

Field Notes

by N.J. Richardson

Big Sky on Ice

FROM THE MOMENT I TOLD my overheated city friends that I was off to Montana for some winter fishing, I could see that they thought I was crazy. “Trout don’t take flies in the winter,” some said, rolling their eyes and whistling as they twirled their fingers round their temples. “There *are* no flies in winter!”

Of course, even if you’ve never cast a line in winter you likely know that trout feed all year round, and that hardy folk keep catching them. But these don’t tend to be the same folk as sit beside tropical pools and get their vicarious thrills from the latest Scott Turow novel. The much bigger question in *my* mind, then, was whether winter anglers had *fun* catching them—and whether being up to my gonads in ice—cold water would, in fact, be tolerable.

Cold Comforts

A few weeks later it was time to find out, as I stood by the side of Route 287 in the Gallatin National Forest, a few miles downstream of Hebgen Lake, staring down over a crisp white snowbank at the Madison River. To get here we’d driven through steady snow, halting for passing buffalo, from our comfortable log cabin digs at Big Sky’s Lone Mountain Ranch. On the way, we’d wondered if we’d actually be able to fish when we arrived.

Brian Kimmel, one of our guides, was behind the wheel, and he stressed that the point of fishing was to have fun and stay safe, and that there was no shame in stopping when those conditions were no longer satisfied. Gary Lewis, the other guide with our party, has been guiding in Montana and Idaho since 1963 and winter fishing for as long as anyone. He has wise and pronounced views on how to go about it. “Winter fishing has become

Winter fishing in Big Sky Country can produce the same great trout that Montana is famous for, but without the crowds of other anglers.

Southwestern Montana is nearly empty in winter, but the trout—and the trout fishing—are still going strong.

a lot safer and more enjoyable over the years,” he told me, “as equipment has improved. But the risks are always there.” He illustrated his point with a story.

“I and another fellow were down at

the river one day in the middle of winter, getting ready to fish,” he said, “when a man drove up alone, parked and headed right off into the river. He obviously had a favorite spot and was going right to it. So he waded quickly across the stream until he reached a rock ledge. As he stood on the ledge, his feet slipped from under him on the ice and he landed with a loud crack on the back of his head. He was out cold—didn’t move. Well, the two of us managed to get him out. But what if we hadn’t been there?”

In any case, now that we’d actually arrived, the “fishiness” of the black water below us was almost palpable, in spite of continually falling snow. So we tottered hastily back to the cars and eagerly began the business of thrusting long-johned legs into waders and wrapping ourselves



DONNIE SEXTON, TRAVEL MONTANA

in multiple layers of ridiculously technical clothing.

Not that it was so easy actually to get into the river. The snow was four feet deep, with a deceptive crust that with each step briefly raised one's hopes and then collapsed them. That translated, at the water's edge, into a sheer four-foot snow cliff on top of the bank's normal height, which meant that the number of safe entry points into the stream was limited and the more undignified the approach, the safer. Later, getting out again would make strenuous demands on flabby muscles. Gary, ever mindful of safety, carried a rope with him to make this easier, and that day that rope was used.

But once actually in the water, I was surprised at how normal it felt. We fished comfortably without gloves—at least until we dipped our hands to handle a fish, when a brutal chill knifed to the marrow our bones. This was certainly the first time I had ever had to chip ice off my rod guides every few casts!

Agony and Ecstasy

Brian set me up with a small purple San Juan Worm and a Copper John on a dropper, and we were off. The Madison was, indeed, fishy that day and didn't keep us waiting long to prove it. But the first time I tightened the line and felt something at the other end, I was surprised all the same. Not only had I been, I think, unconvinced that I really *could* catch fish in a blizzard, but—and what an appalling confession from a contributor to this magazine!—I'd fished for over forty years without even *once* successfully presenting a nymph on a dead drift. (As you stagger back in shock, I shall blame it squarely on my mother: She'd tried upstream nymphing once and failed. Her forcefully expressed opinions on its difficulty drained my confidence, confirming the wisdom of the poet Philip Larkin's immortal opening lines: *They f*** you up, your mum and dad / They may not mean to, but they do.*) Now, then, for the first time ever, I had hooked a fish on a dead-drifted nymph, and on a snowy day in the Rockies to boot.

If You Go

The local airport for Big Sky is Bozeman, which is a little less than an hour to the north. Big Sky is a year-round destination, so apart from Lone Mountain Ranch, there is an abundance of lodging in the area to suit virtually every budget.

The Big Sky area itself makes an excellent center for fishing. It's right on the Gallatin, while the spring creeks of Paradise Valley and the Montana sections of the Madison (those in Yellowstone Park are closed during winter) are approximately TK hours away in opposite directions. There are a number of guides in the Big Sky area, all ready and willing to dress warmly and do everything they can to get you into a fish. Most, if not all, will rent equipment—handy if you are visiting Big Sky primarily to ski, but would like to fit in a day or two of fishing, without having to carry paraphernalia for two sports. You don't need to fish with a guide, but if you have no experience of winter fishing, you should seriously consider doing so, at least part of the time. And do not even think about going out alone.

LODGING AND INFORMATION

Big Sky Chamber of Commerce-1-800-943-4111; www.bigskychamber.com.

GUIDES AND LODGES

Lone Mountain Ranch-(406) 995-4644; www.lmranch.com.

East Slope Anglers-(406) 995-4369/ 1-888-359-3974; www.eastslopeanglers.com.

Gallatin Riverguides-1-888-707-1505; www.montanaflyfishing.com.

Wild Trout Outfitters, Inc.-1-800-423-4742; www.wildtroutoutfitters.com.

Caché Creek Outfitters-(406) 995-3888; www.cachecreekoutfitters.com.

—N. R.

As I did so, Brian looked out across the water, muttered a barely perceptible expletive—for which he spent the rest of the day apologizing—and rushed for the net he'd left on the bank. "Let's go," he said as he returned, staring meaningfully at the backing that now stretched out into the distance from the tip of my rod. He pointed to a snow bank, 150 yards or more downstream through the falling flakes. "If we land this it'll be down there!"

Although the Madison in March was rimmed with more snow than it had seen in years, it was hardly more treacherous wading than at any other time. But the miseries of a dunking, when the water's cold and the air around it even colder, weigh heavily on the minds of soft, middle-aged wading folk. I floundered nervously in Brian's wake as he surged downstream and could hardly have blamed him if he'd grabbed the rod from my hand and charged off alone. Then, me being the kind of half-baked fisherman I am, I lessened tension on the line for a second, the fish slipped off, and Brian let out a laugh that was the only *possible* reaction of a good natured man to the

incompetence of his paying charge.

That was the first of many fish that we came in contact with over the next few hours. We landed some, some got off, and I missed plenty. None was as big, alas, as the one that got away, but we saw some extraordinarily beautiful creatures—rainbows that vividly proclaimed in the steely light the origins of their vibrant name.

The San Juan Worm and Copper John were a productive combination, one that I carried on fishing along the river's bottom for the rest of the day. Most of the time it was the San Juan Worm that did the job.

Winter Spring Creek

The day before, I had *not* been fishing with a San Juan Worm. Perhaps it would have helped if I had, but I doubt it. It was a perfect reminder of how, in any season, on any water, a skunking can be just around the corner—but also how other pleasures can make up for it. We were, perhaps, a bit unlucky to fish DePuy's Spring Creek when there was no sign of a hatch coming off, as this unquestionably superb private fishery emerges from the

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Snow should not stop you from fishing, but it does present challenges to getting on and off the water safely.

ground at a steady 55 degrees all year round and stays close to that all the way to its outflow into the Yellowstone. Hatches can occur at any time, and dry-fly fishing for wild rainbows, browns and cutthroats—some of which are of prodigious size—is a possibility even in what would seem the most unlikely weather. But sometimes, of course, they disappoint, and this was such a day.

DePuy's Spring Creek runs through a working sheep farm in Paradise Valley, just south of Livingston, Montana. Private it may be, but except in the sense that it limits the number of rods to 16 at any one time, it is not exclusive. We paid the daily fee—in winter a bargain at \$40—in the vividly carpeted central hall of the plantation-style ranch house. From there, we drove downstream over fresh snow (it had stopped just as we arrived) to a creek-side hut with a pot-bellied stove that Brian quickly loaded with logs and set to work.

Directly beneath the hut, rainbows were finning visibly in a shallow run. They did not, alas, prove easy to catch—something that they had in common that day with all the other fish in the creek. With no hatches coming off and limited success with streamers and nymphs, this was tougher fishing than we were to have the next day on the Madison, but it had its visual compensations. The snow that had just stopped falling had coated the

trees thickly, and as the clouds gave way to sun, an already spectacular scene became moreso as a pair of trumpeter swans slipped down the stream toward us, white as the snow itself against the creek's dark water.

Other Pleasures

The fisheries of southwestern Montana need no introduction. The Madison, Gallatin and Yellowstone are, to many people—and thanks to Hollywood, not just to anglers—the classic western trout waters. They roll through wild and majestic scenery, sure enough, and are chock full of large and powerful wild trout, but fishing them would hardly, in the regular course of events, qualify for special coverage. Fishing them in winter, though, does have some extra twists.

For one, the rivers are deserted and,

photo in scanning


note 1

NICHOLAS RICHARDSON

The author shows off a Madison River rainbow that fell for a dead-drifted San Juan Worm.

Hatches and Flies

The possibility of dry fly fishing—provided that your eyesight is capable of following a size 20 or 22 midge pattern—is always there on warmer days on both the Madison and the spring creeks, even in the depths of winter. By the time we were there, in mid-March, things had even picked up a bit, and anglers on DePuy's had reported decent hatches of blue-winged olives. But most of the winter action, unsurprisingly, comes underwater. Most trout are taken on small nymphs—Pheasant Tails, Copper Johns, Hare's Ears—fished on a dead drift, with smaller Woolly Buggers and San Juan Worms in various colors making a handy contribution, as well. In the spring creeks, the greater fertility of the water and the copious weed beds add scuds and sow bugs to the mix. There's a school of thought out there, too, that favors stonefly nymphs up to size 4 or 6. In either case the typical rig would be the one we fished—a tandem rig with a small bead-head nymph trailing the larger fly.—*N. R.*

however many articles like this appear, are always going to be. The place looks different, too. You might look up with snowflakes blowing around you to see a mountain sparkling grand and white in the afternoon sun and when you do feel your heart take a small but perceptible leap. On the way to the river, you'll see elk on the slopes, eagles in the sky, and buffalo in the middle of the road. In the evenings you can, if your tastes run to such things, join the skiers for a range of what, in your case, will be *après peche* activities—a sleigh-ride through the forest for a hearty dinner in a snow-girt yurt, perhaps. But above all—and there was no way of knowing this in advance—there's the sheer pleasure of actually standing in an uncrowded river surrounded by snow and catching fish. It is, to use a word that I'm really much too old to use, but that seems to sum it up nicely, a blast. And, I'm pleased to announce, it does not result in frozen gonads. 

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For more info, go to
americanangler.com

