

You'll Never Stay Dry

By Patrick Cone
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My sneakers squeaked and squished as I walked through the tall grass. Seeds were clinging to my wet pant legs. Thistle spines poked my shins, their purple spiked heads aged into the white-haired pods of autumn.

Flurries of golden cottonwood leaves had coated the lavender, quartzite boulders exposed by low water, worn round by their long trip from the high mountains. To the west, towering cumulus clouds were building an orange curtain across the horizon.

I paused briefly in a few places to toss a fly into the swirling water, but impatience made me move on. I knew where I wanted to be and when I needed to be there. Early mornings and late evenings were created for fly fishermen. I walked on in the golden light.

Where once the river had turned abruptly to the south, a new channel burst the banks in a turn, and had left an oxbow littered with boulders, logs and drying pools. Farther downstream I saw remnants of willows that once had lined the bank, now trying to return after their destruction by a dredging bulldozer a few years before.

The mechanically-scoured bottom and high windrows of round rocks protected the pastureland from the high water, but also destroyed an important trout habitat. The stones would surely roll back into the channel at the next high water, a job that would have turned even Prometheus into a juggler. The river would reseal its bottom, given time. Meanwhile, the rainbow, cutthroat and brown trout would have to live and spawn in another stretch of water.

The banks of the river are still home to deer, bobcats, herons and cranes. Eagles and owls perch on the high limbs. But river otters, once common, are now gone. Fish and mammals compete for life in decreasing space as the water is diverted or the streambeds destroyed.

In my shirt pocket the aluminum fly box thumped my chest lightly as I stopped under low branches. Inside the box, in orderly ranks were the tiny bundles of steel, fiber and feathers meant to imitate certain insects.

As a young kid I was thrilled to be given a rudimentary fly-tying (I called it tie-flying) kit. I spent winter evenings planning strategies, studying patterns and mail-ordering exotic feathers from the ten-pound Herter's catalog. Later, of course, I realized that my father had given me the tools so that he wouldn't have to buy any more flies, since we spent a lot of time rescuing flies from trees behind us, or smashing the hooks on the rocks.

Following a few disasters I actually started to create flies that could catch fish. After that a birthday present from me was usually a dozen of my hand-tied terrors. The names were magical: Renegades and Royal Coachmen and Mormon Girls and nymphs; names straight out of Zane Grey, Robin Hood and Mickey Spillane.

Every fly has a unique look. Where one has a red tail, peacock feather body, brown hackle and white wings, another might have no tail, black chenille body and stubby black wings. There are hundreds of patterns.

Something told me that my latest creation had never been seen before, and for good reason. It stood out like a whore in church. It was a psychedelic nightmare, striped with purple tinsel, yellow flow, and orange feathers. It was a zoot suit fly cruising for low-riding trout.

I ducked under the overhanging hawthorne of a deer path, stepped out onto the rock bar and found a seat on a bleached white log near the water.

In front of me was a sweeping ninety-degree curve in the river. A small stream entered from the opposite side, creating a quiet backwater for large fish to patrol.

A hundred yards upstream from the confluence cows stood knee deep in the creek. As I watched the surface of the water, I began to see the telltale dimple rings of large fish. The clouds to my left had turned from red to blue-black. In the distance, lightning danced on the west hills and a veil of rain washed the blue sage.

With a few quick turns I tied my dayglo dazzler onto the leader and bit off the excess line.

A squadron of sandhill cranes flew low overhead, away from the approaching storm. The moist air displaced by their wings brushed my face as I shaped the barb off the hook with some pliers, giving the fish a sporting chance to spit out the fly. I had no plans for a trout dinner.

One advantage to fly-fishing is the angler's ability to release an unwanted catch unharmed, an option not always open using a bait hook. Some people release all their fish, wanting the sport without the trophy.

During certain times of the year insects hatch which dictate the kind of fly to be used – a wet (sinking) fly, dry (floating) fly, nymph or streamer. Most fishermen try to

match the hatch, but on this night I tried the opposite tactic: I was hoping to shock the trout into striking.

With the pimp fly tied securely to my line, I glanced at the brush behind me for a suitable backcast area. I swept the fly forward and back, feeding line out with my left hand. Done incorrectly this can result not only in lost flies, but also in hooks embedded in earlobes, or welted cheeks.

The object is to get the fly into the water. Usually the person who catches the most fish is the person who keeps the fly in the water. Even with perfect technique, there is nothing to be gained by casting about too much. There are no flying fish in Utah.

My eyes picked out the point in the water where the fish would be waiting for food that washed down the river. I let loose. The line straightened out and dropped fly first onto the water. The heavy hook hit the surface like a hubcap and disappeared beneath the dark water. I let the line out as it floated downstream, retrieved the fly, genuflected with my fly rod, and recast back upstream.

The fly hit the water again. Immediately the rod bent under the weight of several pound of angry, wild trout. High voltage ran up the line into my hands. Handcuffed to the fish I followed it up and down the river, my feet slipping on the round rocks. The fish rose once and tailwalked briefly. The orange banner beneath its chin proclaimed it a cutthroat, the native fish of the river.

I stumbled through the shallows and stepped off into a deep hole. Had I been wearing waders, I would have been dragged to the bottom under fifty pounds of water. But holding the rod high, I found the bottom once again.

We eventually tired each other out and I was able to work the fish into the shallows for release. With hands wet to protect the slippery body, I cupped the sides of the big cutthroat and removed the fly from her lip. Her sides bulged with the eggs she was going to release: fish for the future.

As I set her back she gave me a look which said that she would remember this particular abomination of a fly. Then, with a flick of her hand-sized tail, she disappeared.

A whirlwind of leaves reminded me of the approaching storm as the last glimmer of light left the sky. Jagged strokes of lightning marched their way upriver towards me.

I quickly left the bank and started walking home in the dark. Flashes seared the scenery into my eyes, reversing the colors. I followed the images back up a familiar trail.