

Missouri River Blues (or How I Darn Near Flunked Trout Fishing 101)
Outdoor Canada
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I was daydreaming about a rather unusual university. Fly rods and chest waders took the place of books and computers. Students joyfully waded the hallowed waters of great trout streams instead of glumly trudging along the hollow halls of academic learning. The professors were huge brown and rainbow trout, eagerly teaching their students the importance of humility and how little they knew about fly-fishing. The homework kept students on the water until all hours and, it seemed, the lessons never ended.

Then I accidentally pinched myself with a pair of forceps while debarbing an impossibly small fly, I discovered I wasn't daydreaming after all. I actually was in Montana, a clueless freshman at the mythical University of the Missouri River, and I was failing Trout Fishing 101. Badly.

My enrolment had happened through a combination of fate and desperation.

"Come to Montana this spring," urged my friend and repeat Missouri student Mike Sturk. "My regular partner can't make it and I need someone to row."

My arm didn't need much twisting.

Everyone knows Montana is the Mecca of fly-fishing. Heck, Brad Pitt was here years ago to portray a gambler, boozing newspaper reporter in *A River Runs Through It*. The Madison, Big Horn, Jefferson, Flathead, Gallatin, Yellowstone – legendary rivers that beckon fly fishers from around the world. But studying at Missouri River University – Miss U, for short – held a special mystique.

I'd seen pictures and read articles about fly-fishing in the Missouri, just five hours south of my home in southern Alberta. I'd driven past it many times, had even stopped to drool over the resident trout, but had never fished for them.

Springtime fishing in the Missouri appeals on many fronts. For one, many rivers and streams back in Alberta are either closed or starting to dirty with runoff. Secondly, fishing regulation changes in southeastern British Columbia have made Montana the top go-to place for Alberta fly fishers seeking an out-of-province experience. The B.C. government last season started nailing non-resident anglers with an extra \$20 *per day* to fish prime trout streams in the East Kootenays. That's on top of the \$55 annual fishing licence.

In Montana, non-residents pay \$60 (Cdn) for a 10-day permit or \$79 for the season, with no daily fees. And, unlike B.C., non-resident anglers are made to feel welcome in Montana.

Oh, and did I mention the trout?

Bruiser browns. Mighty rainbows. A fly-fishing paradise. Piece of cake, right?

Well, no.

The Trout University analogy hit me even before we arrived. Friends had warned me I should prepare to be educated by the Missouri. Stupidly, I scoffed.

Mike and I arrive late on a Sunday afternoon in mid-May, pulling into the tiny town of Craig (pop. 60, all fly fishers, it seems) in time to buy angling licences and pitch our tent in the rustic campground beside the mighty Missouri.

As we stand on the riverbank nursing a beer, I begin seeing the Missouri in a whole new light. It's a powerful piece of water, bigger and wider than the Bow back home, but with slower and flatter flows thanks to its tailwater status below the Holter Dam. Montana author Trapper Badovinac likens it to "a spring creek on steroids."

At 4,368 kilometres (2,714 miles), the Missouri is the longest river in the U.S. For the next five days, Mike and I will walk-and-wade and drift my 12-foot aluminum rowboat along an 11-kilometre stretch between the Holter Dam and Craig. It's considered the best section in terms of trout numbers, insect life and accessibility.

I feel confident going into that first evening. I have a vest-full of new flies, mainly midges and Parachute Adams and emergers, specially ordered as small as size 24. That's miniscule, about a third the size of the average wood tick. As we string our rods, Mike and I take turns standing on the high bank to admire dozens of huge rainbows and browns cruising in the clear water below.

Soon I'm standing above a small island a few hundred yards upstream of Mike. The first trout rises five minutes later and my blood starts to boil.

I can't tell what it came up for, but clearly it's a beauty. Fat, big-shouldered, tail like a spatula, at least 20 inches long, maybe 22. Fingers fumbling, I tie a Size 22 Adams onto the end of a 12-foot leader tapered to a 5X (4 pound test) tippet. On the Bow back home, using a lighter tippet is considered foolhardy.

My heart skips a beat when the trout rises in the path my fly is taking. It floats drag-free over the ring left by the surfacing trout, which duly ignores it for the first of many times. Soon several trout are rising regularly.

Three hours later, I haven't hooked a fish. I've switched fly patterns several times. But I continue casting, and the trout keep teaching me a lesson. It's my inaugural class at Miss U, and already I feel like a pre-schooler.

When the sun finally drops behind the hills, I trudge back to the van. There sits Mike, shaking his head.

Secretly hoping that he'd also scored a failing grade – I ask, "Did you hook any?" "Stuck four or five and landed two," he replies. "You?"

"Zip."

We proceed to share war stories. I discover the secret of Mike's success. He'd started with 5X tippet. When that proved ineffective, he switched to 6X and then – incredibly – 7X. In case you're wondering, that's 3.6 and 2.7-pound test, respectively. He gently handled each hooked fish and lost those he rushed.

"The trout reacted to 5X like it was rope," Mike notes. "It really spooked them."

No kidding, I thought.

That evening we retire to one of Craig's two taverns. We sit at the bar, across from a grizzled, bearded cowboy who's obviously been here a while. Slumped over the bar, he looks up at us with bleary eyes and queries, "You boys fishing?"

When we say yep, he sits up straight, his eyes narrow and he says one word: Crawdads.

“Crawdads, as in crayfish?” I ask.

“Yep. When nothing else works, when you’ve tried every fly you’ve got and you just can’t catch one, tie on a crawdad. The trout love ‘em.”

Our mentor’s words jump to mind next morning when I begin my morning class at Miss U. As I wade out into the river, I look down at the rocks and spot skeletal crayfish remains, perhaps left there by raccoons or river otters.

I can’t help but think: *I hope I never need to tie on a crawdad to catch a Missouri River trout.* To a committed fly fisher, using a crawdad is akin to chucking dynamite.

I’ll spare you the nasty details, but I don’t catch a trout that day either. Not even a touch, even though I’ve tied on some new fluorocarbon 6X tippet. Throughout the day, I see many giant browns and rainbows, but they ignore everything I throw at them.

I learn something important that day on the Missouri. Not only are the fish smart, they also seem to be psychic. Eating lunch on the bank, Mike and I watch one big rainbow rise three times before deciding to try for him. Before one of us can stand, the fish stops rising and swims away.

“All you have to do is *think* about casting for these trout to put them down,” Mike observes, rather wryly.

Naturally, that day Mike continues competing for top-of-the-class honours; he lands several trout. My biggest thrill happens when a rainbow two feet long chases a sculpin into an inch of water before gobbling it down, not three feet from where I stand, wide-eyed and envious.

In the campground the next morning, I encounter a portly good old boy in taut red suspenders. He’s stringing a fly rod.

“How’re you boys making out?” he drawls in an accent oozing southern U.S.

When I reply that my buddy is getting a few but I’m blanked, he nods Yoda-like and solemnly declares:

“These are the most educated trout in the country. They’ve seen every fly there is to see and know how to avoid them.”

As I walk away, I battle conflicting feelings; I’m happy because he’d confirmed the problem isn’t just me – these trout are really, really smart – but a little sad because I don’t seem to be getting any smarter, which means I didn’t feel any closer to actually catching one.

Would I ever out fool a Missouri River trout? I kept telling myself I would. The secret to fly-fishing is eternal optimism, leavened in the mantra that success isn’t measured in numbers of fish landed. But still...

That morning I vow to change my attitude, to pay attention to my piscatorial professors and stop being the class clown. I want to focus my studies at Miss U, not flog the water desperately. Relax, I tell myself. After all, I’m fishing some of the most gorgeous water I’ve ever visited, and seeing more and larger trout than I ever thought possible, all amidst the spectacular beauty of central Montana’s rolling hills, lush green carpets of spring grass and stunning pastel sunsets over the Missouri.

Mike and I decide to try a float. A mini-flotilla of fancy pontoon and drift boats puts in ahead of us at the Wolf Creek Bridge. My 12-foot aluminum craft is the nautical equivalent of a wooden raft. I take some solace in the fact it is the first boat that friend

and fly-fishing guru Jim McLennan guided with on the Bow River 30 years ago. It's not pretty, but this thing has history.

As we drift, we see countless trout darting about in the shallow, clear water below the boat. Although rising fish are few and far between, and common sense suggests nymphs, we are determined to stick with dry flies. We stop the boat several times, and Mike picks up a couple of nice rainbows. My record remains intact.

Later that evening, still an hour away from the Craig bridge and light failing fast, we beach the boat next to a long, flat stretch of water. A few trout rise periodically, taking tiny midges and the odd blue-wing olive mayfly. I cast a Griffiths Gnat over several. They promptly stop rising, completely disinterested.

When another trout rises, I cast almost absent-mindedly, and it takes my fly. Setting the hook hard, I momentarily forget about the fragile 6X tippet. It snaps, and the fish is gone. Still, I am heartened; I'd finally connected with a Missouri River trout, albeit briefly.

A few minutes later, I hook another. This time I set the hook with a gentle lifting of the five-weight rod. Line peels off the reel as the powerful trout surges for deeper water. When it stops running, I coax it back towards me. My heart beats furiously. The trout runs again and I let it. It stops just before hitting my backing. And the Size 24 hook pops out. Just like that. Disappointment floods through me. I look upstream and see Mike netting another big trout – his third of the night.

We decide to skip class at Miss U the next morning to fish a smaller local stream. It is tea-colored and the fish aren't feeding aggressively, but we manage to land several hefty brown trout. Mike, of course, catches most of them.

Later, we stop to toast our success in a vintage small-town redneck bar. We stroll inside in our chest waders, soaked felt soles leaving wet imprints on the carpet. The owner smiles as he snaps tops off a couple of Budweisers. Awaiting our fried chicken takeout, we admire hundreds of American dollar bills tacked on the walls and ceiling. On each one, people had written their names and hometowns, and some had scrawled a message. "Bush sucks," one said. "Go &*%# yourself you liberal @#\$%&*," shouted the one next to it.

That afternoon, Mike and I witness an angling approach new to us both – road fishing. As we cast unsuccessfully to trout on the east side of the Missouri, a truck hurtles down a gravel road flanking the river's far side. Two shirtless guys stand in the open box, scanning the water as they zip past. Suddenly one of them shouts to the driver: "LOOK AT THOSE HAWGS! STOP!" The truck skids to a halt in a cloud of dust. Fly rods in hand, the young men jump out and scamper down the bank. They cast several times, but nothing takes and they soon leave, road fishing for more trout.

It is cloudless and calm on our last morning, not ideal conditions for fly-fishing in clear, shallow water for possibly the smartest trout in North America. I still haven't caught a Missouri River trout and I'm feeling a little discouraged. It looks like I'll be finishing my first term at Miss U with a point-zero grade point average. Mike and I

assume our usual positions about 100 metres apart. Blue-wing olive mayflies are hatching and the fish are on them.

Several trout are rising at the outside range of my cast. Somehow I delivered a perfect cast and watch the Adams drift – miraculously and wonderfully drag-free – several feet. Suddenly a big rainbow sucks it in.

Fly line disappears almost in a blink and the fish is into the backing. The trout races towards the middle of the river. Mindful of the 6X tippet, I carefully ease it back across the strong current. Then the trout takes off again, and I let it go. Confidence shattered by earlier encounters, I am sure I can't land this fish. Self-doubt nags at me.

Carefully, I reel the fish in, and need to let it run two more times before it allows me to net it. My first Missouri River trout is a beautiful 22-inch rainbow. It took five days of frustrating cramming, but I feel like I finally aced an exam. The homework has paid off.

About 10 minutes later, I spot a wide-shouldered brown repeatedly coming up to feed. My slowly drifts downstream and I watch, amazed, as the trout surfaces to take the fly. It doesn't fight with the rainbow's vigor, but it gives it all it has – and then some. My backing is two revolutions away when the brown finally turns and comes to the net. I scoop up the 20-incher and whoop with joy.

Two trout in one morning. Well, two trout in five days. A pretty average showing for most fly-fishers, but in my books it couldn't be sweeter. I've caught bigger trout, but never two that meant so much. To have it all happen on my last morning is incredible. Well worth the price of enrolment.

Now I can go home knowing that although I didn't exactly graduate with honors from Miss U, at least I didn't flunk out miserably.

I understand summer school there can be a lot of fun, when the trout apparently lose some of their smarts under a steady course-load of morning tricos, pale morning duns, big caddis flies and hoppers.

A summer refresher course is definitely in order.