

About 500 words

Datus Proper
1085 Hamilton Road
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(406) 388-3345

FISHING WITH THE OUZELS

(Alternative title or subtitle)

The Madison in Winter

Winter fishing in the northern Rockies is not something that you can plan, exactly. The weather is too unpredictable. On the other hand, let us suppose that your spouse wants to vacation at a ski lodge so that the two of you can meet some other nice couples for a change. There are ski resorts near the Madison River. By a happy coincidence, there are also fly shops with tackle for rent, just in case you decide not to raise suspicions by packing your own.

When you get to the river's bank, you will not have to wait in line for your recreation. You will walk on snow where the only other tracks were made by a mink. You may hear an ouzel singing in the willows, too, and when you do, tip your hat. The ouzel is an unconventional bird who fishes the Madison all winter and thinks that spring starts in February. (Your spouse may know somebody else who fits that description.)

The Madison runs at minimum volume in winter, making wading

easy, and the fishing pressure is low enough that the trout can relax. I have landed them in near-blizzards, releasing them under water so that they would not turn into fish-flavored popsicles. These days, however, I wait for pleasant weather, which comes along sometimes in January and frequently thereafter.

On the lower reaches of the Madison especially, the fish may not be willing to move far for their lunch. In this case you can prospect with a float and split shot, letting your nymph bump right along the bottom, covering the water foot by foot. It is meticulous work, but it beats riding a lift uphill and skiing back down.

One advantage of the float-and-shot method is that -- with a long rod -- you can fish without stripping in line on every cast. This in turn means that you can use full-fingered neoprene gloves. The rest of you is easy to keep warm, but fingers are a weak point in the design of the human race. Another of our factory defects is that we have only two legs with which to retain balance. The solution is a pair of wading shoes with felt soles or cleats. Falling into the river is not as much fun as it might be in August.

Best news last. What is surprising about the Madison is not that the winter fishing is sometimes slow but that it is often lively. Look for a good hatch of midges -- especially on a mild, gray day in February and March. Be prepared then to stalk feeding fish as you would in summer. Use light tackle and fish upstream with an unweighted midge pupa, or even a dry fly. I don't know

why heavy rainbows bother to rise through cold water for such minuscule insects. Perhaps for them, as for you and me, this is the only game in town.

Before you set out, get a current report on the fishing. For the upper Madison, call Blue Ribbon Flies in West Yellowstone, Montana (406-646-7642). For the Madison below Beartrap Canyon, call one of the Bozeman shops: Montana Troutfitters (406-587-4707) or The River's Edge (406-586-5373).

About 1700 words

Jan
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1993 FISHING QUESTIONNAIRE

BEST FISHERMAN

1. ...most notorious fisherman

The Dredger piles up the biggest body count in my valley. He gets out every day, weather permitting, and works methodically down the middle of a fertile stream, digging up the bottom with his feet. Hundreds of nymphs and larvae drift ahead of him in a cloud of mud. He fishes in the chum line with two live stonefly nymphs on big hooks fastened to leaders that look like strings for a tennis racket. Sometimes he fills three canvas mail-pouches with trout and whitefish averaging over a pound. He gives away those he can, eats the rest, and looks like it. He is not in shape to walk far. If you don't mind hiking a quarter mile back from the road, you might even find a stretch of river that has some aquatic life remaining.

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