



ALL PHOTOS BY KEVIN CASS

South Fork of the Snake River, ID

Cutthroat Nirvana

By Beau Beasley

From the balcony of my second-story room at the Anglers Inn, I admired the bluffs that frame the quirky small town of Jackson, Wyoming. As a native Virginian, I am awed by Western mountains. Even more thrilling was the prospect of catching one of the area's storied cutthroat trout.

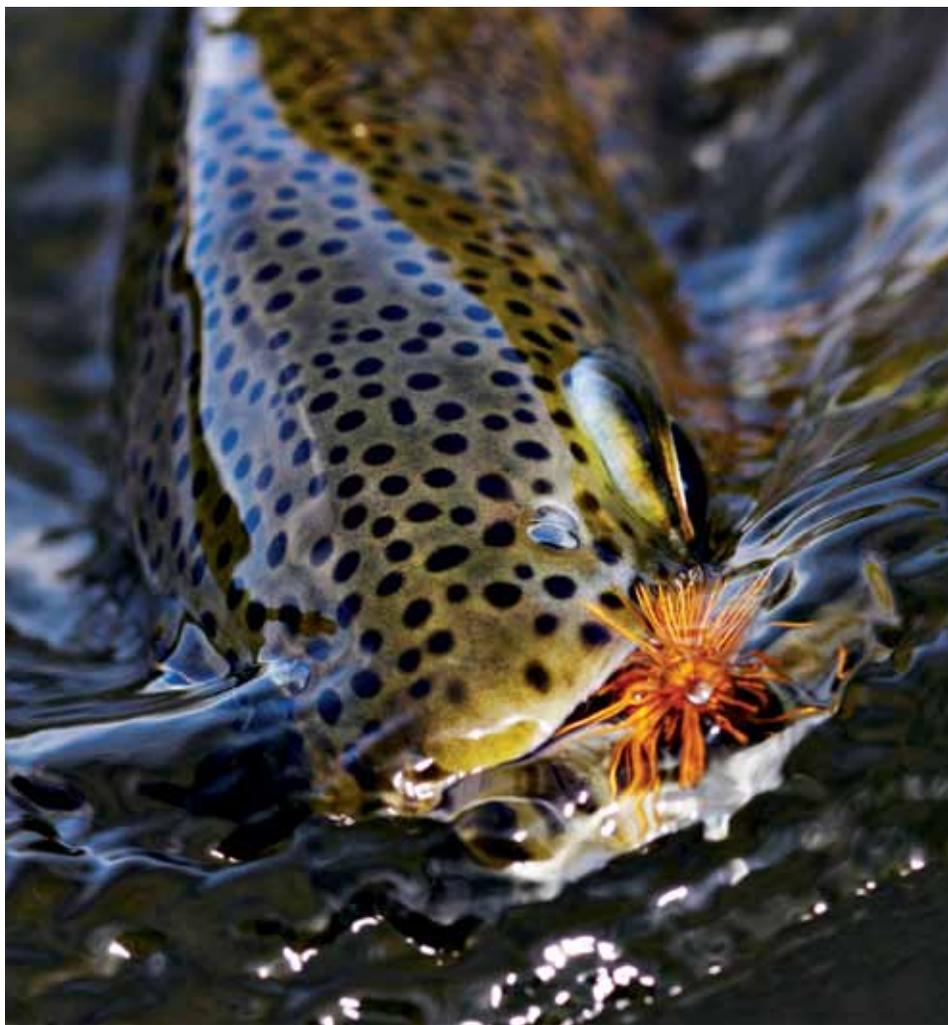
Only a few hours before, I'd met my father-in-law, John Johnson, at the tiny airport in Jackson. At 6 feet, 6 inches, John is easy to spot just about anywhere—even when the majestic Tetons are the backdrop. A retired 30-year veteran of the U.S. Forest Service, he is a Montana native who has lived in (and fished) the American Northwest nearly all his life and knows the wildlife of the area like the back of his hand. He's worked in Prince William Sound on salmon issues, fought forest fires in Montana, managed ranger stations responsible for thousands of acres of timber, and has had his share of run-ins with errant grizzly bears. In short, John is just the sort of guy I'd want to partner with when heading into the wild. As far as I can tell, his only fault is that he has a rather unpleasant habit of outfishing me. Neither of us had fished the South Fork of the Snake before, however, so as we headed out to the river, I thought that perhaps I had leveled the playing field at last.

As we loaded our gear into Jim Hickey's drift boat, I cast a doubtful eye at the heavy clouds and drizzle. Jim, vice president of WorldCast Anglers, assured me that the fishing would be just fine. And he ought to know: Jim is a well-respected fly angler both in Wyoming and in my neck of the woods. I met Jim and his wife, Jenny—an excellent guide in her own right who can cast circles around most men, including me—when they were full-time Virginia smallmouth guides; they have fished around the world, but they have both fallen in love with Wyoming. Today Jim guides in Wyoming and Idaho and competes as a member of the U.S. Olympic Fly Fishing team. He knows the water like a native, casts like a pro, and handles his Clackcraft drift boat as if it came equipped with a steering wheel. He also trains other guides who hope to strike out on their own. But perhaps the most impressive thing about Jim is his lack of ego. He's just a nice guy, which makes it easy to spend eight hours on the water with him.

Discovering the Snake

Intrepid explorer Captain William Clark was the first European in recorded history to mention the Snake River.

When Clark “discovered” the river in 1805, the resident Shoshones called it the Salmon River; some believe that the name Snake was probably derived from the S-shaped hand signals that the Shoshones used to indicate salmon, which thrived in the river at that time. Though the river was called the Lewis for a few years, the name never stuck, and mapmakers began referring to it as the Snake. The Snake River originates in Yellowstone National Park but is impounded by Jackson Lake Dam and flows all the way south through Jackson to the Wyoming/Idaho state line. At Palisades Dam, in Idaho, the river becomes a tailwater



South Fork rainbows love bushy dry flies during July, when stoneflies and caddisflies hatch (above). Eric Anderson of South Fork Outfitters enjoys a day off from guiding. Guided float trips are ideal for both first-time visitors to this beautiful river and for veterans who would rather fish than row (left).

fishery—and it is here that the river becomes the South Fork of the Snake. There is actually no North Fork, as the more northerly prong of the main Snake is the famous Henrys Fork that originates at Henrys Lake and eventually melds with the South Fork near the town of Rexburg. The Snake River ranks among the best cutthroat trout fisheries in the West and boasts thousands of trout per mile, many of which range from 15 to 24 inches. Anglers arrive from all over for the smashing surface takes of hun-

gry trout feasting on large terrestrials. The surface slamfest is generally a summer occurrence; I was on the Snake in September when terrestrials were off the menu, but that didn't keep the fish from biting. The lesson here is that if you can't make it to the Snake for prime time, the shoulder season, which runs from late August to mid-October, is still a good time to fish here. And cutthroat aren't the only quarry: rainbows, browns, and cutbows call this water home as well. As a matter of fact, the rainbow population is so large that the Idaho Department of Fish and Game asks anglers to keep any rainbows caught, no matter their size.

You Just Missed a Fish

As we headed downstream in Jim's drift boat, I was looking forward to catching up with him, spending some quality time with my father-in-law, and landing some really nice fish. A few hours later I had little left to say to Jim, wanted to hit my father-in-law in the head with the oars, and was this far from asking, "Are we done yet?" John was landing one nice fish after another, whereas I hadn't received so much as a bump. I cast a dark glance at Jim and John, but neither seemed to notice:

they had hit it off famously and were enjoying themselves far too much to give me a thought.

Eventually I humbled myself enough to ask Jim, "What am I doing wrong?"

"Nothing, Beau," he replied with a smile. "It just takes a while to get adjusted to fishing the South Fork."

He checked my line and put on a nondescript nymph pattern he had created called Hickey's Paydirt. Nice pattern, but nothing to write home about, I thought to myself. I eyed it with suspicion and cast it toward the shore. Still nothing. By contrast, John was into his second dozen fish and having the time of his life, driving me nuts with statements like, "Oh, this is a nice fish," and "Wow, Beau, thanks for bringing me along. I've always wanted to fish the South Fork." Meanwhile, I was wondering what I had ever admired in the man.

Eventually, Jim took pity on me and changed his strategy, letting me know every time I had missed a fish. This seemed implausible to me because I hadn't yet felt what I thought was a strike. "Nope, that's terra firma," he'd say periodically—to my intense irritation—to let me know that I was striking at debris or had caught my pattern on part of the

shoreline. I had just about given up on fishing and was calculating my odds of making it home alone—my thought was to hit John in the head with the oar first and then Jim, since John's a big guy and I might have to hit him twice—when I noticed the slightest bump in my indicator and set the hook. No "terra firma" this time: my first cutthroat took off downriver like a bat out of hell. I looked over at Jim and said, "You have got to be kidding me. That was a take? The indicator barely moved!" Before I knew it, I was well into my fly line, with John offering a few kind words along the lines of, "It took you long enough, Beau."

I couldn't have been happier with the football-shaped cutthroat I landed. John snapped a quick picture, Jim deftly removed the hook, and I realized a few things: I still liked Jim Hickey and thought him a

terrific guide, his Hickey's Paydirt more than lived up to its name, my father-in-law really was a great guy, and the takes are incredibly subtle on the South Fork of the Snake River.

Finding the Strike Zone

If you find yourself on the South Fork and dry flies aren't on the menu, you have a couple of options. First, consider nymphing with a double-fly rig. You can follow a size-10 Prince Nymph with a dropper, which may be any of a variety of smaller patterns down to size 24. Add a small amount of weight above the first fly and use a double indicator about 2 feet above the first pattern. Nearly all of this fishing is done from a drift boat, so anglers rarely have to cast much more than 20 feet. When I say that Snake River strikes are fast and subtle in September, I'm understating things. I fished for nearly four hours before I really developed a feel for the



Eric and Sarah Anderson enjoy a perfect summer afternoon on the South Fork.

strike. Yes, I caught a few in the morning—but I know that I missed many, many more than I caught. Nymphing with a double rig is certainly a numbers game; believe it or not, you can land 50 trout in a single day even in the slow season.

Your second option is to cast streamer patterns tight to the riverbank. You may net much larger fish this way, but you may go for half an hour at a time without a good strike. So you have to ask yourself if you're shooting for quantity or quality. Casting to the bank is exciting because you can see the fish charging your fly; it also proves nerve-racking because you don't know when the strike will come. Often fish strike right before the fly reaches the boat. The key is to watch what you're doing—which is easier said than done, given the spectacular scenery. I really enjoyed fishing a Trick-or-Treat streamer that Jim lent me. I also managed to lose a brown of about 24 inches on a white Zuddler.

Flies, Lies, and Beer

John and I lost count of how many fish we were catching as the sun put in an appearance and burned off the morning's gray sky. We got out and stretched our legs and fished along a narrow sandbar with a big bluff in the background. John, a self-proclaimed "geezer," looked like he'd been transformed back into the kid he once was, roaming the Wild West, trusty fly rod in hand. The three of us swapped fishing stories, related family funnies, cursed the government, and generally had a rip-roaring great time. John and I eventually browbeat Jim into casting a fly rod himself a few times, which he did only very reluctantly, producing a trout in short order.

Eventually we piled back into the boat and set off downriver again. Having landed quite a few cutts, I decided to leave off nymphing and turn my attention to casting big streamers. Before long I had a few nice fish under my belt when Jim surprised me with, "You guys ready for lunch and a cold beer?"

A trick question, I figured. I knew that he had nothing

in the cooler save soft drinks. And I've been in plenty of social situations with Jim Hickey; a heavy drinker he isn't. "Where in the world are you going to find beer out here, Jim? We're in the middle of nowhere—and it's hot!"

He looked at me blankly and replied cryptically, "The refrigerator, of course."

With that, he pulled the boat over to a large island, where just past the brush on the shoreline we found a camp that Jim and his clients use for overnight trips, complete with canvas tents, picnic tables, and even a pantry of sorts. Jim led us to a small feeder stream that ran along a canyon wall, plunged his hands beneath the water of the hidden spring, and produced an ice-cold beer. Jim Hickey, the consummate guide.

Lay of the Land

The first section of the South Fork of the Snake, which begins at Palisades Dam and runs to Spring Creek Bridge near Irwin, Idaho, is a tailwater environment—nymphing and streamers are the order of the day. Technical dry-fly fishing options exist here, but this section is not known for its surface action. Nevertheless, this section is the most popular with fly anglers because of its close proximity to Jackson and Victor and because there are multiple boat ramps, which provide ample access. These access points offer anglers the option of lazily floating all day or putting in a few good hours of steady fishing after a hard day at work.

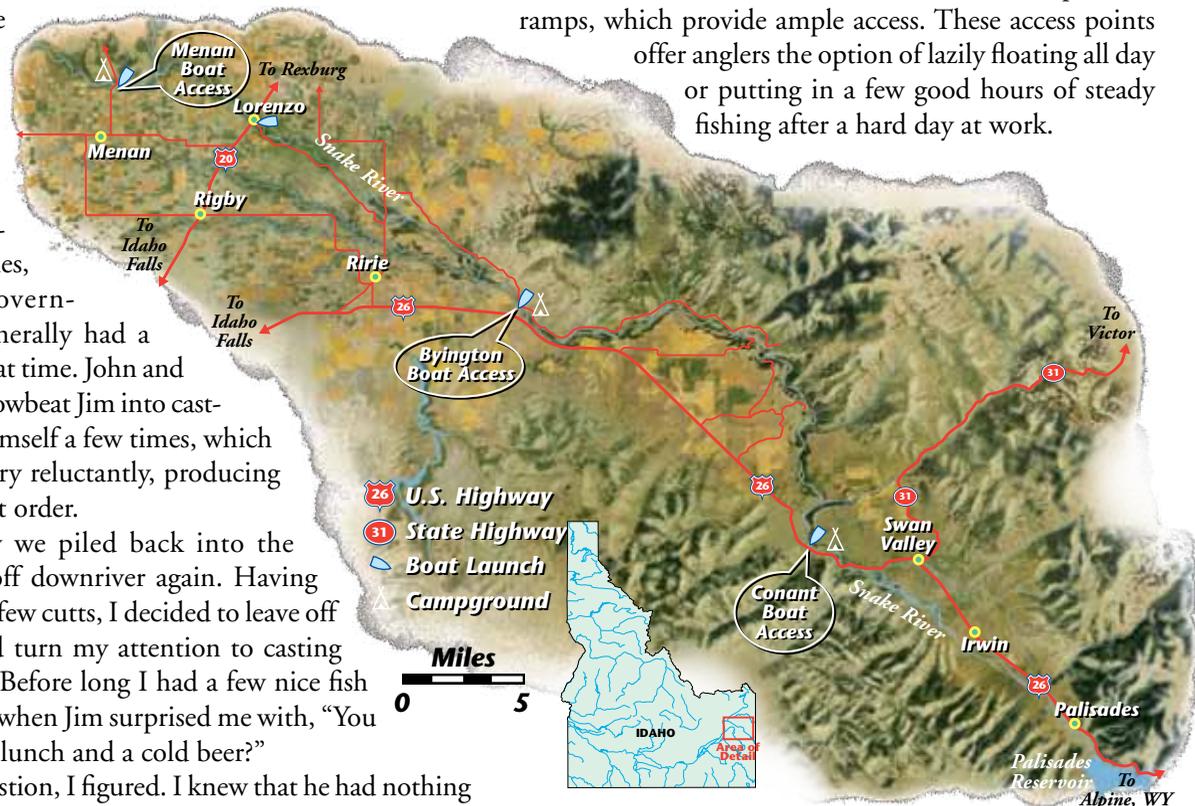
Hickey's Hornet

By Jim Hickey



PHOTO BY NORTHWEST FLY FISHING

- Hook:** TMC 3761 SP-BL, sizes 10–14
- Thread:** Light olive 6/0
- Body:** 50/50 blend of light olive Antron-blend dubbing and caddis green Ice Dub
- Wing:** Holographic Mylar tinsel
- Tail:** Brown goose biots
- Rib:** Fine gold oval



The second section of the river—where Jim, John, and I fished—is known as “the Canyon” and runs from Conant to Byington. If you put in at Conant and need some last-minute items, you’re in luck: South Fork Outfitters is nearby. It is an excellent place to shop for gear and pick up information about the river.

The Canyon put-in section has a huge parking lot and clean public bathrooms. It’s a traditional freestone environ-

ment where large rock bluffs flank the river at nearly every turn. Riffles and good pocket water abound here, and the canyon walls make for picture-postcard scenery. This is also where the South Fork’s famous terrestrial action hits its peak.

Whereas anglers can row the upper section of the South Fork in a matter of hours, the Canyon section is an all-day event. This reach is 26 miles long with virtually no roads nearby and no take-outs. Some anglers and their guides opt to fish the Canyon the old-fashioned way, complete with overnight trip and stories around the campfire. The Bureau of Land Management also has regulated overnight campsites available on a first-come, first-served basis.

The lower reach of the South Fork stretches from Byington to Menan; another take-out is located at Lorenzo as well. Numerous side channels characterize this lowest section of the river, providing anglers with nearly limitless fishing possibilities. The cutthroat population is healthy here, but the brown trout population soars—and with the rise of the browns, rainbows become quite scarce. Tactics must account for fallen trees, sweepers, strainers, and large logjams. Forget casting to the shore; instead, run big streamers along the multiple wooden masses that dot the river. This is serious fishing structure; anglers whose résumés include lots of smallmouth bass fishing may actually have the advantage. You can still cast the occasional dry or nymph, but expect to lose plenty of flies to underwater tree limbs. Finally, here is where your boat could easily get pinned to structure that is barely visible above the water. An angler drowns here nearly every year—unless you want this trip to be your last, pay attention and don’t become a statistic.

The lower reaches of the South Fork also see the most agricultural use; the absentminded or uninformed angler could guide his boat into a nice side channel only to discover that he has inadvertently entered an irrigation ditch. Pulling a drift boat over skinny water isn’t much fun. It’s even less enjoyable once you discover that your side channel is completely blocked by a logjam that prevents you from going farther downstream.

SOUTH FORK NOTEBOOK

When: June–Oct., depending on early summer flows and fall weather.

Where: Below Palisades Dam.

Headquarters: Jackson, WY, and Idaho Falls, ID. *Lodging:* The Anglers Inn, (800) 867-4667, www.anglersinn.net; South Fork Lodge, (877) 347-4735, www.southforklodge.com; The Lodge at Palisades Creek, (866) 393-1613, www.tlapc.com; Teton Valley Lodge, (800) 455-1182, www.tetonvalley-lodge.com; Three Rivers Ranch, (208) 652-3750, www.threeriversranch.com.

Appropriate gear: 9-ft., 5- or 6-wt. rods; floating and sinking-tip lines.

Useful fly patterns: Turner’s Bank Robber, orange Chernobyl Ant, Cat Puke Stonefly, Rogue Stone, Stimulator, Sofa Pillow, Quigley’s Little Yellow Stone, Elk Hair Caddis, X-Caddis, PMD Sparkle Dun, BWO Parachute, Parachute Adams, hopper patterns, Prince Nymph, Rainbow Warrior, Copper Bob, Pheasant Tail Nymph, 20-Incher, Hickey’s Hornet, Hickey’s Paydirt, Peeking Caddis, Zuddler, JJ’s Special, McCune’s Sculpin, Double Bunny, Trick-or-Treat.

Necessary accessories: Polarized sunglasses, sunscreen, waders/wading staff (if you want to get off the boat to fish).

Nonresident license: *Idaho:* \$11.50/1 day plus \$5 each additional consecutive day, \$82/annual. *Wyoming:* \$14/1 day, \$92/annual.

Fly shops/guides: *Idaho Falls, ID:* Jimmy’s All Seasons Angler, (208) 524-7160, www.jimmysflyshop.com; Hyde Drift Boats and Fly Shop, (800) 444-4933, www.hydeoutdoors.com. *Swan Valley, ID:* South Fork Outfitters, (800) 483-2110, www.southforkoutfitters.com. *Jackson, WY:* High Country Flies, (307) 733-7210, www.highcountryflies.com; Jack Dennis Sports, (800) 570-3270, www.jackdennis.com; Orvis Jackson Hole, (307) 733-5407, www.orvis.com; Westbank Anglers, (800) 922-3474, www.westbank.com. *Moose, WY:* Snake River Angler, (888) 998-7688, www.snakeriverangler.com. WorldCast Anglers, (800) 654-0676, www.worldcastanglers.com. (Guides also available through fly shops.)

Books/maps: *Trout Country Flies* and *Snake River Country Flies and Waters* by Bruce Staples; *Flyfisher’s Guide to Idaho* by Ken Retallic and Rocky Barker; *Idaho Blue-Ribbon Fly Fishing Guide* by John Shewey; *Fly Fishing Idaho* by Bill Mason. *Idaho Atlas & Gazetteer* by DeLorme Mapping.



Hiring a Snake Charmer

The Snake River may be the most famous water near Jackson—but it's by no means the only option. If you're willing to drive a few miles, consider Wyoming's Green, Salt, or New Fork rivers. The Teton is also an option, and the Henrys Fork is not far distant; nor are the half dozen or so rivers in Yellowstone National Park.

I recommend a guide, of course, but remember: caveat emptor. Ask for references before committing. While fishing the South Fork, we spied a "guided" party whose members were clearly not with a professional guide. Wyoming-based WorldCast Anglers is great, and many Idaho-based guides work the river.

For breathtaking scenery and hungry trout, put the Snake River near the top of your to-fish list. Dozens of guides and multiple shops service the river, so interested anglers can find plenty of help—unless they wait until the last minute to plan a trip. The key to success on the Snake is to plan early—and to keep your eye on your indicator.



The South Fork's native cutthroat trout love rubber legs.

Plan and watch, and you should find plenty of cutthroat waiting for you—and with any luck, an ice-cold beer somewhere downstream.

Beau Beasley is a freelance writer and photographer who lives in Warrenton, Virginia.



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