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Mr. Duncan Barnes, Editor
Field & Stream
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Dear Duncan:

Here's a story that we discussed briefly. You suggested the "getting started" angle. I began to draft a better query but realized that you'd need the whole text to decide. It's partly mood-piece.

I can set up an expedition for pictures if you need them.

New subject: I could do more fly-fishing stories if I could come up with suitable topics for Field & Stream readers. I've been avoiding technical stuff, or saving it for specialized fly-fishing magazines. It's a change from the days of Al McClane and Ted Trueblood, whose ideas were on the cutting edge, for their time. Far more people are fly fishing today but they have information coming from all angles. I suppose the same is true of big-game hunting (but not bird hunting).

Maybe I'm missing something obvious. If there is anything that I should be doing from here, let me know. I'll also be traveling back to the Appalachians in April and fishing the little brook-trout streams.

Yours,

Enclosed: "Floating Down The River"

About 1800 words

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(Getting Started)

FLOATING DOWN THE RIVER

This is the painless way

to learn fly-fishing.

Work is one of the great pleasures of life, when someone else is doing it. In this case, Dennis Kavanagh is manning the oars of a 300-pound drift-boat while I wave a 3-ounce fly rod. I am grinning like a politician in a 4th-of-July parade. The spectators line up along the lower Madison River and compete for my attention, variously quacking, warbling, and sprouting blossoms. Thunderheads growl, mountains pretend to be too important for this nonsense, and pelicans sprawl for a Gary Larson cartoon. With so much going on, it is hard to concentrate on the business of this excursion, which is catching trout.

Dennis tells me that there is a good pocket coming up, deep near the bank, and if I don't fish it right he'll hand me the

oars for a change. My big buffalo-wool nymph splashes down. The leader cuts deeper and deeper into the water, then jerks. Striking is easy when something attacks a fly like that. I set the hook as if the fish were a tarpon but it's a brown trout, 16 inches long, not the biggest of the day but not the smallest, either. It comes to the net faster than it intended, bending the rod till the ferrules creak. I release it before it realizes quite what happened.

Dennis Kavanagh spends a lot of days rowing and looks like it. He moved to Montana fourteen years ago, searching for the best trout-fishing in the country. He became a guide, an oracle on the rivers hereabouts, and an old-timer at fishing from drift-boats.

I am none of the above. The country is the same I grew up in, but drift-boats were rarities when I was a lad. Most of us shot the rapids in canoes, which took paddlers at each end, or johnboats, which kept half the crew busy bailing. A guide named Pat Barnes brought in a McKenzie River boat from Oregon in 1948. It was a high-sided craft, comfortable as a cruise ship. It had good oarlocks, too, allowing one man to navigate around boulders while others fished from bow and stern. This boat was so decadent, in fact, that anglers could float all day without getting the seat of their pants wet.

Over the next twenty years, such drift-boats caught on. With dry seats available, non-fishing spouses started coming along to watch nature's parade. A fair number began trying a cast or two.

Today the boats are carrying anglers of all ages, hair-styles, and levels of skill.

Aside from the lack of suffering, which weakens moral fiber, this is a good way to learn fly-fishing. Casts are short. The tackle is stout. Wading is optional. You don't have to identify little gray insects. Best of all, you've got a captive instructor. He's the guy with the sunburn on his nose and the calluses on his hands. He could be teaching chemistry instead, but he'd rather coach fishermen, and he can give all the help they can soak up.

For those very new to the sport, Dennis Kavanagh likes to provide some instruction before floating the river. He drives to a small stream and teaches the basics of knot-tying, casting, line-control, and trout lies. A day of fishing from shore provides a good start, he says, even for teen-agers on their first expedition. They have no bad habits, and they learn fast. The important thing is to get them catching fish before they lose interest. The catching is usually easier from a boat.

Dennis says that most folks with the basic skills can become competent fly-fishermen in three days afloat. They learn to fish "blind" -- without seeing fish -- or to distinguish rising trout from all the other things happening on the water. They learn to choose a fly, present it naturally, and deal with tangles. They catch enough fish to learn about timing the strike and landing a trout quickly.

The oarsman does much of the work. He keeps the angler in

position, letting the fly drift at the same speed as the current. Sometimes the fly works for dozens of yards on a cast, covering trout that could not be reached in any other way. The miles drift by. During the height of the season, the fishermen in Dennis's boat may hook 20 fish in the Yellowstone River while bank-anglers are getting 3 or 4.

Dennis meets some beginners who already know where they want to fish, exactly. They've read about the Madison and Yellowstone and Big Hole, or heard about them from friends. These rivers are famous for good reason. Bear in mind, though, that the procession of drift-boats can look like the Rose Bowl parade. An instructor-guide can help you escape the traffic. He may propose to fish from sunrise to mid-day, or from after lunch to after dark. He may suggest a trip to a different part of the river or to another river that is not famous, and therefore not crowded. Maybe you'd rather be the fortieth rod down a stream that will evoke awe when you mention it to the folks back home. Then again, maybe you'd rather find undisturbed trout.

On most of the big streams and some of the little ones, you will meet the salmon fly -- whether you want to or not. You should be ashamed of yourself for screeching when it lands on your clavicle. Remind yourself that this is merely a species of giant stonefly, distantly related to the cockroach, and it does not eat humans. You will learn to love the salmon-fly. The best fish dine on it, and its imitations are easier to use than wisps of feather on little hooks. You cannot blame the creature for

being as creepy as your subconscious.

Nobody admits to this, but there is a competition to tie artificial salmon flies even more bizarre than the naturals. The contest is probably therapeutic. There are, however, some practical reasons too. The trout see a parade of imitation salmon-fly nymphs and dry flies, beginning in mid-June, and if yours looks like the last dozen, it will probably be ignored. What might work is Something Completely Different -- the fantasy with which your fish has not already had a learning experience. And therefore fly-tiers dream up patterns with new stimuli.

Dennis recommends starting the day with a half-dozen each of the best patterns of dry flies, whatever they may be at the moment, and twice as many nymphs. You have to fish where the trout are feeding. Stonefly nymphs live in stones, and stones snag your hooks. Drift-boats are not built for going back up fast currents, so you grit your teeth and break off. Then you tie on another fly in a hurry and get back to casting. A few fly-shops are actually located on the banks of rivers so that fishermen can duck in for emergency supplies. In most places, however, you can spend the last half of the day at pure nature-study if you fail to bring enough of the right flies with you.

When big weighted nymphs are attached to the leader, 12-pound test tippets are not too heavy. Dennis likes Maxima material, which has good abrasion-resistance, partly because it is thicker than usual for its stated strength. When small mayflies and caddisflies hatch, however, you can drop down to 4-

pound-test tippets for dry flies. Anything weaker than that is risky when fish and boat are heading in opposite directions. The best tippets for small floating flies come from super-strong monofilaments like Orvis and Dai-Riki.

At first, you may want to put a strike-indicator on your leader to help you keep track of a nymph's location. Blaze-orange yarn works well. In a day or two, however, you should find that you are able to follow the path of the fly without help. Try to get along without the yarn as soon as you feel competent, because it retards the speed at which your leader sinks. You want to have the flexibility to fish your nymph either deep or shallow with each cast, adapting instantly to the contours of the river's bed.

Graphite fly rods are good at casting heavy flies. Even so, you will want a 9-foot rod -- 8½ feet at the least -- to keep the hook well above your head, and your guide's. (You will notice that he wears a cap battened down around his ears.)

Dennis recommends double-tapered lines. They provide good control of the fly, he says, and reduce the temptation to make long, profitless casts. He prefers a 6-weight line for drift-fishing. Some anglers like a 7-weight for casting the heaviest nymphs, but a line this heavy splashes down hard if you switch to smaller flies. A 5-weight has trouble lofting the heaviest flies but is good for everything else.

I am building up to the most important item of tackle -- a raincoat. One of those thunderheads will rain on your parade, making unprepared anglers wetter than muskrats. Then the sun will

come out and the sky will be a fresh-washed blue. Everybody will change back to long-billed caps and sunglasses.

Dennis's glasses are polarized, and yours should be too. You'll need to watch for the flash of a rainbow's side down deep. Concentration is work, but when you spot a feeding fish before your guide tells you about it, you gain precious seconds. The timing is more like wing-shooting than contemplative angling. You learn to lead a trout like a pheasant, getting your fly on the water a couple of yards upstream and letting it drift down to the fish. You strike at any twitch of leader, any bulge in the water, any change in the color of the current. You earn the trout by intensity and land it by desire.

I can do it, sometimes. My problem is that there are too many other things happening on the river. When attention wanders, I take a turn at the oars and let Dennis fish. He deserves it. He catches a couple of trout, gives the rod back to me, and I am deadly serious again. I narrow my focus to a pocket where a pretty trout may be waiting to ambush my ugly fly. My world is a twisting stream, a cycle, a sine curve of water and mind.

Wild roses bloom along the bank and our boat drifts into their scent. My intensity flags and the world resumes its spin. I notice that the pelicans are in the air now, very high in the evening sun. They have an improbable triangular shape, like a kite, or like the last of the pterodactyls. They are soaring somewhere for their next day's fishing. Makes a fellow want to drift along with them.

The pelicans have taken the day off. Me too. The sun is warm on my back and I have caught more trout than I deserve.

Dennis switches seats with me and shows how the fishing ought to be done. He casts very near the shore, and sometimes below boulders in midstream. We start to see fish rising, so he knots on a dry fly. It is a pattern called a Jean Harlowe, [] and it is roughly the size of a Rose-Bowl float. It could imitate a salmon fly, or it could depict a fluffy heroine bound to a railroad track. This, remember, is a time when even trout fantasize. Who shouldn't I go with the flow?

A snout emerges just downstream of Ms. Harlowe. I choose to believe that the nose belongs to the director of a savings & loan association who has made off with an honest man's cash and is now leering at his daughter.

Dennis give the cad a sharp lesson.

Another advantage of a boat is that it lets you cover every inch of a bank for miles. No bank-fisherman will get his fly over more than a fraction of the trout that will see yours.

I fish with Dennis Kavanagh frequently because we live in the same place, near the Yellowstone and Madison rivers and not far from the Big Hole []. Some guides on the Bitterroot, [] Bighorn, [] and many other western rivers are qualified to give instruction too. But it's wise to ask when you make your reservation.

You may even have read, somewhere, that streams have an orderly sequence of riffles and pools.

The nymphs become active in the lower reaches of the rivers when the red-twig dogwood is blooming, about mid-June. You fish nymphs for a while, and then you switch to dry-flies as big as bass lures.

You can expect an instructor-guide to be good at knotting on new tippets and flies. He gets practice. When navigating a boat through a rocky stretch, however, he may not be able to take his hands off the oars. If your knot-tying skills are weak, say so before you start. No outfitter will be surprised. It is worth taking time for working on knots before the float begins.

Some guides can provide tackle for you, [] though you'd want to ask about that in advance.

and new fishing methods developed. They were revolutionary, in a sense, because they broke from older east-coast traditions, which were in turn inherited from England. Drift boats are used in much of North America, now, though the west has more than its share of suitable rivers.

It comes as a culture-shock to those who have fished pretty Quill Gordons on New York's winsome Willowemoc or Michigan's sober Au Sable.

Moreover, a fisherman drifting the river has no time to make a gentle presentation, watch the trout's reaction, change flies, and try again. By that time the boat would be far downstream. What's needed is a fly that provokes a trout to answer at once, yes or no. An innovative pattern may scare one fish back under its rocks -- and then provoke an instant response from the next.

You make a fast backcast and pop your fly in the water upstream of the fish.