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LIFESTYLES

### **Wading Into Heaven**

*Why fly-fishing might just be the best sport to take up in later life*

By NEIL ULMAN

You may have watched Brad Pitt in the film "A River Runs Through It." Or maybe you saw a friend with a fly-fishing rod smoothly flick 40 feet of line to a rising trout and thought, "That looks cool."

Perhaps, like me, you retired to a land of hills and cold-water streams and found a friend to teach you how to cast an artificial insect into a flowing river. When the first trout grabbed the fly, jumped and danced in the water, bending your slender rod into a quivering bow, you thought you had hooked the fish. Actually, the fish hooked you.

Because fly-fishing *is* cool. Let me count the ways.

It's active and absorbing. Wading in streams in pursuit of fish is a whole different world from sitting in a boat, waiting for something to bite. It takes a little time, maybe the kind you didn't have while working hard and raising kids. But like some other activities good for us...ah...mature folks, you can make it into whatever suits you, from leisurely pastime to strenuous obsession, solitary or social.

Fly-casting is an athletic challenge, but a small one. A very average klutz, I found it almost impossible to teach myself but easy to pick up with coaching. Its apparent similarity to another fishing discipline you may be more familiar with, spin casting, can create all sorts of frustration. Sorry, it's totally different. Drawing the supple fly rod backward to initiate a cast bends it, loading it with energy until your wrist flicks it forward. The more muscle you put into it, the worse the cast. It's all timing.

Fly-fishing is also intellectual. You study fish habits. You learn, or think you learn, to read the river, figuring out where the fish are hiding. You study stream biology. Trout feed on lots of different bugs. The trick is casting a fly that imitates the bug currently tickling their palates. You can keep all this to yourself, of course. But for many, the sport requires endless discussion, description and reportage, which tends to reflect favorably on the skill and wisdom of the teller. As Truel Myers, head of the Orvis fly-fishing school in Manchester, Vt., once said, "Fishermen are born honest, but we get over it."

If you're conservation-minded, you'll find soul mates in fly-fishing. You may practice

catch-and-release fishing -- many venues will require it. You'll come to care about preserving streams for wild fish. Trout Unlimited is an effective, apolitical organization dedicated to cold-water habitat. Members in local chapters hold meetings, swap fish stories and pursue conservation projects.

## *Brook, Lake and River*

There are many different ways you can go fly-fishing. Here are some of mine:

One evening this spring, I ducked into the woods behind my house, carrying a short rod designed for tight spaces, and slanted half a mile into a gorge that roars like the ocean during snow melt. But now the stream was lower, crisscrossed with fallen timber and crowded by overhanging trees. Coyotes, bears, deer and moose walk here. Between shallow stretches lay a pair of boulders through which water gurgled into a pool little bigger than a bathtub. Here my stealthy backcast...hooked a tree. I forgot to mention that fly-fishing also teaches humility and patience.

A better cast landed a fly called an Adams next to the rock at the head of the pool. It drifted on the current for a couple of seconds and then -- *flip*, a fish tugged, then leapt from the water. I reeled in a small brook trout, perhaps six or seven inches. Without lifting it from the water, I removed the hook and it darted away, invisible in an instant. In a decade of visits to this spot, this was my third bite and the second fish I have caught. For several nights, the brookie's mazy dorsal markings and the glistening jade and ruby spots along its flanks were the last thing I saw before falling asleep.

On September evenings when the lake near my house is glassy, I meet the neighbor who taught me to pursue trout with a canoe. To the ends of our floating fly lines we tie 11-foot leaders of nearly invisible monofilament, tipped with an artificial midge half the size of the nail on my little finger. I paddle first, the better to study Dave's technique. After a trout rises to gulp a real midge from the surface, we track his next rise, which betrays his course. I paddle Dave into position to cast his midge in the trout's path. Two or three times (on a very good night) we get a trout. In between we have the quiet of the darkening lake, lights beginning to glow orange in shoreline cabins, and the occasional slurp of a feeding fish.

Some evenings or dark, rainy days, I drive five miles north to cast a "wet" fly into the river by the town-line bridge. The Adams and midge described above are dry flies that float on or near the surface. But most northern Vermont trout are hooked deeper on a wet fly that imitates a stream-dwelling bug drifting along the bottom or surfacing to take flight. In 10 years I have caught five brown trout near this bridge abutment. Next, I always walk a quarter-mile downstream to where, several years ago, I saw two large trout holding by the riverbank. They fled before I could cast to them. So I fish here every year at least once. Never even had a bite.

Driving 60 miles east to the Connecticut River is a big expedition. Richard, a neighbor and retired pediatrician, and I once canoed the river for a couple of days, camping

overnight on a sandbar. We caught one fish each. Dave and I headed over on another rainy day to wade. He hooked nine with a sinking line; my floating line caught zero. But we both got to see a moose with full antlers cross 50 yards upstream from Vermont into New Hampshire. I went home and invested \$60 in a sinking line.

### *Equipment and Guides*

You can spend a bundle on fly-fishing, but needn't. A classic handcrafted, split-bamboo fly rod costs \$3,500. I'd go with a starter package (\$75 to \$150), which includes rod, reel and fly line. Some \$60 hip boots will get you into the water. Big catalog retailers such as L.L. Bean, Cabela's and Orvis offer a wide selection and good telephone advice, as well as fly-fishing schools and packaged trips. Eleven years ago this newspaper sent me to report on the Orvis school. It was pricey (\$470 today for the two-day course) but excellent. At your local fly shop or sporting-goods store, you can handle and test gear before making a purchase. Buy flies, generally about \$2 each, where you fish; they usually come with tips on where and what the fish are biting.

You may want to travel and fish with professional guides. In recent years I've rafted down Oregon's Sandy and Deschutes rivers for a day each with my son-in-law, Zach Mertens, formerly a guide in Alaska and Idaho, and his friend, Brian Silvey, a guide and fly tier in Maupin, Ore. Zach founded Idylwilde Flies, in Portland, Ore., which makes and wholesales flies by the tens of thousands, some designed by Brian. So what do they do on their day off? Go fishing, of course, with Dad paying for the gas.

About 200 days a year Brian, with a college degree in aquatic biology, steers his pontoon raft down churning white water and placid reaches, showing his clients the good places to wade and fish. For a greenhorn like me, he'll select and tie a fly to your leader and, if you like, coach your casting. These pros are also fun to watch. In the canyon of the Deschutes, where the local variety of rainbow trout sometimes exceeds 20 inches, Brian beaches on a small island where Zach spots a trout feeding in an eddy 50 feet away. A perfect cast with a dry fly hooks him neatly. Brian then stations me near a riffle where even I catch one of these fish.

Guides, to be sure, cost real money -- from \$325 for a day of trout fishing on the Deschutes with Brian for one person to \$525 for three people. A five-day trip camping down the river for three costs \$5,625.

Whatever you do out there, be careful. You could become addicted.

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