

On the River (Outdoor Canada, Summer 2000)

April 19, 2000. It's been a long winter. This day has beckoned, tantalizingly, for months. Now, finally, it's the first fishing trip of the season. Keeping to tradition, which is so important for those of us for whom fishing is a life-defining passion, my destination is the Crowsnest River, a pretty, meandering stream that weaves through the rolling foothills of the Rockies in southwestern Alberta. It's a day of promise. Success is assured, measured not in numbers or size of fish caught, but just by being here, feeling once again the life of the river. It's time to reconnect with the water, with the trout, with the land, with myself.

It's fly fishing's greatest challenge. Picking the right fly is part science, part crapshoot, a combination of gut feeling, experience and educated guess. Pluck the wrong fly from the box and the day is reduced to mere casting practice. I choose from a dazzling array of perfect pieces of intricate, hand-tied art, all organized in rows according to size and colour. Some flies are impossibly tiny and delicate, just like the insects they mimic; others are larger, almost frightening depictions of bugs that spend much of their lives hiding beneath rocks in the river. Under various circumstances, they all are capable of catching trout. Knowing when, where and how to use each one is the tough part.

Engaging trout means meeting them in their element – feeling the strong, surging flow against my body, rediscovering last year's pinhole leak in the waders, and forcing tired leg muscles to keep me upright. I effectively become one with the river, working with it, not against it, using the current to full advantage. I study the location of each boulder, back eddy, overhanging bush, sunken log and mysterious deep run or hole. I peer at underwater shadows and wonder if they are trout, sunken wood or just wishful thinking. These are all pieces of the piscatorial puzzle. Put them all together and I might be rewarded with a tug and a silvery flash at the end of my line.

The fly line feels cool and smooth as it runs through my fingers, each false cast increasing the range and margin of error. The thin, plastic-coated thread is the physical connection between me, the water and, if I'm lucky, the trout. The rod bends easily as it builds strength to deliver the line, tippet and fly. There is grace in the forming and unfurling of the loop. It requires coordination, line control and knowing when to use power and when to ease off. Sometimes it works; other times, I peer around hoping nobody is watching. Either way, casting is a tonic for the soul, a soothing, pleasurable act that comes naturally, even after several months of not doing it.

I anticipate it. I plan for it. I expect it. But when a trout actually takes an offered fly, my first reaction invariably is delighted surprise. The fish leaps, taking my heart with it. I try to guess its size based on the bend in the rod. If the trout slips the hook, I am disappointed, forced into a fantasy world of speculation and exaggeration. Each trout is unique in colour and shape. Each reacts differently to the hook. Most importantly, each one is preserved forever in my memory book, there to withdraw whenever I need to relive that magic moment. Fly fishers discover early that catching a trout can't be taken for granted. It is a blessing, pure and simple.