

Salvation on the Yellowstone

Field Editor Gary LaFontaine and his companions in angling stream-hop the tricky waters of Montana to top their day by striking the mother lode on the Yellowstone.

Gary LaFontaine

AT THE AIRPORT THE HEAT-SPELL carried the press of the humidity, with only a few wisps of cloud scattered high in the sky. I explained the weather to Ken and Steve Parkany as I helped pile baggage into my motor home, "It's a topper to the drought."

We drove to the Clark Fork near Missoula, to a favorite stretch of flat water that I called "Bad-Odds Alley," and the river under the cliffs was a languid puddle, devoid of feeding fish where normally V-formations of cruising rainbows and browns spattered the surface with rises to emerging mayflies. Steve judged the water right, "Doesn't look like it's worth fishing."

"Not now. Not this season," I said.

For most of a winter I teased Ken and Steve with accounts of Montana angling, promising great fly fishing for their first visit to the West. I wrote, "The snow-melt runs mud in the rivers during a normal year until mid-July, so August 9 is

nearly perfect for arrival — and last year at that date we fished the Clark's Fork during the tizzy of the Spruce Moth fall, with trout of 10 pounds swirling the surface for the drifting moths."

But now no trout were swirling in the Clark's Fork on August 9 and much of the mountain region in 1973 was in the midst of the lowest stream levels in recorded history — a fluke of fate to coincide with the trip, to make me as the self-appointed guide slightly desperate.

With vacation plans to be firmed and families to be settled, the dates of the trip were arranged early in the year. Now we were forced to adapt to the weather, and Ken and Steve agreed, "Let's go where you think is best."

"Then let's move."

Ken added, "You know, we'd be happy just to be able to say that we fished some of these famous rivers."

They donned hats for the trip. Ken put on a floppy white



LaFontaine's party at sunset on the Yellowstone's Buffalo Ford. Photos by author.

beach shade, his big eyes peering upwards from under the collapsing brim. Steve put on a mottled brown duck cap, and made a doubtful observation, "My hat has class."

I moaned, "Oh, my God."

"We're going to buy you a hat," Ken said to me. "We don't want you to embarrass us among the locals."

With the evening shadows touching Rock Creek, we drove the motor home up the dirt road at the highway exit. The stream twisted with the mountains and we wound slowly to the Valley of the Moons. We parked at the bridge and studied the water; the stream not in prime shape either, but not sucked up by irrigation like the Clark's Fork.

At a long and flat panning of water the surface was bubbled with a furious rise of fish, and a man and a boy cast flies over the pool as I circled behind them. Far enough above the two anglers I placed a few casts, and a whitefish nailed the fly to confirm the suspicion that the pool was a ground for schools of whitefish.

I left quickly, seeking trout, seeking the bouncing riffle at the inflow shelf, and I swung a #10 Plain Jane to swim across the patches of darker water. The fly played for only a moment in the streak, and a small rainbow hit the streamer to hang solid. The hook buried itself deep in the throat, but I worked it loose carefully to release the fish.

The light was dim, with the fish stacked at the spot for a spree of feeding, and another rainbow grabbed the fly. The

jumping trout of 15 inches forced the struggle into the flat water. The fish tail-walked the width of the stream, drawing the attention of the other anglers with the commotion. I pressed the fish, bulling it from the current to fight in the shallows. I beached it on the gravel.

The trout were striking with a sense of determination, engulfing the realistic little marabou fooler with intent. The next trout was hooked in the slot of the gills, the 13-inch rainbow bleeding badly, and I broke the neck to kill it. I released another rainbow, and then a final trout took the fly too deep.

I stopped casting, not wishing to kill any more trout, and I walked downstream. Steve was fishing in the whitefish glory-hole above the man and the boy. He moved up to me and nodded towards the man, "That guy, he pulled in a whitefish and he was pretty mad. He told me, 'That's the biggest trout in this stream.'"

I handed Steve samples of the Plain Jane; the variation on the Marabou Muddler a subdued application of the attractive marabou fibers, a fly that might catch fish in the pool. "Browns are laying under the whitefish, but he's flogging the top and if he's waiting for them to come up to commit suicide, he won't see a trout for a while."

We met Ken at the bridge, where he stayed to cast and where he nabbed rainbows at the lip of the pool. The fish hung at the edge gathering random fare from the surface,

and a Royal Trude lured strikes. He grinned, "What do you mean, this isn't good fishing?"

"Maybe I'm spoiled," I admitted.

The three of us sat with legs dangling over the edge of the bridge, multiple moon-images reflected from the water onto the face of the cliff. The water purred and gurgled against the stone of the bank. Ken and Steve raved in turn about the rush of beauty, as I nodded in agreement and basked with a mirrored pride for the state.

Ken mused, "It's bigger than many streams called rivers in the East, and there's over fifty miles of it."

We climbed into the motor home, leaving to find our campsite. I added an opinion, "Maybe the drought makes some of the problems seem worse, but we fight a battle for quality water and it seems like we're always losing a little bit more of it."

Rock Creek was in mediocre condition, but they were honed on the challenge of eastern fishing; Ken on fine streams like the Natchaug and the Jeremy's in Connecticut and Steve on fine streams like the Kettle and the Neshannock in Pennsylvania. They were not going to believe that this was poor fishing. Angling expectations were based on a more demanding set of experiences.

Any chance to believe was gone the next morning, as they left early with the dawn and I stayed under covers to preserve the western tradition of never lifting a fly rod before full-sun. Ken returned to wake me, holding a rainbow of over 15 inches caught on a Dark Cahill wet, ranting with

garbled muttering about a bigger rainbow, "... just took off for the Continental Divide — jump, jump, run and gone — and he's probably still going."

The sun was climbing, "Big?"

"At least 18 inches."

"Fair."

"No, unbelievable."

We found Steve along the stream, casting at the spot where he caught five rainbows. We talked while Ken waded up and began fishing. I harassed both of them for breaking area custom. "All right, let's see how you wake up these early trout."

Ken cast the fly with a short and accurate line upstream. Mending to keep the float on a dead drift, he meticulously probed each pocket of still water in the riffle. He set the hook, "Yubba dubba doo!"

It was difficult to reconcile the aesthetics of angling with the whoop that sent ducks honking south, moose crashing through the underbrush, and grizzlies scampering up pine trees, but as I laughed I complimented the upstream technique, "Nice, real nice."

The fact that they were both fine fly fishermen, ready to adapt, diminished any problems. As long as the water was decent, I did not need to worry about either of them catching trout. "Okay. Make a choice. Stay here or move on?"

"For better or worse?"

After a lingering stare at Rock Creek, they decided, "Let's move."

A FINE DUST SIFTED INTO THE CLOSED WINDOWS OF the motor home. We guzzled cans of soda and our flow of talk tapered off to a comfortable silence as we swayed and nodded with the truck. The radio played, a familiar commercial repeating the drum for tourism, "... invite a friend to Montana. Fish, hunt, ski in beautiful Montana."

We popped to life as we entered the town of Twin Bridges, a cluster of wood frame and stone buildings in the river valley. I pointed out the turn off, "The Big Hole is a few miles out of town that way."

"When was the last time you fished it?"

"Three years ago I fished it a lot."

"Good?"

"Great! And for me, a dub's paradise. Usually I fished at the bridge and never moved. In the evening I hit rainbows and browns of one to two pounds steady."

After a wasted day on the road they were ready to fish, "Beautiful."

As we crossed town we stopped to look at the Beaverhead, and the river was a flush of mud water that rollicked against the limits of the bank. I answered a question, "Irrigation water."

"What a mess."

We drove on to the Big Hole. We rattled across the plank-ing of the bridge, peering unbelieving at a shrunken remnant of water. A pittance flow remained, faced by stretches of bleached rock on each side. A trickle snaked from puddle to puddle, water seemingly lost in the jumble of the stone bed. Quiet wash spread in shallow flats at the bottoms of the deepest depressions. More questions, "How? Why?"

The radio touted the official 1973 state campaign, "Invite a friend to Montana."

I asked the questions, "How? Why?"

We leaned at the bridge railing, staring at a tragic skeleton of a river that was once considered the greatest rainbow trout stream in America. On the flat we saw the rises of stranded trout, the dimples bunched over the center slot in the bed. We decided to cast. Steve summed up the feeling, "Let's pay our respects."

We trooped to the edge of the pool. Ken skimmed the water to gather the fallen spinners and he handed me a #22 Tricorythodes no-hackle fly to match the predominant insect. I placed the cast in front of a string of rises, and with the sip of the trout I set the hook. I landed the first 10-inch rainbow, and Ken and I quickly caught the small rainbows and browns, but we were discouraged with the pathetic experience of bathtub trout.

We walked gingerly on the unstable rubble, following Steve down the valley. "You know, there's no law in Montana to keep the river from being drawn entirely."

"The ruin of a river is legal?"

"Yes, legal. The river is wasted by the diversion projects. Bottom gravel is bull dozed into a wing across the current and the river is washed into a canal and onto the fields."

"It's a shame. It's more than a shame."

"I can't believe it happened, though."

Steve was teasing a brown with the grey Plain Jane, retrieving the fly with a skipping jerk, and the brown hopped in pursuit. With a reflex tripped too fast, Steve struck and pulled the fly from the mouth of the fish. We ribbed, "Just teaching the trout that old Steve is too fast."

I ambled alone to further pools, watching furtive fish swim in water cages. I did not cast, because catching trout was not important. It was not the lack of fish that spoiled the day and tainted the week, but it was the desecration of a shrine. It was the violation of a heritage. It was the dream memory of a



Ken Parkany displays a beauty from Rock Creek.

Still productive, The Big Hole bears the burden of its recent depredations.



ruin projecting the unthinkable possibility to all the trout streams of Montana.

I perched on a rock near the line of forest trees, surveying the dried bed and estimating the extent of damage to insect and fish population. I calculated a seventy percent loss of insect life through habitat reduction alone, and more if high water temperature or low oxygen content added to the kill. I figured the mortality rate of the trout, not as drastic if the fish survived temperature rise and oxygen depletion in the pool-traps until the end of the irrigation season, increased nevertheless by disease susceptibility, stress exhaustion, and animal and bird predation due to the unnatural overcrowding.

We met back at the motor home and cancelled plans to stay in Twin Bridges. In the moon-shaded dark a brood of young foxes scampered down the dirt road in front of the headlights. A doe peered stiffly into the beams. Moths fluttered erratically in the tunnels of light. We turned onto the highway and left the river to the animals and the publicists.

I fingered a state brochure that contained pictures of a brim-full Big Hole, the river featured along with the other Blue Ribbon waters. "I'm sorry I brought you here. I should have checked it out last week."

We were pensive. Steve asked, "Will the river recover next year?"

I answered honestly, "I don't know."

AT NIGHT THE TOWN OF WEST YELLOWSTONE was a splurge of tinsel and neon light, a boom-camp catering to the flush of summer visitors. The tourists filtered through the stores, straggling on the board walk from one cubby-hole hut to another to purchase trinkets of remembrance. Music lured patrons to each bar, with the country/western lament a muddled cacophony blending in the street air. The fly fishermen hopped among the bevy of fine fly shops in the central area.

After a day and a half of casting split between Odell Creek and the Madison River, we were relaxing in the evening. We gathered information as we talked with Pat Barnes in his shop. "Try the Yellowstone at Buffalo Ford," he suggested. "Put the fly in the water, and there's no way to keep from catching fish. It's that good."

As Pat described schools of trout hovering in the current and billows of insects bursting in surges from the water, the words confirmed the vision of plenty that I planted in the minds of Ken and Steve with my letters — and they understood the promise that placed the value more on the essence of purity. "We've found pretty good fishing so far," I added, "but not great."

Pat smiled, "The Yellowstone is great."

I nodded at Steve and Ken, who still doubted the statements, "Just once, I want us to hit a river at the peak."

Pat recommended the Humpy as a prime fly and we purchased a supply in the good sizes. He sketched a map of the Ford, "It might be crowded with fly fishermen on the road side, but you can wade across the river like this," he dotted out a path, "and be alone on the far bank." (Since the stream bed may change slightly each season, a fly fisherman interested in crossing the Ford should check with the area fly shops for the latest information.)

The next morning we wound through Yellowstone Park and found the Buffalo Ford, the section of the river regulated as a no-kill area for the easily accessible stretch paralleling the road. The river flowed through sloping meadows that slid down from the crimp of the mountains, the water pausing above the islands in a broad slick before rumbling into a spread of riffle.

Too anxious to not cast, we began to fish from the near shore. Ken plumbed a deep swell with a Muddler, and nailed the first cutthroat. He held up the 14-inch trout, and he yelled for Steve, "Already! Look at this."

Steve lumbered down the shoreline, stopping to puff before speaking, "Already?"

I spotted a rise in the chop of mid-river and waded chest high. The current was strong and I backed away as I tottered. Still deep in the flow, I stretched a cast to reach the trout and missed hits on the Humpy. I groaned, since I knew that the minute variations of current snaked the line into a sloppy "S."

The long cast is too often a lazy substitute for proper approach. The short cast is preferable, and the opposite shore offered a closer presentation to the rises. I worked out into the river, where the path was a shallow ridge, and it was easy wading even in the swift water until I turned past the island. At the middle of the riffle the current pushed against my waist, and the loose stones pulled in tiny swirls from under my feet to slide me toward the downstream hole. I dug with quick steps to escape the shove, and I slogged free toward the bank.

At the rush of water under the slick the buoyant Humpy bobbed, and as I stepped and cast the fly took three cutthroats of 16 inches. I called across with jubilant shouts, lifting the water to let it sift through my fingers like gold

dust, and an 18-inch fish belted the unattended Humpy.

A trench divided the two sides of the river below the slick, and while I fished dry flies Ken drifted a Muddler down into the slot from his side. He bellowed with sporadic moans of anguish, "Oh, no. Oh, no."

"What?"

"How come you didn't tell me not to use a 5X tippet on a downstream strike? I just busted off four fish in a row."

"5X?" I wafted an audible cackle across the water, "That'll teach you dudes to have some respect for a western trout."

I noted a rise alongside a rock that poked from the chop. The fish sucked in a fluttering grey Caddis and I cast the Humpy, but a dozen floats with the fly were ignored. The silhouette of the pattern was wrong, with the persistent refusal indicating a modicum of selectivity by the cutthroat, and to match the natural I picked out a #14 Henryville. The fish gathered one more sample of the real insect, and then it slashed at the Henryville. With the set of the hook the trout rolled and exposed the massive length of back. It bucked for the trench and I trotted along the shore to follow, the click of the light drag a continuous buzz. We played the test of tug and swirl and with fresh power the cutthroat ranged the deep slot.

The pliant glass bend wore on the fish, but for fifteen minutes the struggle carried in the current of the river. I answered a question from Ken, "No choice. He's playing me."

When the circling surges petered out and the cutthroat wallowed over the gravel, I boosted the fish onto land with a scoop of the foot. I held the prize while Ken filmed a movie. The trout was thick and deep in the belly, a husky native in excellent condition, and the camera recorded the process of reviving the brute.

I waded back across the river and we met together on the bank. "When you lifted him," Ken said, "he hung all the way down to your waist."

We measured the marked length on my rod. "Just a shade under 22 inches."

We all moved to the far shore. Cars parked and fly fishermen embarked to flog the near water, but no one except us forded the river. The long expanse of mild riffle was

Author LaFontaine surveys some likely water on the Yellowstone



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an abundant fishery, and it was covered by the three of us alone, spread along the ¼ mile of slope casting to sporadic rises.

The trout responded readily to a dry fly throughout the early afternoon, as they hit an assortment of western fast-water specialties: Humpy, Royal Trude, Grizzly Wulff, Renegade, Irristable. Ken learned quickly to spot the big flies in the creases of the flow, to riffle pop the pockets and eddies of slower water. He cast to a visible swirl, and as he hooked the fish he back-pedaled to land and trailed the run. He held the rod high and lightly thumbed the reel, waving us to follow the flight. He grinned and cautiously bowed to the trout's roll, "Big one."

We offered unneeded advice, "Easy."

When he netted the 19-inch fish we whooped, "The biggest trout I ever caught!"

I pointed Steve back out to the river, "It's your turn for a big one."

Steve fished skillfully, catching many of the cutthroat in the 14 to 16-inch range, but the best trout was shy of a 17-inch Pennsylvania brown of the previous summer, and a "biggest" fish hid somewhere in the river. As we waded the Ford to leave, the first of a pale grey-winged dun escaped from the surface, and along the riffle more insects popped free to wheel in the air. Birds arrived to dive for the mayflies. Fish poked the water with rises. We glanced back at the flurry, and vowed to be there the following evening. "Tomorrow night, Steve."

The next morning we fished the delightful Gibbon, but in the afternoon we returned to Buffalo Ford. We crossed and met another angler wading back. "How is it?"

"It's slowed down."

"Dry flies?"

"All day."

Ken and I fished sunken patterns, but Steve cast a #14 Light Cahill to match the body color of the evening dun and he waited for the naturals. He caught an occasional trout, while we caught more on the bucktails and nymphs that we cast, but suddenly he hooked fish and we fell to dead-action. No mayflies showed on the surface, but he landed four fish in quick succession.

We sat on shore, watching the powerful flex of the rod as Steve cast, and he struck another fish. We joked, "It's the hat."

He splashed to the beach, "This one feels bigger." The cutthroat sizzled a spanking run, and Steve walked until he was below the hold. He tipped with the side-pull, triggering another streak. He dogged the strong trout, and he grinned and sweated until the fish was near. Ken netted it, and we measured. "That's it — 18 inches."

Steve looked like he wanted to kiss the fish, the puff-cheeked roundness of his cherubic face beaming. "He fought!"

Together we fished up the long riffle to the crossing point. Isolated on the spit of sand, the water a dark glaze in the fade of last light, we lingered and warned each other at odd moments, "It's getting dark. We'd better go."

Three fish in a V-set rose below, and I popped a cast to the nose of the lead trout; a pile of slack paying the fly out, a positive curve off the left-hand throw curling the Hendrickson ahead of the leader. Too perfect, too easy to be anything but luck, and I chuckled. The cutthroat hit and Steve laughed with me, "Hey."

"When you're hot, . . ."

Ken and Steve both struck fish, and in the battle the trout crossed to leave the rods in a strained arch. "I'm under, I'm

under," Ken called as he ran to the point of the bar.

With all fish landed, each of us echoed the ultimatum, "Let's go."

We waded and felt with probing feet for the ridge of gravel. Blind men in a row, we hesitated in the middle of the cross to watch the spectacle of the mayflies hoarding the wide patches of sky. Amidst slurps of trout, with the fly rods cradled idly, we pecked for the obscure path. We slid past the scoop of the deep hole and plunged up the ascent.

Secure on the bank, we remained to watch the progress of the emergence and the glut of the rising fish. "At moments they can all be like this; Clark Fork, Rock Creek, Madison, South Fork of the Flathead."

"It was everything that was promised."

The fly fisherman in search of trout is a trusting soul, willing to tramp off to far corners. The trout are always bigger, and the waters are always more bountiful in the far away places. With no problems to beset the quality of the angling, at least there are dreams to foster the belief, and if at rare moments the angling dreams end true, then there is enough reality to nurture the hope. ■

Plain Jane (variation on the Marabou Muddler):

Favorite colors; wing and tail matching — Brown, Grey, Dark Green, or Black

Thread: Grey

Hook: 3X long, sizes 10, 12, 14

Wing: A sparse application of marabou fibers, only as long as the bend of the hook.

Body: Eggshell white wool yarn

Tail: A thick bunch of marabou fibers, cut short to a ¼ inch extension beyond the bend of the hook.

Head: Natural grey deer body hair, spun and clipped shaggy.

The standard Marabou Muddler with the tinsel chenille body and the flare of marabou is often a highly effective fly. It excites the trout to a frenzy, but often a striking fish will only nip at, jump over, or tail-slap the fly. And at times under clear water conditions where the fish look closely at the flashy Marabou, it is not an effective pattern.

To utilize the lure of marabou in conjunction with the deer hair head in an imitator pattern, I tied the subtle variation. In testing on clear water streams it proved special, and in tough streams it caught finicky trout. At spots like the Musconetcong of New Jersey with Fred Rapp, the Mad of Ohio with John Simms, and the upper Snake of Wyoming with Stan Bradshaw it produced impressive results.

During the trip with Ken and Steve, we observed the smashing strikes of the trout. In the simplicity of the form the Variation seemed to pose both as an attractor and as an imitator. It elicited an attack intended to kill, but to draw the fish from a distance it also excited the trout beyond the predator role.

Fly Fisherman



MID-SEASON ANGLING / 1974

Volume Five • Number Six

Price \$1.00

THE MAGAZINE FOR THE COMPLETE ANGLER

