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Fly Fish America

May/June 2008

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ANNUAL TROUT ISSUE

This Magazine

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Your Local Fly Shop

Snake River Idaho/Wyoming

Cutthroat Trout On The South Fork

"Be careful, Jim," I said to my guide as he unhooked and then handed me my first Snake River cutthroat trout. "I think he must have swallowed the fly rather deeply, or maybe it's in his gills since he appears to be bleeding." My guide, Jim Hickey, didn't even bother to look up, much less acknowledge my unsolicited advice. He deftly removed the hook and then handed me a rather plump and healthy trout from the South Fork of the Snake River. "He's just fine," Jim said without even a hint of sarcasm. Hickey, who releases thousands of cutthroat trout each season, was no doubt used to the rookie mistake I'd made. Seeing the blood-red stripe just below the gill plate, I assumed he had been injured. "Now I see why they call them cutthroat trout," I said rather sheepishly. Jim just grinned and leaned back on the oars of his Clackcraft drift boat.

I settled back comfortably into the drift boat myself and thought back to the day before. I'd flown into Jackson Hole, Wyoming by way of Denver, and I was mightily impressed at the site of the Teton Mountains as my plane rumbled onto the tarmac in the late afternoon. After disembarking I quickly spied my father in law, John Johnson, standing in what passes as a waiting room in Jackson's tiny airport. John, who spent over 30 years in the U. S. Forest Service, is 6' 6" tall and easy to spot in a crowd. He was beaming at me and I could see he was as eager to go fishing as I was. Over the years he's become my fishing partner when ever I go out West, and since he knew the area fairly well from his Forest Service days, he wanted to show me the sites before heading off to our hotel.

An Angler's Prayer

OUR FIRST STOP was The Chapel of Transfiguration, a beautiful building made of lodge pole pine that was erected by members of the Episcopal Church in 1925. The chapel is open to travelers 24 hour a day during the summer, and offers a wonderful view of the Tetons from a large picture window at the rear of the chapel. It's hard to express what one feels when standing in this special place, and I must admit I took a moment to say a special prayer of thanks for seeing such a glorious place. I also have to admit I asked the Almighty for a little help, since I was going to fish the famous Snake River for the first time the next day. After leaving the chapel John made a few quick turns and we were on Antelope Flats, and within 10 minutes we could see their namesake critters grazing and staring back at us.

A few more turns and we spotted a pair of mule deer, and as if that weren't enough, down along a small creek I spied a bull elk stopping for a drink. I could hardly take it all in when John pointed to a herd of brown beasts moving along the edge of the sage brush in the distance. I picked up John's binoculars and beheld my first herd of buffalo. "Wow," I exclaimed like my 3-year-old son, "look at the buffalo!" John, who was driving, cut his eyes at me and said curtly "Beau, those are bison, not buffalo. Buffalo are found in Africa, while bison inhabit the great plains of the American West." This retort rather deflated my enthusiasm until we rounded a corner and had to come to a complete stop when a herd of bison (definitely not buffalo) decided to cross the road. I looked on in amazement and snapped pictures as fast as I could. These majestic creatures have come to symbolize the American West as much as Native Americans. I only wish my children could've seen the calves as they nursed from their mothers. Some of the bulls, which must have been pushed 800 pounds, looked on with an air of suspicion that said, "You can take all the pictures you want, pilgrim, but if you set foot out of that truck you're dead meat." I stayed in the truck.



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by Beau Beasley

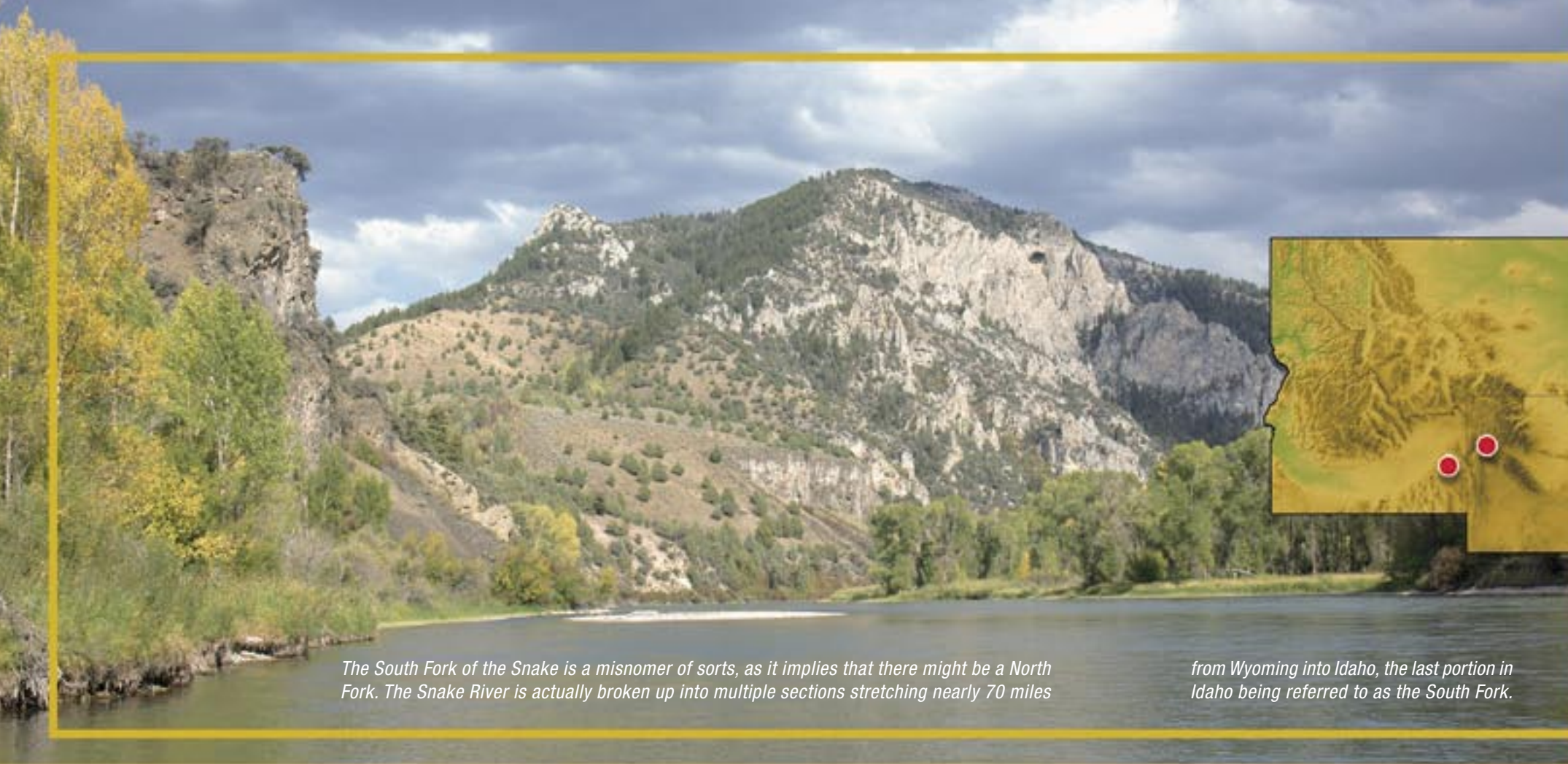


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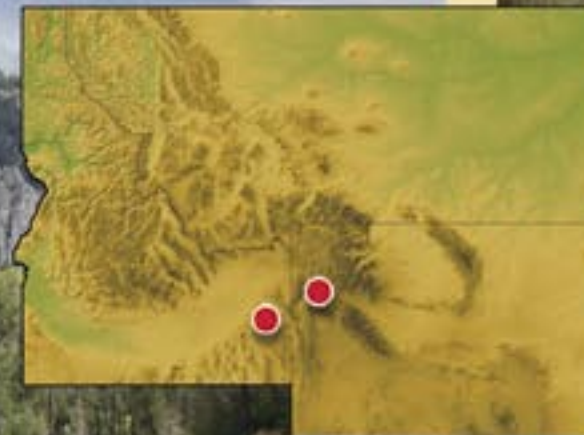


BEAU BEASLEY PHOTOS





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from Wyoming into Idaho, the last portion in Idaho being referred to as the South Fork.



A Guide's Guide

THE NEXT MORNING found me standing on the second floor balcony of the Angler's Inn in Jackson Hole trying to soak up all the scenery. Our hotel was just what anglers love: clean and affordable, with an environment that's rustic and quiet as a grave at night. The "no vacancy" sign I'd noticed coming in the night before was a common sight in Jackson Hole, and I was glad I'd made my reservations much earlier in the month. By 8:30 that morning Jim's pickup pulled into the parking lot and we quickly stowed our gear.

I've had the pleasure of knowing Jim Hickey, a partner in World Cast Anglers, for nearly ten years. I first met Jim when he and his wife Jenny were guiding in my home state of Virginia, and where I fished with him on more than one occasion. Jim is the consummate professional guide that can handle a drift boat better than most folks can drive their car. He's constantly tinkering with fly patterns (his Hickey's Condor is a must for Virginia smallies), and he's a superb caster to boot. Jim is a long time member of the USA Fly Fishing Team, and his team placed sixth in the world games in 2006. Jim's so good, in fact, that he and his partners actually teach a week-long guide's school. Some folks who take the course are newbies trying to break into the business, while others just want to brush up on their skills and need an outside assessment of how they stack up against their peers. Of all the qualities Jim possesses as a guide, however, his greatest skill is reading people. He knows when to encourage or correct a client, as well as when to keep quiet. This, no doubt, is why he didn't correct me when I mentioned the "injured trout."

The South Fork of the Snake

THE SNAKE RIVER is known for being one of best cutthroat trout fisheries in the West, and boast thousands of trout per mile ranging from 15 to 24 inches. Anglers from across the country, and the world,

come here for the smashing surface takes by hungry cutts feasting on the large terrestrials. This surface slam-fest occurs in the summer, and since I was fishing in September the terrestrial action was not an option, but that didn't keep the fish from biting. Anglers who can't make it to the Snake in prime-time months should remember that the shoulder season from late August to mid October is still a good time to fish here. Cutthroats aren't the only option, as rainbows and browns call this water home as well. As a matter of fact, the rainbow population is so large that Idaho Game and Fish asks that you keep any rainbows you catch, no matter their size!

The South Fork of the Snake is a misnomer of sorts, as it implies that there might be a North Fork. The Snake River is actually broken up into multiple sections stretching nearly 70 miles from Wyoming into Idaho, the last portion in Idaho being referred to as the South Fork. This fishery is a tailwater produced by the Palisades Dam. Although the river had a good flow while I was there, the color was off as silt clouded what would normally be crystal-clear waters. Generally speaking, anglers here can normally see up to five feet in depth.

Finding the Strike Zone

I'M NOT A NOVICE fly angler by any standard, but I do not consider myself an expert either. I was humbled, however, by how long it took me to get into the groove of fishing this extraordinary river. There are two principal methods of fishing here when casting dry flies is not your first choice. The first is to nymph with a double rig—usually a size-10 prince nymph followed by a dropper. The dropper can be any variety of smaller patterns down to size-24. A small amount of weight can be added above the first fly, with a double indicator used about two feet above the first. Nearly all of this fishing is done from a drift boat, so anglers rarely have to cast more than 30 feet at the outside.

To say that strikes here at this time of the year are fast and subtle is a great understatement. I fished for nearly four hours before I really felt like I was finding the strike zone. That's not to say I didn't catch fish, but I know I missed many, many more than I caught. This type of fishing is certainly a numbers game, and landing 50 trout in a single day can be done.

The second method is to use streamer patterns cast tight to the bank. This technique results in much larger fish, but anglers may go 30 minutes without a good strike. This method is exciting, since you can see the fish charging your fly, but also proves nerve racking since you don't know when the strike will come. Often, fish strike right before the fly reaches the boat. John landed several nice trout in the 16- to 20-inch range, and lost perhaps a dozen others. He caught so many, in fact, that I considered not inviting him to fish with me again. As I mentioned before, he's a "big" boy and my father in law, so I tend to cut him a little slack.

As the day was nearing a close I began casting a size-4 white zuddler tight to the bank. After a while I became distracted by the awesome scenery and was sort of on auto-pilot casting and retrieving my fly, all the while looking at the buttes and riverside cliffs. All at once my line stopped and I was slammed back into reality as a massive cutthroat turned with my white zuddler in his mouth. I took in a huge breath, as I could tell the fish was easily 24 inches in length. In a split second he spit out the fly and lazily headed back for the bank, my fly line slumped in the water for lack of tension.

Despite the loss of this monster trout, the day went on pleasantly enough, with Jim gently rowing John and me down the river. I learned a lot on this trip, including that you really have to pay attention to what you're doing. You never know when you'll cross paths with a massive trout while fishing, or see a buffalo while driving. Did I just say buffalo? I meant bison, of course.

BEAU BEASLEY PHOTOS

Planning A Trip

A TRIP OUT WEST is like any other fishing trip and requires good planning. Keep in mind that although the Snake may be the most famous river near Jackson, Wyoming, other options are also available. Anglers can use places like the Anglers Inn (800-867-4667; www.anglersinn.net) as a base of operations and fish multiple locations, like Wyoming's Green, Salt or New Fork Rivers. In Idaho you can also fish the South Fork of the Snake (where overnight camping is an option) and fish the Teton River as well. A word to the wise, however: Do your homework and make sure your guide is legit. World Cast Anglers is the only Wyoming-based outfitter legally licensed to guide on the South Fork of the Snake.

For more information on when and where to fish, or to attend their guide school, contact World Cast Anglers at (800) 654-0676; Web: www.worldcastanglers.com.

River Information

THE UNINFORMED MIGHT THINK that anglers are always fishing the Snake River with huge terrestrials and other surface patterns. Although this is certainly what's made the Snake River famous, it hardly passes as the only angling option when coming out to Wyoming, or Idaho for that matter. Other rivers include the Green, Teton, Salt and New Fork, as well as a half dozen others in Yellowstone National Park. A great source for information on these waters is the Orvis Company Store in Jackson Hole (307-733-5407; www.orvis.com).



Beau Beasley (www.beaubeasley.com) is an FFA contributing editor. His first book, *Fly Fishing Virginia: A No Nonsense Guide to Top Waters*, is a must for anglers who fish the Old Dominion.