Looking Forward and Thinking Back: A Visit with Fly Fishing Legend Bud Lilly

by Keith McCafferty

I met Bud Lilly in the fall of 1976, during a month-long camping trip to Yellowstone Park. As a graduate student on fishing sabbatical I had chosen the park because the license was free, and when I entered the door of Bud Lilly's Trout Shop it wasn't to buy anything, but simply to pay homage to a Mecca of Western fly fishing. The old school teacher in Bud must have seen in me a willingness to learn, for he introduced himself -- I was too shy to have spoken with him otherwise -- and when he heard I was camped at Madison Junction he explained to me in exact terms how, when and where to cast a fly for the fish I had traveled more than 2,500 miles to catch. What I recall most about that tall, soft-spoken gentleman were his eyes. It was the eyes that smiled first and made you feel welcome, and when I walked down to the river the following dawn I could still hear the quiet authority of his voice, and with the spirit of his hand guiding mine on the rod grip I caught more large trout in the next few days than I had caught in nearly 20 years fishing in Midwest waters.

The man I drive to meet this January at his Three Forks, Montana home -- a two-story, white clapboard house he and his wife, Esther, run as a summer fishing lodge -- seems little changed, despite having undergone heart surgery to install a synchronization device in his chest less than a week before. At age 83, Bud Lilly's hair isn't as red as I remember, but it is still sandy and there are the kind eyes to greet you, the stately grace of manner. Only the step is slower.

"Ah, Mademoiselle," he says, inclining his head as he greets Carol Schmidt, the editor of "Mountains And Mines," who has accompanied me on the visit. He apologizes for minor disorder in the quaint, simple living room with the trout border wallpaper, and asks us to take a tour of the guest rooms upstairs and the room Esther calls his "Shrine," while he tidies up.

Going up the stairs the floorboards creak a little -- the 9-room guest house, called "Bud Lilly's Anglers' Retreat," belonged to Bud's great aunt and dates back a century. There aren't any guests now -- "the only visitors in winter are bill collectors," Bud had told us with a laugh -- and the door to the Shrine stands open. It isn't a big room, but the southfacing windows gather the winter sun, illuminating the mementos of a long life and career. Hanging on a peg inside the door is the Navy uniform Bud wore as a young Ensign during World War II. His Navy cap is on the shelf above it, and there is a framed portrait of the young man inscribed with his given name, "Walen F. Lilly, Jr."

Hanging from the west wall are the signature straw cowboy hats with the double Western crease by which thousands of anglers recognize Bud Lilly, each hat cracked, battered and sweat-stained from a thousand suns. There is a letter from President Jimmy Carter, thanking Bud for a gift of hand-tied flies, a collage of photos taken during a camping trip Bud took on the Lewis River with the British Ambassador. Here and there are signed photos from the luminaries he has shepherded on Western waters, men such as Tom Brokaw, Charles Kuralt, and the actor Bill Conrad. A Tribute to The Rivers plaque of the three fly fishing legends -- George Grant, Bud Lilly, and Dan Bailey -- adorns the north wall. Then there are the awards -- The American Museum of Fly Fishing Award, Montana Ambassador of the Year Award, Legends of the Headwaters Award. One plaque includes Kamloops rainbow trout carvings, and there is a photo of a record 29-pound brown trout from Wade Lake that was displayed at Bud Lilly's Trout Shop in 1966. The big brown is the only photo of a dead fish, which isn't surprising. Bud Lilly pioneered catch&release in western waters, creating the first catch&release fishing club in 1961.

It is a room that one walks out of thinking about a life fully spent, one of both adventure and accomplishment. If you didn't know Bud Lilly, it would easy to think that the sum of the man's life was contained in that room, and that after raising three children with his first wife, Patricia Lean, and after her death helping to raise Esther's two children, that it was time to relax and reflect, and perhaps to limit one's endeavor to making a few casts for trout in Baker Creek near Manhattan, where he is the riverkeeper for the Baker Spring Fishing Ranch during the summer months.

But Bud hasn't invited us here to dwell upon the past. His fame as a fishing shop operator and outfitter, which made his name synonymous with western fly fishing as far back as the 1950s, has simply been the springboard for a second act in conservation. Bud's colleague, the environmental historian Paul Schullery, has called him the "trout best friend," but it can be argued that he is also the trout fisherman's best friend. Among Lilly's latest projects is a cooperative effort with the Governor's office, Montana Fish, Wildlife&Parks and the US Fish and Wildlife Service to broaden the concept of river access and expand and maintain access sites for anglers.

"The river systems are the blood of our existence," Bud says as he sits down in a stuffed chair of his living room. "But with more privatization, access is being squeezed down. These are national rivers. We all own them. As I look down the pike, I think it will more vital than ever before to respect our rivers and maintain them in the highest regard, and to create equal access for everyone."

Lilly is also working closely with Montana State University, often called "Trout U" for its many projects involving water resources, fisheries

and wildlife management. Bud, who was awarded an honorary Ph.D. from the university in 2001, is the guiding force and chair of the Trout and Salmonoid Collection, which includes some 11,000 volumes on trout research and fishing, the largest such collection in the country.

Another project very dear to his heart is the "Wounded Warriors and Quiet Waters Foundation", which he founded in 2007. The project flies disabled war veterans, some gravely injured with brain damage or legs missing from road bomb explosions, from hospitals around the country to Montana. Arriving for a week-long stay, a network of volunteers introduce the veterans to fly fishing and the healing power of moving water.

In addition to these projects, Lilly works with the Montana Land Reliance, the Whirling Disease Foundation, the Montana Trout Foundation and is the director of Montana River Action, which works towards maintaining critical flow levels in trout streams threatened by dewatering. He is a past National Director of Trout Unlimited, the Federation of Fly Fisherman and the Greater Yellowstone Coalition.

When did Lilly's involvement with trout fishing and conservation begin?

"I think it started when I was born," he says, and laughs. A descendant of pioneers -- his great great great grandmother, Ginny Yates, came to Virginia City during the 1860s gold rush -- young Walen Lilly grew up in Manhattan. His father, the local barber, introduced him to fishing with sucker meat, bullheads and angle worms on the headwater rivers of the Missouri.

"Dad felt you were a bootstrap person," Lilly recalls. He brought you to the water, you took it from there. He distinctly recalls the first trout he caught, fishing in a diversion ditch of Baker Creek a few miles outside town. His aunt recorded the momentous event in her journal.

"I was with Buddy when he caught his first fish," she wrote. "He jumped up and down and said, 'Goddamn! Goddamn!"

Upon this blasphemy a passion was born. Under his father's tutelage, Lilly graduated to fly fishing, favoring Pott's hand-woven flies that sold 3 for a dollar.

"They were deadly," Bud says, but it was a costly mistake to lose one on the backcast.

"Can't you find something cheaper to put in those trees than flies," his mother would complain.

The upside were trout dinners, enough not only for Lilly's family but for many others, for his father insisted that every fish be eaten, and many days Bud caught 50 brook trout on grasshoppers in the morning, and 50 again in the evening.

"In those days we didn't realize the value of a live trout or the value of a spawning tributary," he recalls.

Early leanings toward conservation that were encouraged by his father, who was a member of the Manhattan Rod & Gun Club, and were fostered by the Boy Scout Code of Ethics, were put on hold during the 1940s. Bud was 16 when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. A fine high school athlete, he'd harbored vague dreams of a pro baseball career and even came to the plate against legendary pitcher Satchel Page, who was barnstorming around the country with Negro league players during the war. Bud got a hit off Page, but was prompted thrown out at second when trying to steal. His baseball dreams were dashed just as abruptly. By the time a letter arrived inviting him to join the Cincinnati Reds farm team in Salt Lake City on July 1, 1943, he had already taken a test offered by navy representatives who came to Montana looking for officer material.

"I figured if nothing else, it (the test) was a good way of getting out of school for two hours," he remembers. A few weeks later, he was in an accelerated officer training program in Annapolis, working toward commission as a Naval Ensign.

"The education rally opened my eyes," Bud says. "I'd never heard the word 'college'. My father never went to school."

By June of 1945, Bud was at sea. After a short stint in Italy, he would spend the rest of the war in the Pacific on the USS General RN Blatchford, a troop transport ship that ferried 3,000 prisoners of war at a time. One of his commanding officers saw the leadership qualities that were to serve Lilly so well in later life. The 19-year-old Montanan was elevated to third in command, and it was aboard this ship that he was shot when a kamikazi pilot passed low amidships, spraying the crew with its machine guns. Lilly's right pectoral muscle was peeled off by the gunfire. He was stitched up and back on the bridge the next day.

Bud came home in July of 1946. His father's greeting was to the point. "You know," he said, "the salmonflies are on the Madison River."

Bud smiles. "I took off my uniform, found some old clothes and went right back to fishing."

Thanks to the GI Bill, Bud attended Montana State University, graduating with a Bachelor's Degree in Applied Science. He later earned a Master's of Education and for 20 years served as a high school teacher in Roundup, Deerlodge and in Bozeman, where he taught an accelerated science class for advanced students.

Quickly realizing he would need a second income --"Like a fool", he remembers, "I thought I could live off a teacher's salary" -- he and a friend started a summer car wash business in West Yellowstone. Startup costs amounted to a scrap of canvas and a hose. Later he added lights to extend business hours. When Wally Eagle offered him space to open a fishing shop in his store near the entrance of Yellowstone Park, Bud asked a friend for advice.

His friend said, "If you want to starve, buy it."

That was 1952, and the rest is fly fishing history. Except for one major hiccup -- the 1959 earthquakes fissured the bedrock under the park rivers, raising water temperatures and depositing sediments that ruined fishing for 2 years -- Bud Lilly' Trout Shop, which moved to its present location in the 1960s, was successful. It was a family operation, with Bud's sons Mike and Greg doing the guiding, as well as Bud's daughter, Annette, who was Montana's first licensed fishing guide. His wife, Pat, operated the art and clothing section of the store.

Bud attributes his growing awareness that a trout could have value beyond its jumping ability and the succulence of its flesh to the customers who came through the door.

"I had an 9-foot South Bend bamboo rod in the early years," Bud says, shaking his head. "It was great for driving horses. Somebody told me my creel was so big you could carry alligators in it, but I'd fill that sucker."

Fishing luminaries including Al McClane, Ed Zern and Ted Trueblood brought a more enlightened set of ethics into the store. Having fished extensively, they had witnessed the decline of fisheries in the East. But it was Art Neumann, who was the executive director of Trout Unlimited, and others in that organization, who had the greatest influence.

"These guys turned my head around," Bud says.

Along with two other western fly fishing pioneers, Pat Sample and Livingston tackle shop owner Dan Bailey, Bud founded a Montana chapter of Trout Unlimited.

"Dan had the knowledge, Pat had the money, and I had the willingness," he recalls.

One of their first projects was to oppose the Allen Spur Dam proposed by the Bureau of Reclamation, which would have guillotined the Yellowstone River south of Livingston. A wild trout program, catch and release, special regulations for sensitive waters, adequate water flows to insure spawning -- the challenge to save western trout rivers was engaged.

"The problem with the agencies (that oppose environmental progress) is that they outlast you," Bud says, shaking his head. The solution, he says, should be simple.

"Clean air, clean water equals good fishing."

At 83, Bud Lilly isn't ready to give up the fight for it quite yet.

When we rise to leave, I remind Bud about meeting him during my first fishing trip to the West. At the time, I had thought that the part he played in my success was limited to advice; I hadn't realized that the trout in the rivers were largely thanks to him, as well.

He can't remember the brief meeting, which is understandable. But he remembers the places he told me to go, and soon we are pouring over a hand-drawn map.

He points his finger.

"Yes," he says, "that's the first place I'd make a cast, too." And, "No, I never made it up there." And, "It's all in the angle of the presentation."

And for a few minutes he seems like a kid again, the buoyant enthusiasm dancing in the kind eyes that I remember so well.

As he once said himself of the wonder of trout fishing, "Goddamn! Goddamn!"

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AGENDA

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7:00 – 8:00	Dinner
7:30 – 8:00	Selections from FTV—The Fishing Channel
8:00 – 9:00	Bud Lilly Roast -Marshall Bloom -Paul Schullery -Cal Dunbar -Dick Blumershine -Mike Gurnett -Mike Lilly
	☞ Bud Lilly Rebuttal
9:00 - 9:30	Three Men, Three Rivers Film



Bud Lilly A Montana Original

Bud Lilly's Montana roots run deep. His great-grandmother, Granny Yates, guided wagon trains to Montana, starting in the 1860s. Bud was born in Manhattan, Montana, in 1925, and grew up fishing and hunting the Gallatin Valley and Yellowstone country. From 1950 to 1982, Bud owned the famous Trout Shop in West Yellowstone, from which he advised generations of anglers in how to fish this region's great waters. He has become one of the west's best-known and widely celebrated anglers.

But as important as his services as a guide, advisor, and retailer have been, his role as a conservationist has earned him the gratitude of all fishermen. As Montana's popularity among fishermen grew, he was among the first to recognize that the fish would need a lot of help to survive all the popularity. Twenty years ago, using the power of his widely distributed catalog, he established the "Catchand-Release Club," promoting the release of all trout when very few management agencies were yet ready to take such a step. Fly fishing's premier commentator of the time, Arnold Gingrich, announced in his book *The Joys of Trout* that "Bud Lilly is a trout's best friend."

Among his many other contributions to conservation, Bud was one of the founders of the Montana Trout Foundation, the founding president of Montana Trout Unlimited, first chairman of the International Fly Fishing Center, a director of the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, and a senior advisor of the Federation of Fly Fishers. He has frequently been profiled in national media, including CNN's "Portrait of America" series, ABC's "Twenty-Twenty," and the Wall Street Journal. More recently, he was profiled along with Dan Bailey and George Grant in the film "Three Men, Three Rivers," produced by the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks. Today he continues both his guiding and his conservation work, and is one of the west's foremost spokesmen for wild trout, their world, and the people who pursue them.



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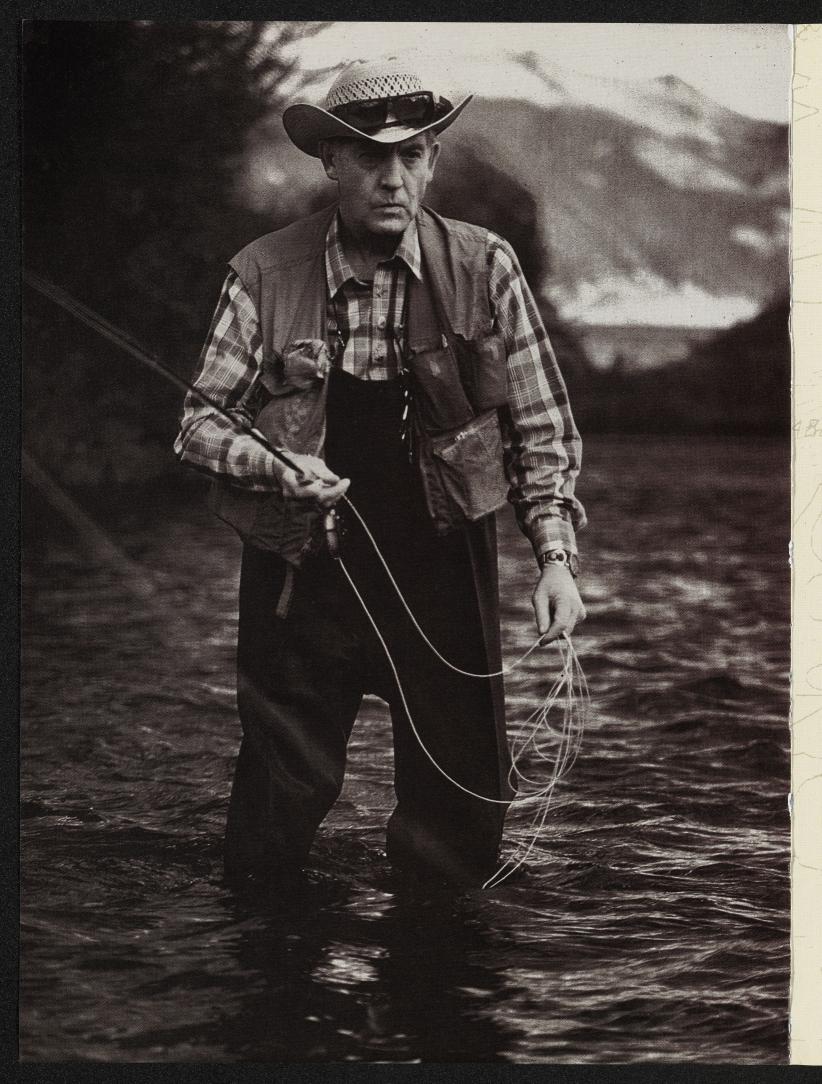
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Flyfishing guru Bud Lilly casts a long shadow across the rivers of the West

In his bones, bud lilly could feel a storm approaching.

He crawled out of bed before dawn, summoned his clients to the car and made a beeline for the floor of Paradise Valley, Mont., a sweeping, bucolic dale that slides down from the Absaroka mountains to cradle the Yellowstone River.

Beneath a blizzard of insects — caddis flies that sputtered and skidded in frenetic swarms across the water — the river was alive with hungry, cutthroat trout riled into a springtime feeding frenzy. While Lilly's out-of-town clients would remember this morning as a visit to flyfishing Nirvana, the 68-year-old sage of angling considered it merely another successful day at the office. Over the past 40 years, Lilly has parlayed the leisurely search for trout into a legitimate occupation.

"Flyfishing isn't an art form," says the man who has earned \$350 a day helping other people catch fish. "Nor is it like trying to develop a good golf swing. Casting is an aesthetic pursuit that broadens people's horizons and makes them more aware of their environment. All of the elements — the fly, the wind, the sunlight, the speed of the river, the time of day — come together into a single moment of action. I still get a thrill every time there's a strike."

Since 1951 when Walen "Bud" Lilly opened a small tackle shop in West Yellowstone, Mont., the silver-haired fishing guide with a lumberjack build has become something of a legend. He has taken a sport popularized 200 years ago by Sir Isaak Walton in *The Compleat Angler* and given it a distinctive edge. Through his efforts — and motion pictures, such as *A River Runs Through It*, filmed at Lilly's regular haunts — flyfishing is one of the fastest growing outdoor sports in the United States.

THE COMPLETE AN CILER

BY TODD WILKINSON / PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAN ABRAMS

⁶The Magic, of COURSE, COMES IN CONVINCING A FISH TO TAKE YOUR ARTIFICIAL FLY EVEN THOUGH THERE ARE **10 MILLION REAL** ONES FLOATING ALONG THE RIVER.9

Like nomads, flyfishing guides and their clients spend summers traveling between fabled rivers such as the Yellowstone, Madison, Gallatin and Big Hole, rushing from one insect hatch to the next. They rock their rods back and forth and send their lines aloft, patiently relying on tiny artificial lures to impersonate bugs. Nine months of the year, from the icy maw of February to the first snows of November, Lilly practices this ritual four days a week. "It's like an addiction," he says, although he declares wryly that he is not a fanatic. "I don't approach it as an obligation; I approach it as an opportunity. I have some acquaintances who fish six days a week and then they're disappointed if they have to go to church on Sunday."

Critics characterize flyfishing as a refined sport practiced by gentleman elitists. But Lilly, born in the farming village of Manhattan, Mont., is unpretentious. There is nothing tony or chauvinistic about him. In fact, it was Lilly who defied the gender barrier by offering flyfishing classes exclusively for women two decades ago. Yet he won't hesitate to berate yuppies who spend thousands of dollars on equipment and attire only to measure success on how many fish they catch.

"A true professional doesn't need to have the finest gear to get the best results," he says. "As long as you can present a fly on the river, you can fish, no matter whether you're physically disabled or getting up in age." Lilly's voluminous list of clients ranges from government dignitaries and celebrities to octogenarians and the disabled. The list includes Dan Rather of CBS News, television outdoorsman Curt Gowdy and actor William Conrad.

During one quiet morning in the late 1970s, Lilly's fly shop was surrounded by a fleet of black cars and serious men in leisure suits. "The Secret Service came into the shop and said President Carter was outside and wanted to meet me," he recalls. "I said, 'Well tell him to come on in.'

Part of being a proficient guide is being malleable to a client's needs, he says. "For the man who is blind, we would send two guys along with him in a boat, one to help him with his equipment, while the other would watch the fly. And when the fish took it, he would vell 'strike'. There are all kinds of possibilities."

An icon, particularly in Europe and Japan, Lilly still finds himself mobbed by Japanese tourists who pass through the Yellowstone region on buses. "I'm better known in Tokyo than I am in Bozeman," he says with a laugh. On several occasions film crews from Japanese and Dutch television stations have profiled Lilly as a master angler worthy of emulation.

Long ago, Lilly discovered that what really matters is not keeping score but soaking in the elements. "I still get a thrill every time I go to the river's edge," he says. "When you hit it just right and witness a hatch, the feeling of excitement that flows through your body is indescribable. It's an overwhelming sensation to see such whirling clouds of insects. The magic, of course, comes in convincing a fish to take your artificial fly even though there are 10 million real ones floating along the river."

"Bud's got a touch, a feel for what's happening, and he's a great storyteller. He's not an arrogant expert even though he is an expert," says Paul Schullery, who co-wrote two books with Lilly, Bud Lilly's Guide to Western Flyfishing and A Trout's Best Friend.

In 1991, Lilly was named Guide of the Year by Rod and Reel Magazine, but he is synonymous with more than

guiding. Since the 1950s, he has been an outspoken crusader for river conservation throughout the northern Rockies. His main theme has been an idea called "catch and release," a euphemism for recycling trout.

Flyfishermen who practice catch and release immediately turn fish loose once they are caught to ensure there will be plenty for future anglers and wildlife. During the 1960s when Lilly first championed the idea in the headwater streams around Yellowstone National Park, critics thought he was a heretic. But catch and release is now a standard part of managing wild fisheries in the West. Lilly's involvement with the approach is featured in a documentary film called Three Men, Three Rivers, to appear on public television later this year.

"The results are staggering on rivers where catch-and-release regulations are now in place," Lilly says. "The size and numbers of fish have rebounded and so have the catch rates. After all, we don't have to kill a fish in order to enjoy it." Perhaps the best example is found along the Yellowstone River, which originates in Yellowstone Park. Studies show that some trout in Yellowstone Park are caught and set free as many as 20 times over the course of their lives.

A consummate businessman, Lilly launched a Catch and Release club that got anglers so excited about turning loose their fish that they would actually buy pins from Lilly which showed how long their trout was. "He made money off a good cause and he made people proud to be involved with the conservation movement," Schullery says. As a founding member of both Trout Unlimited and the International Federation of Fly Fishers, Lilly has worked closely with his wife, Esther — a real estate broker — to convince property owners to put conservation easements on their land in order to prevent riverside development that threatens trout habitat. The couple already have protected two and a half miles along the Gallatin River and the acreage is growing.

So influential is Lilly as a salesman that nine years ago he was named a "Montana Ambassador" to help lure low-impact development to the state. He recruits new businesses by exposing corporate executives to the beauty of flyfishing.

This year, Lilly floated down the Missouri River with business leaders to get them hooked on angling. If they care about fishing, he reasons, executives will realize that maintaining healthy trout populations requires clean, unpolluted water, which engenders corporate responsibility.

By the end of August, after enduring crowded stretches of river, Lilly covets reclusiveness. Indian Summer brings idyllic afternoons when temperatures in September and October climb to 75 degrees, the leaves on cottonwoods and aspen erupt in fiery autumn colors and, best of all, he finds that he has some streams all to himself. "If you want to beat the crowds and enjoy Indian Summer in Montana," Lilly says, proffering advice like a true guide, "then you've got to look at the bigger rivers."

Inching his way toward 70, Lilly is contemplating bigger mysteries than the usual hatch of caddis flies on the Yellowstone. In 1985, he sold his thriving business — Bud Lilly's Trout Shop, located outside the western entrance to Yellowstone National Park — and moved to Bozeman, where he could devote more attention to guiding. But the store remains a hub to anglers. "All of his customers over the years have become friends, and they keep coming back," says Ann Criner, who now owns the store with her husband, Jim. "He actually remembers the names of practically everyone who has ever gone through his store."

Now Lilly's threatening to retire, though his friends continue to call him up looking for advice every time they come to town. "I suppose that's the difficulty of having a lifelong business which is also your avocation," he says, smiling.

Todd Wilkinson, a freelance writer whose work has appeared in Backpacker and Outside magazines, lives in Bozeman, Mont., and eagerly awaits each year's insect hatches.

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