

CELEBRATING 20 YEARS

BIG SKY JOURNAL

SUMMER 2013 LIFESTYLE IN THE NORTHERN ROCKIES



FISHING THE UPPER MIDDLE FORK OF THE FLATHEAD RIVER

RODEO ROCKSTAR: FLINT RASMUSSEN

PHOTO ESSAY: THE BLUEBIRD OF HAPPINESS BY BRUCE PITCHER

ARTISTIC HORIZONS CELEBRATES WESTERN ARTISTS



PLEASE SLOW THIS RIVER DOWN

*Four Sweet Days in the Great Bear Wilderness
with Glacier Raft Company*

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED
BY BRIAN SCHOTT

*I place my cell phone and wallet
in the safe at the Glacier Outdoor Center — home base
of Glacier Raft Company in West Glacier — and it feels
good. Seriously good. I'm here to take a guided 24-mile
float on one of the most beautiful wilderness slices of
river anywhere. Sleep under the stars. Eat richly. Drink
deeply. And catch trout. Lots of them.*

The author reels in a trout on the Upper
Middle Fork of the Flathead River in the
Great Bear Wilderness, one of the most
pristine stretches of designated Wild and
Scenic Rivers in North America.

PHOTO BY DARWON STONEMAN



After a scenic 20-mile drive toward Marias Pass, we walk down an easy trail through thick forest and a carpet of blooming fireweed and Indian paintbrush. I'm hiking with a husband and wife — Bill and Olga Adams — both real estate brokers in Whitefish, and Jeff Vilkin, a Las Vegas real estate developer.

"You can smell the huckleberries!" says Olga, as we pause to munch on the savory purple berries. The long fly rods on their backpacks make my companions look like marching infantry. We are on a fishing mission.

Do-it-yourselfers will often pack lighter inflatable kayaks into this spot, but our big rafts, metal frames and oars, camp gear and gourmet meals — nearly a ton of gear — are on the backs of loyal pack mules who haul our baggage to the beautiful confluence of Granite Creek and the Upper Middlefork of the Flathead.

From our launchsite, second-year guide Patrick Liddell sets off in the gear boat and floats ahead to set up camp. It'll be a short float today and we're all buzzing with energy, eager to enter the current.

"These cutthroat are unmolested — they'll eat anything," says Glacier Raft Company owner Darwon Stoneman as we

After packing rafts and overnight gear at the Granite Creek Trailhead, anglers hike the easy 6 miles to the river. A team of pack mules will do the heavy lifting of rafts, food and supplies for four nights in the wilderness.

shove off into the deep, blue-green water. As we round the first turn, Jeff hauls in a huge cutthroat trout. As we glide down the river, we try bouncing the flies off rock walls, teasing the fish that are waiting for bugs to fall off the rocks. I'm learning new strategies already.

"Casting is overrated," says veteran lead guide Marc Evans. And he's right, although watching him cast from the shore later is a creative act between art and sport and dance. Back in the boat with Marc, we "high stick" our rods in the deep pool pour-overs, holding them high above our heads to simply drop the fly in the current to generate a believable float as we spin through deep holes.

The sound of the river becomes overpowering. Colorful rocks flash beneath the electric water, green light refracting through the fine rock-dust ground up by glaciers. I concentrate on the feel of the water beneath us, learning balance in the wobbly raft. And patience.

After one cast I pull my fly away just before a big one strikes. But then I land one. And another. Two fish jump at my fly — this river is electric! I land a beauty that measures 15 inches just before we pull into camp.



Lead guide Marc Evans looks for another perfect riffle for clients Bill and Olga Adams, in search of native westslope cutthroat trout. These beautiful and lively fish are remarkable indicators of water cleanliness and stream health.

Patrick pitches tents and Marc cooks dinner as the sound of the creek rushing to join the river from Castle Lake fills the cool air. We eat barbecued spare ribs, asparagus, butter rolls and a fresh salad.

Darwon stretches out on the ground with bear mace and a gun as we bid each other goodnight. Jeff sleeps on a cot by the river in the open air.

IN THE MORNING, I emerge from my tent in the damp air and Marc is tending the fire, brewing coffee. Jeff walks up from the river talking about his amazing sleep. "I closed my eyes and it was morning."

Jeff and Olga want to fish Castle Lake this morning, and I join them while Jeff and Marc fish a hole just down river. Darwon leads us up a moderately steep trail and we pass fresh bear scat loaded with huckleberries. As we emerge from the thick brush into the open bowl, we

pass moose and elk tracks in the mud.

While catch-and-release is required on the river, we can keep a small number of fish from Castle because they are non-native Yellowstone cutthroat. I cast and quickly pull a



trout from the water, whack it on the head, say some kind of a prayer, and prepare to clean it. I slide my knife in below the red slash below its mouth (air escapes with a hiss), then slit it from tail up. I rip out the guts, tear the blood artery and peel it out, then throw the entrails back to the waters. This is the first trout I have ever killed. Strangely, it feels pretty good.

Six fish are in the cooler and we are back floating on the river by 1 p.m., surrounded again by that ever-present sound of moving water. We catch and release so many fish it seems silly, surreal, like we have been blessed by ancient gods.

Marc stuns me with his uncanny ability to guess when a fish will hit, just by watching the float of the fly. "One, two, three ..." he counts. And the fish strikes.

As we eat cheese and crackers late that afternoon, the general consensus is that we completely lost count.

"I bet I caught 80 or 90 fish today," says Jeff as Marc cooks the trout we caught at Castle, folding lemons, garlic and herbs into the white flesh. The act of killing the fish pays its dividends. We also eat tenderloin from an elk Darwon harvested in a hunt last fall.

It's a wet night, rain pouring from the sky, creating puddles under the tarp where we are huddled, sharing sips

of whisky from a flask. The air is a sensual mixture of wood smoke, fish and flesh, the musty duff of the woods under rain and logs snapping with flame.

AFTER WAKING UP TO BACON AND EGGS to order, and French toast topped with apples and huckleberries, we pack our wet gear into the boats. Perhaps it's not that casting is overrated, but that casting, once you get the hang of it, is the easy part.

The lessons Marc continues to teach us are all about line management, mending line for the right float, setting the hook at that lightning flash of white. Marc's ability to intuitively read what the fish find most delicious at this particular moment in time adds to our enjoyment.

Toward the end of the float, we spin through a rapid and I look down into the deep pool. A monster trout flicks its tail. I high-stick a fly into the froth just like Marc taught me and *wham!* The fish hits. The fight is on and within minutes I land the largest and most beautiful trout I have ever seen. We gaze at each other briefly, I snap a photo and let it slip back into the emerald water.

When we pull into camp that evening, Jeff reads a book in the sun and Bill jumps in the river for a quick bath in his



Jeff Vilkin hooks a huge cutthroat from a deep pool. Conservation efforts have kept the Upper Middle Fork one of the most pristine rivers in the nation.

underwear. "No pictures!" He screams. After rock shrimp and herbed cream cheese and crackers, tonight Marc is preparing salmon, steamed veggies and rice. Really, the eating we do on this trip is about as stunning as the fishing.

"I learned more today about fly fishing than I have in my whole life," says Jeff as we eat pineapple upside down cake.

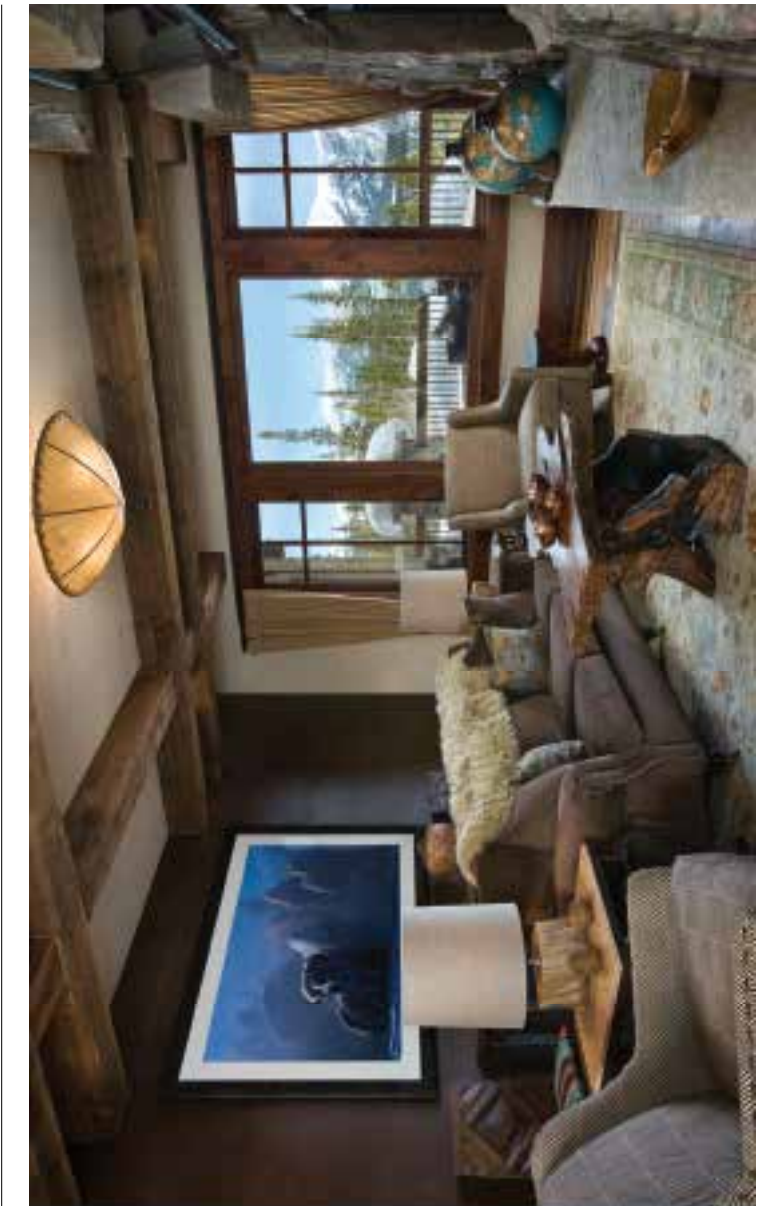
A full moon rises over the top of the mountains across the river, huge spires of burnt tree trunks silhouetted against the bright white light of this unlikely celestial orb. In the dark, deer rustle in the woods as we retire to our tents, glowing like lanterns.

ON THE LAST DAY, we slide the 14-foot raft into the current. "I always get that lump in my throat on the last morning," says Marc, looking downriver. "Everything has to be just right or you can ruin a perfectly good trip."

Spruce Park Gorge is a series of whitewater drops that we must navigate on our final day, when we will put our rods away and buckle helmets instead.



Enjoying camaraderie by the campfire is all part of the adventure.



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Marc Evans navigates the tricky whitewater of Spruce Park Gorge on the final day in the wilderness.

We park the boats before the first rapid and secure everything with lines. Marc and Darwon take the boats through this first stretch without us, a maze of car-sized boulders and small waterfalls. We scamper along the rocks and wait ... and watch.

Patrick is through first with the gear boat. He makes it look easy. Marc picks a different line through a narrow slot. It's tight, but no problem. Darwon tries to repeat the move, but gets sucked river-right and has to spin around the boulder into the slot Patrick ran.

We're through the crux, and for the next several miles we look at the rocks and trees and sky and forget about the fish swimming below the surface. The sound of whitewater fills our ears through the rapids of Lunch Creek and 25-Mile Creek. Luckily, after lunch, we still have a few miles of fishing before we hit Bear Creek where we'll take out and this dream will end.

We push off for the final stretch and I drag my feet in the water. I try to slow the boat down. I don't want this to end. **BS**



EDITOR'S NOTE: The four-day Great Bear Wilderness Fishing Trip on the Upper Middlefork of the Flathead is \$695 per person, per day with a four-person minimum. Before July 4, the raft company flies guests into the wilderness airstrip near the Spotted Bear Ranger Station. For more information visit www.glacieraftco.com