

## Get Thee to a Guide School!

My youngest son, Geoffrey, is affectionately known to his brother, Nathan, and me as “The Fish Whisperer.” He consistently hooks up to trout on the river while we look on in awe. A little over a year ago, Geoffrey announced that, “All I want to do is be a flyfishing guide.” I told him, “Great, but first you need to finish your degree at UW. Then I will send you to guide school as a graduation present.” Geoffrey kept his end of the bargain and graduated this spring with a B.A. in History. I started shopping for guide schools.

There are many guide schools out there. I happen to have picked World Cast Anglers’ *Western Rivers Guide School* in Victor, ID, for its reputation and long-standing presence in the flyfishing “industry.” After Geoffrey filled out the application, I wondered, “Why should he have all the fun?” So I signed up for eight days of guide school myself. At age 59, I have no intention of changing careers and rowing clients on the river five days a week. However, I knew that World Cast could make me a better fly angler and I could foment great memories with Geoffrey.

On the first night, WCA instructors asked each of ten students what they wanted to get out of guide school. I told them, “I want to learn how to make my boat a fishing tool.” Many of the instructors smiled with understanding. Following is a synopsis of what I learned in guide school. Perhaps the knowledge imparted to me will whet your appetite and you will also consider attending a guide school.

Knots and Setup. Can you tie a nail knot using a length of thick mono as the “nail”? I can. More importantly, can you quickly tie a blood, perfection loop, non-slip loop, surgeon’s, clinch, and Davy knot to re-rig your client’s trout hooking weapon? I spent many hours learning the fine nuances of knot tying and rigging terminal tackle.

Your Boat on the Water. Hopefully, I never have to use the water rescue and first-aid skills I practiced . . . but certainly abilities I am glad I now possess. When I have friends and family on my boat, their safety is top priority. I also learned proper boat etiquette and how to share fishy water with others.

Flycasting. Ever have a friend on your boat who does not know the first thing about casting a fly? Well, there are proven ways, practiced by guides for decades, to get your buddy to successfully put line on the water with a quick lesson. Patience and roll-casting. Graduate to a simple overhead cast when they can feel the rod load. Backcast with a controlled, tight loop . . . forward cast . . . stop the rod . . . let the fly present itself to the fish. Upstream mend. Keep the fly in the water, fish don’t live in the air. I will get you a nice, long drift. From a boat, all your buddy needs to do is cast 15 feet to be successful. Sometimes, we all forget that casting a fly line can be a simple, enjoyable process. It does not need to be mysterious.

Conservation. As a lifetime member of TU, I was gratified to listen to WCA instructors discuss the importance of protecting the riparian habitat. Guides make their living on the water. The ability to identify flora and fauna to clients is a bonus for an enjoyable day in addition to the fishing. It is imperative that guides, and those of us who spend

hours on the river, are able to discuss local projects to conserve, protect, restore, and reconnect the rivers.

Business End of Guiding. The flyfishing industry has grown exponentially since “The Movie” twenty years ago. Descriptions of flyfishing destinations worldwide gave me insight into places I will put on my bucket list. Bonefishing in Belize. Taimen in Mongolia. Sea-run brown trout in Chile. I am stoked.

Entomology. Bugs. Bugs that make fish grow big when they eat them. Bugs that we sit down to the vise and try to imitate. I spent four fascinating hours in the classroom, watching a PowerPoint presentation created by a guide with a PHD in entomology, on how to identify food available to the trout on any given day. I can confidently identify, and could care less about their Latin monikers, mayfly clingers, free caddis, cased caddis, duns, spinners, stoneflies, midges, crane fly larva, terrestrials, etc. Having identified what bugs are available to the salmonids, I can match their size. We went out to the stream behind the lodge and kicked up the streambed into a seine. First thing Geoffrey did when he got home was make an insect seine using instructions found on TU.org “Stream Explorers.”

I also learned that an important weapon in my arsenal is a thermometer. No sense in throwing dry flies if the water temp is below 52 degrees. Time to huck streamers or rig up nymphs.

By the way, our instructors told us the Top Five Flies they would not leave the put in on a Rocky Mountain river unless they were in their quiver: Pat’s Rubber Legs, aka “Turd”; Quigley’s Cripple; Elk Hair/CDC Caddis dry fly; Mercer’s Poxback Golden Stone; and Splitback PMD.

Rowing Progression. Of course, the highlight of *Western Rivers Guide School* was getting on the sticks. I thought I was an accomplished oarsman. However, I have been feathering the oars on The Green, North Platte, New Fork, that rarely flow more than 2000 cfs during the summer after runoff. The field of instruction for WCA’s guide school is the South Fork of the Snake River below Palisades Dam. On May 24<sup>th</sup>, first day of rowing duties, the South Fork was pushing water at 10,500 cfs. Five days later it had been bumped up to 12,500 cfs. Big water that pushes you around and spins your boat if you don’t have an oar in the water. Big water that you had better respect when you leave an eddy, side channel, or when you anchor on the bank. I was humbled. The South Fork of the Snake taught me how to:

- properly load my boat to achieve a weight-forward, centered distribution of contents and occupants
- identify the laminar flow, helical flow, confused water, soft water, eddy lines, downstream v, standing waves, obstacles/strainers/holes to avoid, etc. making the river journey safe and enjoyable
- use my big muscles, ergonomically, in the back stroke to slow the boat down and give both my anglers an equal chance at a good dead drift and/or target the bank with streamers. Remember what I said about using my boat as a fishing tool?
- push the oars to achieve the same dead drift for my anglers

- scissor stroke to regain control of my boat or make quick maneuvers to avoid obstacles
- achieve efficient ferry angles when rowing to opposite bank
- “pat my head and rub my belly at the same time.” I learned how to scull my oars and fine-tune lateral movement to keep my boat in position for my clients
- safely approach the bank and anchor for needed rest and rehydration

Conclusion. Initially, you may experience sticker shock when you research guide schools. However, consider all that you learn that I have tried to convey above. Most guide schools, like WCA, provide lodging and food. When you are not on the sticks, you are fishing. We had an overnight stay in the canyon section of The South Fork with a great dinner and campfire. I made new friends among my instructors and fellow students. I created memories with Geoffrey we will talk about for years. And you will, like I did, learn to use your boat as a fishing tool.

Because Geoffrey could put on his resume that he completed WCA’s guide school, he will be head of flyfishing operations at Brooks Lake Lodge near Dubois in June. He is young and single. He can pursue his dream as a professional flyfishing guide. Godspeed, son.

*Jim Hissong is a lifetime member of TU and treasurer of Upper Bear River TU in southwest Wyoming.*



It’s not always learnin’ and rowin’ in guide school. Here, Geoffrey is tight to a South Fork cutty. Or, is it Mr. Whitey?