

Provo River, UT

In the Shadow of Sundance

By Michael Hamilton

Oscar saw the rise before I did. His right paw was raised to lock his forearm in a perfect point at the widening ring where, seconds before, a feeding brown had slurped a Blue-Winged Olive. A moment later, the trout fed again. I gently executed a reach cast and floated a size 18 olive Comparadun 10 feet above the rise and watched it float alongside a natural. Oscar quivered and held point.

Swoosh. The fly disappeared in a swirl. I raised my rod tip and felt the strong pull of a big-shouldered brown. Oscar bounded near the water's edge. You'd think he had just cornered a bevy of wild mergansers. Behind him on the bank, his mother, Blue, watched nonchalantly. She had seen his act a thousand times. Oscar continued his river dance until I coaxed the brown trout into my net.

"Almost 18 inches," I said.

Fly fishing the Provo River near Sundance, Utah, with five-year-old Oscar, a golden retriever mix, and his nine-year-old mom, a shepherd/Catahoula, was part of the walk-and-wade "daily show" with Provo River guide Brian Wimmer.

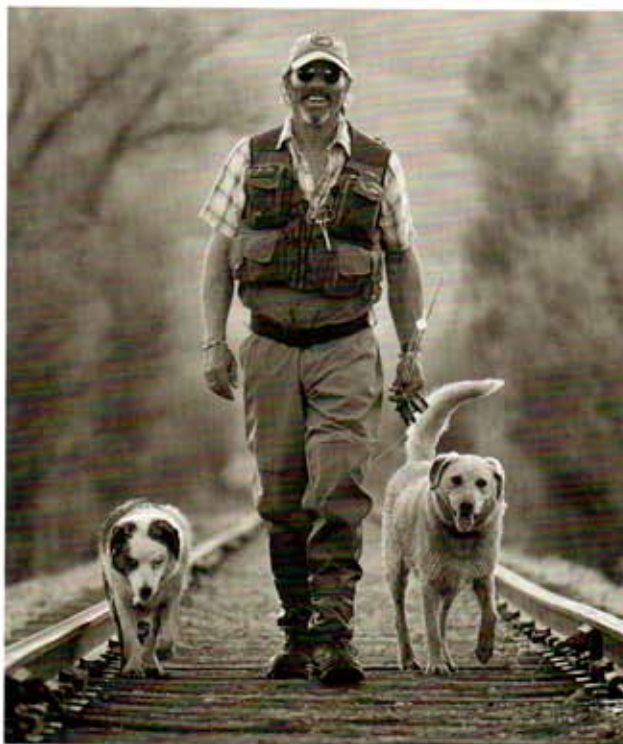
"I like to say it's the only Oscar I will ever win," quips Wimmer. He should know. Brian spent 20 years in Los Angeles developing a successful acting career. Best known for his role as Boonie in the groundbreaking television series *China Beach*, he left the glitz behind to return to the rugged beauty of the Wasatch Mountains in northern Utah.

For years, my friend Brad Stewart, owner of Stewart Mountain Lodging in Sundance, Utah, had bragged about the blue-ribbon trout fishery on the Provo and the five-star amenities, such as fine/casual dining, spa, horseback riding, and hiking nearby at Sundance Resort.

Many prime fishing spots on the Provo are within an

hour's drive of Salt Lake, Provo, Orem, or Park City, and even closer to Stewart Mountain Lodging. Brad's family has been on Stewart Mountain since the late 1800s. In 1969, the family sold a homespun ski resort and 5,000 adjacent acres to Robert Redford, and the Sundance Resort was born. Brad's insistence that I fish the Provo led me to read

surprising reports of 3,000 fish per mile and epic hatches of midges, Blue-Winged Olives, Pale Morning Duns, caddisflies, and Green Drakes.



Guide Brian Wimmer walks the Heber Valley railroad tracks along the middle Provo River with Oscar and Blue (above). Because the Lower Provo flows between steep canyon walls, its straight-path structure is different from the meandering Middle Provo. Nymphing is the best tactic on the Lower Provo in the canyon. Consistent water depth requires familiarity and local knowledge to find holes, so first-time visitors should hire a guide from Stewart Mountain Lodging. Photo by Bryan Angleron (left).

Lay of the Land

The Provo River is born in the high ramparts of the Uinta Mountains. Although the forests and canyons are the ancestral home of the Timpanogos Nation, the river bears the moniker of Erienne Provost, a colorful character who trapped along the Wasatch Range in the early 1800s. The city of Provo was also named after Provost.

The Provo River is relatively short. But while it lacks in size, it more than delivers with trophy-size browns and acrobatic rainbows. Electro-fishing surveys on the middle and lower sections by the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR) during the past decade confirm trout densi-

ties as high as 5,000 fish per mile, with an average of about 3,500. These numbers place the Provo in the company of the Madison, Henrys Fork of the Snake, and Gallatin Rivers.

The Provo is primarily a brown-trout fishery with a strong supporting cast of rainbows. It is also a walk-and-wade fishery that affords a much different experience from what's possible in a raft or drift boat.

"It's a slower pace of fishing for sure, with a lot more opportunity for personalized instruction," notes Wimmer. "We are often able to spot and stalk fish because the water is so clear. We also take more time to see what's hatching in greater detail."

The variety of bugs and length of hatches will surprise most anglers. Midges erupt in December through February. Anglers on the middle or lower reaches who are lucky enough to catch the Buffalo Midges, which are much larger than normal, could see the biggest fish of the season. In late March and April, BWOs emerge, with pods of fish slurping emergers and duns all over them. During the summer, midmorning Pale Morning Duns are prolific, and afternoon terrestrials as well as thick flights of evening caddisflies are river-wide. In July, the famed Green Drake hatch drives everyone a little crazy. BWOs return in fall, along with migrating brown trout looking for oversize streamers.

According to Mark Fjerstad—owner and head guide of Four Seasons Fly Fishing in Heber City—“The Provo is a smorgasbord of oxygen-loving insects. Constant flows and water temperatures create a 12-month growing season for insects and fish.”

Typically, the Provo is divided into three distinct stretches. The upper section is freestone and flows from a natural lake. The middle and lower reaches are tailwaters. The middle runs between the dam at Jordanelle to Deer Creek Reservoir; the lower portion surges out of Deer Creek Dam through wild and scenic Provo Canyon and into Utah Lake. Each is as different as chalk and cheese; they all deserve attention.

The Upper Provo

“A spider web of small creeks feeds the upper Provo as it flows out of Trial Lake at an elevation of 9,500 in the Uinta Range before emptying into Jordanelle Reservoir 15 miles below,” notes Mike Slater, Regional Aquatics Program Manager for the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources.

Slater describes the upper Provo as a typical small high-elevation trout stream with pocket water, pools, and riffles. Small cutthroat and brook trout are aggressive and will eat a well-presented fly. Long term, says Slater, the UDWR is working to restore larger Bonneville cutthroat to this high country.

Only a small portion of the upper Provo lies within the Wasatch National Forest and is open to the public.

This stretch parallels the Mirror Lake Scenic Byway (State Route 150), providing entry points to walk and wade. Annual spring runoff usually subsides in June.

“Summer is the best time to be up in the high country chasing trout on ants, hoppers, and big stimulators,” says Travis Gillespie, founder of the Utah Fly Fishing Club (UFFC). Because of the higher elevations, fish in the upper river have a short feeding season and need to eat frequently to hold them over for another year. Late September and October flows are low and the fish are spooky.

Once the upper river leaves national forest and runs toward Jordanelle Reservoir, the volume of water—and

the level of controversy— increase greatly. “Much of the upper river is predominantly private property. Land ownership is expanding and keeps people out,” says Steve Schmidt, owner of Western Rivers Flyfisher in Salt Lake City.

However, he notes there are 1.5 miles of river directly above Jordanelle Dam that are in state park and open to the public. He says this stretch can produce some of the best dry-fly fishing the river offers. BWO and Skwala Stonefly hatches are thick in March and April. In autumn, brown trout migrate upstream from the reservoir to spawn and big streamers can produce violent strikes from trophy-size browns up to 25 inches.

The Middle Provo

The middle flows 12 miles from the dam at Jordanelle to Deer Creek Reservoir. Brown trout dominate, ranging in size from 17 to 22 inches. The middle Provo has strong hatches of stoneflies and caddisflies. Additionally, because this section is a tailwater, midges, scuds, and sow bugs are abundant, making nymphing almost automatic at times.

Since the completion of the Jordanelle Dam in 1995, the middle section has blossomed into one of Utah’s premier blue-ribbon streams. “It’s really only been a tailwater fishery for a short time,” notes Mark Fjerstad. “It’s still evolving. If this stretch was in Montana, it would be legendary.”

Key factors to the success of the middle river came about as a result of the 12-year-long Provo River Restoration Project completed in 2008. It transformed a narrow



flume-like irrigation canal to a lush wetland and a fertile fishery.

The middle Provo can be crowded. The top 2 miles below the dam get 85 percent of the fishing pressure. However, hike 20 minutes in either direction from any of the 7 public access parking areas along the 12 miles of river, and you'll seldom see another angler. This was certainly the case as Oscar and Blue led Wimmer and me through wetlands on a May morning.

Yellow-headed and red-winged black birds sang. Overhead, ospreys soared. A great blue heron flew ahead of us, moving each time we got close. Our destination was a glassy slick above a fast rushing tailout, one of Wimmer's favorite runs when the PMD hatch is going full tilt.

After 25 minutes, without another soul in sight, we stopped at the river's edge. Oscar was dead still on point, aiming his muzzle directly at fish slurping emerging PMDs. Wimmer gave me the first shot. I tied a size 18 PMD cripple on 5X tippet. After one false cast, I laid the fly line upstream of the rising pod. The bug drifted down drag free and abruptly disappeared in a swirl. *Snap!* I set too quickly and came up empty—no fly, no fish.

Wimmer howled. Oscar barked. Blue looked bored. "OK, you try it," I said, grinning.

Wimmer made the same play but with a much different outcome. "Fish on," he yelled. I grabbed the hand net. Wimmer's 17-inch brown would become four more, plus



PHOTO BY BRIAN ANGLERSON

Anglers should fish the Provo early in the morning or late in the evening to find the river's browns most active. June and July caddisfly hatches on the Middle Provo provide fast action right at dusk. Stay later into the night and fish in the dark by casting toward the sounds of rises (above). The Provo River is a prolific trout factory. Ironically, it suffers from too much catch-and-release. Wildlife officials encourage anglers to keep some fish so that trout can grow larger. However, fly fishers on the Provo continue to practice catch-and-release at record rates, and anglers seem content with slightly smaller but more numerous trout (below).

two rainbows, all from the same run. During the next three hours, we walked and waded about a mile and a half of river, continually finding fish snapping at emerging PMDs. We raised more than 30 fish and brought at least 15 to hand, all between 16 and 21 inches.

The Lower Provo

The lower Provo begins below Deer Creek Reservoir and flows cold and mostly clear for 8 miles to Olmstead Diversion Dam. Because it's a bottom-release tailwater, water temperatures are much colder and fluctuate less than in the middle section. US Highway 189 follows the river and railroad tracks through Provo River Canyon and anglers can simply park, cross the tracks, and ease into the river.

The fertile lower section is loaded with PMDs, BWOs, and Yellow Sallies. As a result, browns and rainbows grow quickly and grow big. But, says Wimmer, "Sow bugs are the meat and potatoes of trout in the lower Provo; I've read entomology surveys by the University of Utah that show unimaginable populations of sow bugs, scuds, and mayflies. It's really the perfect storm for fast-growing fish."

Then he taught me the "Provo River Bounce."

First, tie on a 7.5 foot 4X tapered leader and attach 36 inches of 5X fluorocarbon tippet



PHOTO BY PAUL TIPPY ANGLERSON

with a blood knot. Then set a strike indicator just above the junction. Next, add about 4 inches of tippet a foot below the original knot and use the tag to suspend a nymph.

Repeat 10 inches below the first nymph to have two "tags" with nymphs attached. We used a size 18 Sow Bug followed by a size 18 PMD nymph. Finally, pinch on two 3/0 split shots at the end of the 36 inches of tippet.

Standing almost waist deep, Wimmer demonstrated how to allow the river to load the fly rod. "The water haul cast works extremely well in a walk-and-wade fishery like the Provo," he explained.

Under his watchful eye, I made an easy roll cast to get my nymphs and bobber directly downstream. When I felt the line go tight, I dropped my rod tip to the water and smoothly accelerated my cast directly upstream toward my target. It felt almost effortless. As the bobber started to move downstream past the rocks, the strike was nearly immediate.

"Set!" he yelled. The trout ran like a freight train to the middle of the river, jumped, and ran back straight toward me. "Strip, strip, strip," Wimmer shouted.

I almost fell backward trying to pick up the slack. I



Although Provo River browns average 14 inches, older fish can grow large, like this kype-jawed leviathan landed near dawn in early autumn by angler Dave Gray on a black Woolly Bugger.

knew it was a big rainbow, but how big was hard to tell until it almost ran between my legs. I think we both saw the size and girth of the trout at the same instant because we yelled out an expletive that could have been heard on Stewart Mountain 5 miles above and behind us. Oscar danced excitedly. Even Blue was up and pacing.

After the trout made two more acrobatic runs to the middle of the river, I was able to coax it toward shallow water. We could barely get it in Wimmer's net. When we put a tape on the big shouldered rainbow, Wimmer announced, "Twenty-two inches and I guess about 4 pounds."

What if a River Runs Through It?

Any discussion of the Provo River demands mentioning the current legal fight concerning the public right to gain access to private property, primarily on the upper river. The fight is being led Utah Stream Access Coalition (USAC), a nonprofit group created to preserve public access to the state's waterways. The question on the table has confounded state legislatures for more than 100 years. If the public owns the water but it flows through private land, what, if any, limitations can be placed on its use?

The majority of Western states allows some degree of public use of rivers that flow through private property. Montana affords the greatest access and Utah came close with a 2008 State Supreme Court decision ruling that waterways in the state are publicly owned and access should be allowed. However, in 2010, the Utah State Legislature passed, and the governor signed into law, the Public Waters Access Act that puts most streambeds crossing private lands off-limits unless anglers have a landowner's permission. Because a large portion of land on the upper Provo is privately owned, the legislation has pitted anglers against landowners.

USAC filed a lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of the law, believing that the act counters the 2008 Utah Supreme Court ruling.

To try to heal some of the wounds opened up by the controversy, the UDWR compensates private, high-value residential developments to provide limited public access on the upper Provo.

"We have an agreement with Victory Ranch that allows 10 anglers per day on a first-come basis to sign up to fish about a quarter mile of river that flows through their property," notes the UDWR's Mike Slater. Critics of the policy are quick to condemn the agreement for two reasons. First, the UDWR was named as one of the defendants in the original lawsuit and second, compensation comes from state

coffers. Slater disagrees. "Without the UDWR's policy, there would be no public access to the river across the Victory Ranch property."

While the lawsuit moves through the courts, the Provo flows along, unaware and uninterrupted. And the fishing is splendid. ➔

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