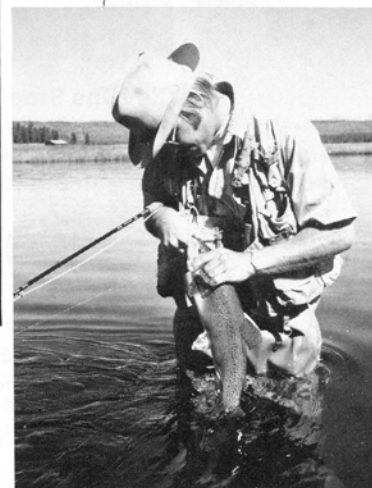
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the bend, surveyed the long stretch of water before him, dipped thoughtfully into a box of flies, chose his pattern, and began to fish. His casts were wondrously smooth; he laid the line out long and like a feather, probing the pockets and riffles deftly.

At first he caught no fish. My friend could not see whether they were rising but he knew this stretch, knew it contained good fish, knew that on a June evening the browns should be rising to sulphurs. Nothing. The man pricked not one fish.

Then The Expert changed his fly. *Now*, thought my friend, *we'll see some action*.

Again the line went out like a dream, and the skilled practitioner plied his art for a hundred more slow yards of gorgeous water. Nothing. Nothing even unto the dark.

It had been a memorable performance, though, and my friend was glad he'd watched. Did it matter that the man had caught no fish? Not really. Not at all. Isn't one of the finest books of angling memoirs, by that grand legendary sparsely hackled angler, called *Fishless Days*? In it, the author catches precisely two barely legal fish. The Expert had caught no fish, which did little more than affirm what we all know: sometimes they won't be caught.

Back at the lodge, where the men gathered to swap flies and lies, someone asked The Expert how many fish he'd caught that evening. Suddenly the chatter stopped. Not a glass clinked. Everyone, including my friend, turned to the famous man. Without a second's hesitation, The Expert said: "Thirty-two."

Why?

Why did he feel compelled to tell such an outrageous stretcher? Would it have been so dreadful to say, "Nothing" or "Not one" or "Skunked, most magnificently skunked?" I don't think so. In fact, I can imagine that he would have given the others, who'd all taken a few that night, much pleasure to think they were a little more gifted than they'd thought. And would The Expert's reputation have been diminished? Not by the diameter of a 7X leader point.

And why did another expert I know feel compelled to have a local fish-hawk catch and ice up some huge West-

ern browns whole—so when he got out there he could hold the fish up and get his picture taken with them for the magazines?

I happen to know and like and admire these men, though I've fished with neither of them. I expect, sadly, that they were locked in by their expertise. No one was less free. They were condemned, like G. E. M. Skues's ill-fated Mr. Theodore Castwell, *always* to catch fish. What hell. And they had to do it: they weren't entitled to any more fishless days. What a pity! For aren't those days precisely what hook us most? Don't we remember most the big fish that we've lost, the days when the sweet mysteries of the river and its inhabitants elude even our most sophisticated angling?

Or perhaps it was not the cunning of the trout that made us fishless, but that we failed: our timing was off, we were impatient, we missed our chances. What then? Twenty years in the classroom have taught me at least this: we often learn most from failure, though few people have the heart to see this. Why should we hide our failures, or fear them? They are the emblems of our humanity, beacons to what we yet might be.

AH, DEAR ME. I PREACH TOO MUCH. Isn't it all an attempt to justify my own admitted failings—to worm out of the embarrassment of putting flies in my ear and nearly falling on my assumptions?

Probably.

But at least if I am condemned *not* to catch fish, I am also *free* not to catch them, too.

Still, there are times, like now, when the season is hot upon us, when I would like to get just a little more of the hundreds of miles of drag-free float the experts promise us; when I would like to know, for sure, whether the thorax tie will work best for a Hendrickson imitation; when I am more than a little curious about what the trout really sees; when I long for a bit of professional coaching and wish I could tie flies along the banks of a stream, in my fingers.

Like all of us, there are times when I would like to know just a little bit more. —

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