

Travelling Angler – Ultimate West Flyfishing  
Fly Rod and Reel  
December 2003  
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An eerie salmon-hued haze created by smoke from nearby forest fires hung low over the Purcell Mountains overlooking the St. Mary River in southeastern British Columbia.

But the scrappy westslope cutthroat trout didn't seem to mind the smoke when my eldest daughter, Chelsea, then 19, and I visited the area one August day a couple of summers ago. It certainly didn't affect their ability to see our flies presented either on top or below the surface.

"You should be prepared for some very good fly-fishing," our host, Gary Gow of Ultimate West Flyfishing, had told me when we'd booked.

As it turned out, Gow, and the St. Mary River itself, did not disappoint.

Shortly after he launched the oar-powered inflatable raft in a pretty stretch of river near his base in the city of Cranbrook, Gow pointed to a sipping rise next to a submerged boulder. The cutthroat ignored the first drift of a No. 10 yellow Stimulator, but eagerly rose to the second one.

The fish fought hard in classic cutthroat style: no jumps but frequent and persistent runs toward deeper water, causing my whippy 3-weight rod to bend like an inverted U and my heart to pound like a drum. A minute or two later, I released a gorgeous 14-inch, hard-bodied trout back into the clear water.

The encounter was a portent of exciting action that followed for the next several hours on one of western North America's most overlooked trout waters.

Overshadowed by the region's more popular cutthroat rivers – the Elk near Fernie, B.C. and the Oldman and Castle just across the border in Alberta – the St. Mary goes quietly about its business of producing world-class cutthroat fishing without the world-class crowds experienced in those other hotspots. Gow likes to say it's fly fishing like Montana was 40 years ago.

This clear, freestone river boasts thriving hatches of stone flies, caddis and may flies, making for spectacular fly-fishing action for anglers casting from boat or shore. Much of the river cuts through a deep canyon that makes foot access difficult. The lower section runs through private land and has no public access. Floating is the best approach.

Gary Gow first fished the St. Mary a few decades ago, while living in the southern Alberta city of Calgary, less than four hours away. The fly-fishing it offered for native cutthroat impressed him then, and it impresses him even more now that he has a chance to regularly explore the river as part of the Ultimate West Flyfishing business he operates along with his wife, Sandra.

The Orvis-endorsed fly fishing guide service is based out of the Tartan Trout Guest House, a sprawling 4,000-square-foot, three-storey house built of tamarack logs. Featuring high-beamed ceilings, the chalet-style lodge is nestled on 10 wooded acres just north of Cranbrook. Deer and elk occasionally wander past the front door.

The guestrooms are spacious and finished in a trout décor. A den includes a fly tying desk and complete library of fly fishing literature. As Chelsea and I found out, both Sandra and Gary are gracious hosts. But Sandra, an accomplished fly fisher in her own right, is the undisputed queen of the kitchen, turning out delicious meals at the start and end of the day.

But fly-fishing is the main attraction.

In addition to fishing the St. Mary, from mid-March to mid-November Gary takes visitors on quests for rainbows, eastern brook trout, huge bull trout and cutthroat trout in other lesser-known rivers, streams and lakes, along with the Elk. He also is a qualified guide on popular Alberta waters such as the Bow, Oldman and Crowsnest rivers.

The day we spent with him on the St. Mary, however, qualifies as one of the best days on the water that Chelsea and I have ever shared – and not just because of the fishing.

The scenery was spectacular, with the river passing through open ranch country and heavily treed woodlots. We spotted mule deer and both bald and golden eagles. The often-braided river alternated between deep pools, long quiet runs and exciting choppy riffles.

The water was lower than normal, the product of a lingering dry season that had created ideal forest fire conditions. Several times, Gary and I had to hop out of the inflatable to push it through a stretch of shallow water. We saw one other fly-fisher all day – and he was with one of Gary's guides.

Although the cutts were especially skittish because of low and clear water conditions, we still managed to catch many fish on top with Elkhair Caddis and Stimulator dries. When that wasn't working, we switched to Size 12 beadhead Prince, Pheasant Tail and Gold-ribbed Hare's Ear nymphs.

A certified Federation of Fly Fishers instructor, Gary patiently coached both Chelsea and me on proper presentation, fly selection and reading the water. He had talked of the possibility of seeing pods of feeding cutthroats. Although water conditions ruled that out, we still saw a number of rising trout. And, even where they weren't rising, a blind drift through a riffle or pool more often than not generated a response.

The day was warm, hovering in the low 80's, so Chelsea and I opted to wade wet whenever we left the boat. In the exuberance of youth, she fished through one pool, then jumped in – clothes and all – for an impromptu swim in the cool water.

At the next stop a few minutes later, she waded out into thigh-deep water to drift a Caddis through a promising looking run. On the third cast, I heard her holler and turned in time to see her five-weight bouncing under the weight of a good fish.

After gently removing the hook, she held the trout in the water until it regained enough strength to swim away. Standing up after watching the fish vanish in the azure-blue depths, her brown eyes sparkled and a broad smile creased her tanned face as she said, "I'd like to do that again."

And she did.

(Bruce Masterman is a full-time writer who fly-fishes throughout southern Alberta and British Columbia)

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