

# Around the Northwest

News, Views, and Piscatorial Pursuits

## Swan River, MT

By Michael Hamilton

“Really? You want to fish the Swan?” I asked.

The little-publicized Swan River, in northwest Montana, runs 95 miles, from Gray Wolf Lake in the Mission Mountains to Swan Lake, and then on to Flathead Lake. A local Montana guide once told me that the Swan was woody as hell, dangerous to row, and has limited access and low native fish counts.



PHOTO BY STEVE MAEDER

In between sips of his favorite IPA, Steve Maeder smiled and said, “Come on, let’s explore something different.”

It didn’t hurt the proposition that Maeder, the advertising manager for *Northwest Fly Fishing*, had arranged weekend lodging with Charlie Ryan, a longtime Swan Valley landowner.

Matt DiPaulo of Crane Mountain Guide Service, (406) 837-0918, [www.cranemountainguide.com](http://www.cranemountainguide.com), had agreed to guide us, but with one caveat: “The Swan is absent from most anglers’ radar. It’s a unique fishery and can’t stand a lot of pressure. Please don’t write that it’s loaded with wild trout, because it isn’t.”

“Fair enough,” we replied.

DiPaulo explained that the single biggest problem with fishing the Swan is access. “There are no real trails or roads up or down the river,” he said. “Logjams are everywhere. It’s remote, wild country. The river twists and turns through a steep valley between the Mission and Swan mountain ranges. Late-spring runoff can often make it impossible to wade or even float until mid-June or later.”

Every new season, before he begins guiding, DiPaulo runs the river and often encounters new obstacles that make navigating the river challenging and dangerous. “This is not a river for a novice or even experienced rower,” he warns. “You really need to consider hiring a guide.”

That said, adventurous walk-and-wade an-

glers can enjoy ample access if they’re willing to work for it, entering the river at bridges or walking in from nearby roads, and then walking the river channel. Save such adventures for late summer and fall, when low water reveals ample gravel bars, making for easier trekking, and study good maps and satellite views carefully in planning an outing.

We launched at Porcupine Bridge, about 6 miles above Swan Lake, and floated through a heavily wooded stretch, with logjams, tight corners, root balls, and downed trees. “Not huge numbers of fish per mile, but certainly a shot at a fish of a lifetime,” noted DiPaulo.

As morning ran into afternoon, casting size 4 sculpin patterns tight to the bank and stripping them back produced a few follows but no takes. After lunch, my luck changed.

“Set!” barked DiPaulo. With the speed of a bonefish and the strength of a steelhead, a silvery slab slammed my streamer, skyrocketed into the air from under a root ball, and took off

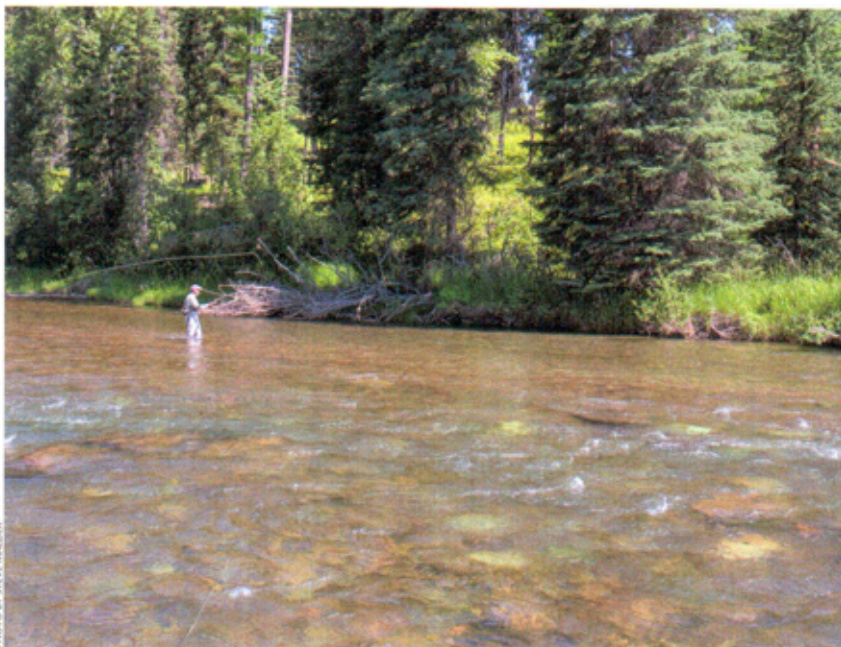


PHOTO BY STEVE MAEDER



pell-mell downstream. "Rod tip high; keep him out the wood," shouted DiPaulo. My 6-weight rod was bent like a horseshoe. Ten minutes doesn't sound like much time, but that's how long it took to finally coax this monster rainbow into DiPaulo's net.



PHOTO BY STEVE MAUDER

"Bona fide 2-footer," exclaimed an excited DiPaulo.

According to Leo Rosenthal with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, the density of fish in the Swan is in the hundreds of fish per mile, not thousands, but that wasn't always the case. Three main factors, he says, have significantly threatened native populations of westslope cutthroat and bull trout: "Migrating lake trout from Swan Lake prey on juvenile cutties, brook trout populate most of the Swan's tributaries and reduce juvenile cutthroat survival, and rainbow trout hybridization has greatly diminished the genetic integrity of native populations. However, the fish that are present, primarily rainbows, are very strong and range from 18 to 20 inches, with the occasional 2-footer."

That fish I landed was a case in point.



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