



A Day in the Stream

Instead of fish, I hooked a lesson in living

By JENNIFER OLSSON

ALTHOUGH it maintained a humble exterior, the Montana dude ranch¹ where I was to meet my latest client was much more than a corral-and-bunkhouse affair. A chef with a tall white hat prepared gourmet meals; the massage sign-up sheet was posted on an easel by the front desk; the fax and copy machine were to the left.

I stepped out of my vehicle to meet my client and his wife. He was strong and solidly built. He looked like a model for an outdoor catalogue. The fishing vest was stiff with newness; all of the correct hardware, shiny and untested, hung from his chest, like tools in a toolshed. The felt on his wading boots was as white as snow. A

handcrafted net swung on his back. The rod had never gotten wet, much less caught a fish, and the line was shiny from lack of use. The reel was on backward.

Typical beginner, I thought.

I reached out to shake his hand. A firm grip grabbed back.

His wife, an attractive woman brimming with confidence, took a photo of us, then waved good-bye with an arm heavily weighted with turquoise bracelets.

First, I turned his reel around. He smiled and shrugged. Then we began his casting lesson on the lawn behind the main lodge.

To my surprise, he was one of those rare people who connect with a fly rod² almost immediately. It just looked right from the beginning, and he was charmed by the way

¹ **dude ranch:** a hotel in a ranch setting where guests can participate in ranching activities

² **fly rod:** a long, flexible fishing rod used for casting artificial flies or insects

the line seemed to magically flow above his silhouette on the lawn.

"I could just stand here all day and cast," he said, smiling.

We did not have to travel far to the water, since a perfectly sweet little creek ran along the last six miles of the rutted dirt road I had traveled that morning. The warmth of the sun raised the water temperature enough to awaken the rainbow and cutthroat trout that slumbered, and the caddis flies were dancing their erratic dance, here and there, over the water.

Even in hip waders³ we were overdressed for the ankle-deep creek, but we stepped in, waded out to the middle and faced upstream. My client cast, and I pointed to the place the fly should land.

"Oh, hey! Look at that," he said when the first fish struck. He was truly awed. The second time a trout struck, his shouts of surprise and joy rang up and down the creek, and we happily reeled in a sparkling, eight-inch wild rainbow.

"Isn't that beautiful?" he said softly, and every trout after that was beautiful, incredible, amazing, fantastic. A little brook trout took the fly, and I held it so my client could see the blue rings around the bright-orange spots.

"That's the prettiest thing I've ever seen," he said with sincerity.

To be with someone who was able to treasure the moment the way he did made me feel like I was exploring fly-fishing for the first time. I showed him how to keep his fly from dragging, how to fish the deeper pools. He was absorbed by the whys and the hows and the execution. And the fish, whether six inches or ten, were praised like precious stones.

In the late afternoon, about the time the skin begins to feel sore from a fresh sunburn, my client stopped fishing. His shoulders dropped, and he paused to look at the water, the trees and, finally, at me.

"I have to tell you something," he said. "This has been one of the best days of my life. The reason I'm telling you is, I wasn't supposed to be here right now. I've been very sick, and the doctors didn't think I was going to make it. I wasn't sure I was going to make it, but I've been well since last fall, and everything is fine now. My wife gave me this equipment because I've always wanted to fly-fish, and this trip is kind of a celebration for our family. This really has been one of the best days of my life."

I could not speak. I looked into his eyes and nodded. He smiled at me and cast again. We left the creek only after hearing the triangle ringing for dinner in the distance.

His wife, who was waiting on the front porch of their cabin, embraced him and asked how he had done. "Fantastic, absolutely fantastic." His children, a seven-year-old girl and a teenage boy, followed him inside, interrupting each other to tell him what they had done that day. I could see that the dark cloud that had hung over them for so long had passed, and they were finally able to enjoy something as simple as being a family.

Down the dirt road my vehicle bounced over ruts and rocks as I followed the creek that had given us "fantastic," "beautiful," "amazing" trout. The next day there would be a new fisherman to meet. And I would not let stiff, expensive clothes or a backward-mounted reel deceive me into thinking he had nothing to teach me.

³ **hip waders:** waterproof hip-high boots worn while fishing

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