

# Around the West

News, Views, and Piscatorial Pursuits

## Montana: Salmonflies on the West Fork Bitterroot

By Michael Hamilton

Trying to guess the end of runoff in Montana from afar, in order to fish the storied Salmonfly hatch on the West Fork Bitterroot, is akin to picking a Super Bowl winner before the football season starts. Sure, volumes of data show 10-year trends, but every year is different, especially now, with weather seeming ever more unpredictable because of climate change. But if you are lucky enough to time it right, the rewards of watching fat cutthroat, rainbows, and browns explode on robust Salmonfly-imitating dry flies far outweigh the dejection of encountering a river swollen with runoff. So, when the second week in June arrived in 2019, I decided to roll the dice.

The West Fork has two distinct personalities. It begins as a small freestone stream, hugging the southwest border of Montana and eventually flowing into Painted Rocks Lake, 40 miles south of Hamilton, Montana. The West Fork above the reservoir is a walk-and-wade fishery, with plenty of 8- to 12-inch trout that willingly rise to dry flies. The West Fork, along with Slate, Blue Joint, and Overwhich Creeks, fill the reservoir, which at full capacity can store close to 45,000 acre-feet of water. Managed releases irrigate Bitterroot Valley farms as well as protect fish during hot summers. Below Painted Rocks Lake, the West Fork assumes a totally different character. Undercut banks, boulder drops, tight pockets, deep pools, rock garden rapids, riffles, and numerous logjams provide prime habitat for prodigious numbers of thick-bodied westslope cutthroat, feisty rainbows, and big browns, as well as mountain whitefish and a sparse population



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of federally protected bull trout, which must be released immediately.

Three days before I arrived, my guide friend, Andrew Hettick, part of the guide contingent from Freestone Fly Shop ([www.freestoneflyshop.com](http://www.freestoneflyshop.com)), in Hamilton, left me a voicemail with disturbing news: "Flows are way above normal, pushing 2,000 cfs [cubic feet per second]. No sign of Salmonflies. Nada. Not even shucks on the banks or in the bushes. But the weather is supposed to shift."

Shift turned out to be a major understatement. Over the next 72 hours, overnight lows jumped 10 degrees. Daytime highs skyrocketed into the 80s. The West Fork's flows fell below 1,000 cfs. Welcome to late spring in Montana.

Hettick met me in Hamilton on a cloudy, humid day, and we drove south on US Highway 93. Three miles after passing through the small berg of Darby, we turned onto West Fork Road (State Route 473) to continue the southward journey. As Hettick was explaining our game plan—to launch just below the reservoir—we



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were startled by a loud pop, followed by splat. When an insect nearly 3 inches long meets your windshield as you are traveling at 50 miles per hour, it gets your attention. We both yelled, "Salmonflies!"

Soon, we slid Hettick's raft down a steep bank and into the river downstream from Painted Rocks. Squadrons of Salmonflies zigzagged overhead. I tied one of Hettick's Salmonfly imitations to a 7.5-foot leader. "Make short reach casts, tight to the bank," he advised. We pushed off. The swift current flung us downstream. On my third cast, a huge brown trout chased my fly over a boulder. I set the hook and the fish rocketed upstream. No way we could stop. I dropped my rod tip, as if I were fighting a steelhead, trying to turn the fish downstream. A good 300 yards downriver, Hettick navigated his raft into a slow pocket behind a boulder. He dropped anchor. As if on cue, the fish swam by the raft. I pulled the fish's head upward and Hettick deftly netted the prize. The next several hours provided nonstop action. Salmonflies buzzed above. I hooked fish after fish below. It was a constant rush of pure adrenaline.

For many fly fishers, catching the Salmonfly hatch just right is like discovering the location of the Holy Grail. However, all it takes is one unforgettable day, with magnificent trout opening their mouths to inhale your huge dry fly, to make the legend real.

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