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ANOTHER TIME AND PLACE

Spring begins where you would least expect it.

Montana, as every fisherman knows, is bounded by the Bighorn River on the east, the Beaverhead River on the west, Memorial Day at the beginning and Labor Day at the end. The angler's Montana is the Greater Yellowstone Area and summer.

The trout's Montana is broader. It begins with the vernal equinox in a low, warm valley between high, cold mountains. A river called the Bitterroot runs down there and I run down the river in a big rubber boat. It drifts past boulders that, from the looks of the country, might have rolled a mile down from Trapper Peak. My fly floats on clear, low water and is the prettiest thing since the world thawed out. A hundred yards downstream a trout-snout rises straight up and absorbs the fly: no splash, no noise, no waste motion. Old brown trout are efficient like that. We in the boat are only human so on our part

there is frantic reeling and rowing and groping for net. John Adza pulls the boat up on shore while I land the fish and cradle it between two hands and rock it like a baby. I congratulate myself while John fidgets. Then I slide the trout back in the water and take the oars while he sits in the bow seat and lengthens his fly-line with urgent strokes of a long rod. This, he says, is the time of year when he really wants to fish.

It seems unfair that Montana has not only the summer fishing that all anglers know about, and the fall fishing that half of all anglers know about, but also the spring fishing that nobody knows about. There are so few tourists around in April that John is reduced to fishing with other guides and with local characters emerging from hibernation, like me.

This is our reward for surviving January, an apology from the mountains. Having made January what it was, they turn right around and give us paradoxical early-spring fishing. It starts in the Bitterroot by March 20, sometimes earlier. When I lived back east, the best of the fishing did not start till mid-April in Virginia, later than that in Pennsylvania and New York. Opening day meant high water and deep nymphs. It was better than not fishing. It was not as good as trout-noses sticking up out of clear water for floating flies.

Relief explains the difference. I refer here not to the relief felt by cabin-happy anglers, which is the same everywhere,

but to the difference in elevation between mountain-top and valley floor, which is greater in the Rockies. My first trout's residence was exactly 6,204 feet lower in altitude than the mountain shading it. This kind of relief means that the valley gets a lot of spring, and perhaps a little summer, before the peaks warm enough to pour snow-melt into the river. You can follow this low-water spring to other streams, enjoying one while another is high and muddy. The Bitterroot happens to be first on the circuit for reasons that become clear when you drive down to it.

Every way is down, unless you thread your way into the narrow valley from Missoula. Up on the passes there is winter, cars with ski-racks, rivulets narrow with ice. As you drop, the snow thins, but not much. It ends abruptly where mountains level into valley floor. Down here cliffs push into the river and ponderosa pines crowd as close as they can. This valley is all edges and masses and snug. There is no big sky, no emptiness. There is green grass at a drift's edge. There are buttercups popping from roadside banks and aspens flirting their catkins. Wood ducks are squealing through the cottonwoods, geese are honking from every field, and John Adza is pacing around his pickup, wondering what is taking his guest so long.

By the time John got me organized, two other guides had joined us. They floated the stream behind our boat, giving me

first shot at the water, though everyone else deserved it more. Chris Pagnell rowed the second boat while Dave Odell cast. Dave wore a short-sleeved shirt infested with ^{Hawaiian} ~~tropical~~ vegetation, making the point that this was Tropical Montana. The rest of us became believers. We peeled flannel as the temperature climbed to the mid-seventies, and we caught trout: mostly browns, some rainbows. The biggest was twenty inches long on a non-stretch steel tape, ~~measure~~. Few were below fourteen. The trout jumped high, pulled hard, made seasoned guides yelp and groan.

Guides should not be allowed to enjoy themselves so much. Violates the Code of the West. Fun is my department.

Time was when guides were were grizzled codgers. You could depend on a guide to spit tobacco juice in the water when you tied on a fly. He would admit to being nonplused (not in precisely that language) when a trout was stupid enough to eat feathers. For lunch he would serve fried meat. Nowadays John Adza serves sandwiches of smoked salmon with chilled white wine. He is President of an association of western Montana river guides and has two college degrees. All of his associates seem to have at least one, which may account for their ^{Peculiar} ~~odd~~ behavior. Dave keeps statistics, for example. [When I wanted to know how spring fishing compared with that during the rest of the year,] he told me that only ten percent of his guided float trips are in the spring, but they produce fifty percent of the trout over eighteen inches.

This means (if I remember freshman algebra) that chances of catching a big trout are nine times better in the spring than during the rest of the season.

There is a reason. The Bitterroot River has a spring-hatching stonefly named Skwala parallela in Latin and nothing particular in English. The name lends itself to levity but ~~there~~ *The Skwalas are not -- just different.* ~~is nothing~~ squalid about the Skwalas -- merely an odd social ~~life.~~ The males have short, useless wings and must crawl around in search of the larger, long-winged females. These, being liberated, take all the risks. They swim out from the rocky banks and are carried downstream near shore, laying eggs. They seem content paddling around like little boats in the water. I suppose that the insects could travel miles downstream, except for the trout. Picture the reaction of trout to a line of fat, brown flies being carried downstream one at a time. This is another way in which Montana is compensated for a winter that is (to be frank) stressful to banana trees.

It is hard to believe that ~~such a~~ ^{So} perfect angler's insect exists or that, if it does, it can survive. ^{an} ~~so~~ I kept a few of the Skwalas as evidence. I put them into a clear solution in a glass vial, preserving them forever.

The artificial fly that worked was, of course, an inch-long imitation Skwala. (Just to be contrary, I tried others, which did not work.) The imitation had to be fished like the real thing,

too. Once in awhile we would see a rising fish, get out of the boat, and catch it. But drift-boats and Skwalas were made for each other. The boat lets you cover miles of banks with few casts, building suspense, waiting for a trout's neb to lift serenely beneath the fake insect.

*The mix of by:nes and excitement
seem right for you.*
When you ~~do~~ ^{eventually} have to ~~make a new~~ cast, you want to fire the fly back to the trout-zone as quickly as possible, missing not a foot of shoreline. For speed and accuracy, you stay with a line that is heavier than average for dry flies, these days: a five- or six-weight. Then you use a tippet stout enough to retrieve the fly from an occasional grabby alder. You use a rod of nine feet -- long enough to keep the fly above the guide's ears on your backcast, most of the time.

Guides learn to row with their heads down, though. John says that the ideal guide fits a size 48 jacket and a size 4 cap. He likes people to laugh. About rivers, however, he is serious. He describes water as the blood that keeps Montana alive. For a fly to float on living rivers he wants wings of something real: hair of elk, which lives even after its owner dies. Magic. You need that for trout. They rise for the fly because of a force resembling electricity. They can feel it.

I believe it because I feel it too. There are witnesses. One morning, after an hour when nothing had happened, the weather changed a little and I felt the thing. I said so to Chris. It was

his turn to cast from the bow-gunner's seat and he rose three fish right away.

But spring trips are not all spring-like and there are preparations to be made if you do not wish to tempt fate. Expect some weather for Hawaiian shirts and some for raincoats. Expect that, after a few nights above freezing on the mountains, the river will rise and the trout will stop rising. The Bitterroot will get cloudy from snow-melt one day when the crocuses bloom in the middle of April. When it happens, remember that there are other streams where the run-off will not start till a month later.

Spring is not an ideal time to sleep out under the stars. They have a way of turning flaky after midnight, making you run for your Volkswagen and wait for dawn in its back seat. I stayed at the Bitterroot River Lodge, and since I had a good bed the weather was perfect. The river ran near enough to the window that I could sleep to its sound, then wake up and rush out to see if the water level was still all right. It was. You know about the yesterdays when you should have been fishing. I was in time for the yesterdays, though I got there late, on April 13.

"There," on the map, was Hamilton, Montana, heart of the banana belt. It is a well-ordered town. There are motels and good places to eat. There is a service station with a big lot where teen-agers dance to boom-boxes on warm April nights. They do not

have anywhere else to dance. On the other hand, there are two fly shops, which is two more than there were in all of Washington, D.C., when I was living there. Here in Montana we keep our priorities straight.

One of the priorities is watching a new season wedge into the mountains from the bow of a drift-boat. You cannot step into the same river twice but you can float on top of the same one for a long time. Oars drip beads through clear air to clear water. Long rods paint yellow lines on blue skies. You wait for a trout to rise, ignoring the killdeers that flutter from every point of gravel, voices merging with the slow talk of current. Mountains move by. River and boat and anglers stay in place, preserved, floating in solution of springtime.

[Optional Sidebar on next page.]

More Information

Timing: the Skwala stoneflies may hatch as early as the first week in March. Count on them by March 20. Peak fishing is likely to be in the first week of April, lasting till the Bitterroot run-off begins, usually between April 7 and 15.

Transportation: Guides will pick up at Missoula airport, but you may wish to rent a car. If you plan to stop by other Montana rivers after the Bitterroot, Bozeman or Billings may be more convenient for the outbound flight.

Regulations: one reason why the spring fishing is so little known is that it was not legal on the Bitterroot till recently. All trout must be released during the special early season.

Clothing: Hats, sunglasses, raingear, and waders with felt soles.

Guides: Make reservations early. Call John Adza of Catch Montana (an asociation of river guides) at 1-800-882-7844.

Lodging: 1-406-363-5191 for the Bitterroot River Lodge. Or ask a guide to make reservations.

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Explain why I did not work in Bill Klyn

colors are drab

kept it short & atmospheric. Want more how-to?

Check Adza

10 times?

3 fly shops?

1987?