

Fish Naked

Naked we come into the world and naked we leave it, but deciding what to wear in the meantime can be a pain in the duff. I consider shopping for clothes about as much fun as shingling condominiums, so I like to wear the same blue jeans and corduroy shirt most days, and would probably wear them *every* day if my wife and kids didn't complain. I'm not lazy or undisciplined or unclean, just uninterested.

But when I was in my early twenties, my fishing friends and I were fashion paragons, on the cutting edge of what would eventually become known as the grunge look. We grew our hair long (and yes, Dad, you were right: Someday we *did* look back at the photos and cringe) and dressed only in jeans, tees, and flannel shirts. Because we were too obsessed with fishing and hunting to land good jobs, money was scarce. It condemned us to sleeping in our cars when we traveled and fishing with cheap waders, midrange fiberglass rods, and decent but not great Hardy reels. We filled mismatched plastic boxes with flies we tied ourselves and stuffed them inside vests so stained with sweat and blood and spilled dry-fly floatant they looked as if they'd been kicked around on the floor of an automobile repair shop that doubled as a slaughterhouse.

For a few years in the mid-seventies, Mike McCumby and I drove west every September to fish the waters in and around Yellowstone Park, a region that even then was a center of outdoor fashion. Mike and I stood out

from the rest of the crowd. When we entered fly shops the proprietors looked at us the way a famously conservative congressman from northern Michigan looked at hippies -- as road dreck that arrived in town with one pair of underwear and one five-dollar bill and no intention of changing either of them. Mike and I weren't hippies, but neither were we in the market for Wheatley fly boxes or a hundred-dollars' worth of Japanese-tied Humpies and Bitch-Creek Nymphs. To get useful information we had to spring for a couple spools of tippet material and endure the head-to-foot glances of customers who wore more money on their backs than Mike and I earned in two weeks of pounding nails. Screw 'em, we said. Our outfits sucked, but man, we *fished*.

One year we spent every day for a week on the Firehole. We concentrated on the meadow sections of the river, in the midst of geyser fields, mud pots, and boiling streams. It's hard to imagine water more unlike the staid, cedar-shrouded rivers we had grown up fishing back home in Michigan. We became a bit delirious with the novelty of casting where there were few trees to snag our backcasts and where large fish fed recklessly on the surface in midstream, at midday.

The Firehole's trout see a lot of skillfully presented artificial flies and can be fussy about which ones they eat. Mike and I did okay, fooling a few good fish every afternoon during mayfly hatches and taking rainbows and browns to eighteen inches on weighted nymphs dead-drifted through some of the deeper riffles. That was during working hours, when we had much of the river to ourselves. On the weekend we had to share.

We knew the Firehole was popular, but we were not prepared for the crowds that gathered at every bend and riffle that bright September Saturday. Much of the competition was composed of deeply intent young

men and women who dressed as if they had been assisted by personal fashion consultants and cast as if they had been tutored from the crib by tournament champs. Mike and I were a little intimidated. On previous trips to less fashionable places in Wyoming and Montana we had shared the water with locals wading wet in dusty blue jeans and cowboy hats, carrying Band-Aid

boxes of flies in their shirt pockets, and casting heavy glass rods with most of the paint chipped off. They were after-work anglers, good at muscling Woolly Worms into the wind and keeping their freezers stocked. Although Mike and I considered them kindred spirits, they dismissed us as effete fancy-pants purists because we wore chest-waders with only a few patches on them and preferred long leaders and smallish dry flies over the giant, gaudy, subaquatic patterns that were standard in most Western fly boxes in those days. One afternoon on the Madison an elderly cowboy casting large nineteenth-century-style wet flies on snelled hooks laughed out loud when we told him we were using #20 Blue-Winged Olives and 6X tippetts. Later, surrendering to the when-in-Rome principle, we ambushed the Madison with Spruce Flies the size of neotropical songbirds and caught just as many fish as we were accustomed to catching, but they averaged half a foot longer.

On the Firehole we kept running into expert midgers casting thousand-dollar rods and wearing outfits like the folks in the Orvis catalog. They looked us up and down in frank appraisal, bent over to read the logos on our rods and reels, and more often than not began furiously dropping names. "I fished this stretch once with Ernest," one yawning dude said, sidling up to Mike and me on the bank of a drop-dead pool where a few minutes earlier we had watched a brown trout big enough to eat a muskrat rise, just once,

during a brief hatch of minuscule gray somethings. The dude didn't specify which Ernest he meant, and we were too polite to ask. Then, later, while Mike worked a gravel run downstream and I stood on a rock casting dry flies and watching a streamside geyser erupt, a meticulously dressed gentleman with a cosmetic suntan walked to within twenty feet of me and began casting into the same pool. As I reeled in he leaned my way and said, "I helped Jack Hemingway land and release a twenty-eight-inch brown trout from that exact spot a month ago."

Well, I was glad to hear it. I've always wanted to catch a twenty-eight-inch brown trout, and any rumor of one's existence is encouraging. But I had seen enough superbly dressed, superbly equipped, and superbly connected fishermen for one day, so I excused myself and rounded up Mike and we hiked through a stand of lodgepole pines to intercept the river in an area the map showed was as far from roads and boardwalks as any stretch of the Firehole gets. It was a hot day, grasshopper weather, and we walked a fair distance. We were sweating like wrestlers when we finally spotted sunlight flashing on water through the trees.

But then we saw the glint of a rod and stopped. Pilgrims were everywhere on this holy water. We were pilgrims too, of course, but after fishing an uncrowded river all week it was hard to be charitable. We walked to the edge of the woods to see what we were up against.

Facing us from the shallows on the opposite bank was a powerfully built man wearing skin-tight, skin-toned waders, with a landing net hanging below his waist and a fly rod waving around his head. Two heartbeats later, in a kind of cognitive double-take, I realized that the man was wearing neither waders nor clothes. He was stitchless, buck-naked, bare-assed as a baby. And there is no delicate way to say this: That thing hanging to his

knees was no landing net. The guy was a freak of nature. P. T. Barnum could have made a fortune off him.

Mike and I drew back into the woods and hunkered down to think. We stayed quiet, not wanting to alert the guy to our presence. It sounds strange now, but we were spooked. Seeing a naked man fishing is odd enough, but this naked man brought to mind the biological concept of dominance hierarchy. We were six-point bucks intruding on a twelve-pointer's territory, and we sure as hell didn't want him to think we were challenging him for it.

"Did you see that?" Mike whispered.

"I'm not sure," I said. "You're talking about the nude guy in the river?"

"Yea. But did you see *that*?"

We stepped to the edge of the trees. The man was gone. In his place was a woman, knee-deep in the river, placing short, splashy casts to midstream. She too was starkers. And her physique was just as extraordinary as the man's. She had the kind of body that is considered out of fashion nowadays but can be seen on glorious display in Greek statuary, saucy Renaissance paintings, and turn-of-the-century French postcards. Venus with a fly rod.

Now we were really spooked. Where was the man? And what would he do if he caught us spying on his girlfriend? We cut through the woods, taking frequent glances behind us, and came out on the river a long bend downstream, in open terrain, where we could keep an eye on the woman above us and see anyone approaching when they were still a hundred yards away. But now the naked woman and the naked man were together,

standing side by side and casting in synchronized rhythm, like the original innocent anglers of Eden. If Mike and I had been first-time visitors to the planet, we might have assumed we were witnessing some form of ritual courtship display.

We had a stretch of river to ourselves, at least, so we took our time and fished carefully. A middle-aged man wearing tight waders and a slouch hat furred with dozens of flies passed us on the bank and gave a jolly hello. We returned his greeting and watched him walk upstream to the bend where Adam and Eve fished. He stopped beside them and exchanged words as if there were nothing unusual about encountering naked people on the Firehole. It was disorienting. Mike and I wondered if we were terribly misinformed. Maybe nude angling was a local tradition, promoted by the West Yellowstone Chamber of Commerce and celebrated with effusive prose in travel magazines. Maybe it was a *tactic*.

We cast nymphs for an hour or so, but the trout seemed to have hightailed it to the headwaters. No insects were hatching, and the river was shallow and empty of life. All the time we fished we watched the man and woman. They never raised a trout. If nudity was a tactic, it didn't work.

It occurred to us that we might be witnessing a fashion statement. Maybe the nudists were protesting designer labels and de rigueur fishing duds, casting off all superfluities and announcing bravely to the world that only the river and the fishing mattered. The idea was nice, but it probably didn't apply. My guess is it just felt good to take your clothes off and stand in the water and show off a little. Mike and I laughed about it as we made our way downstream. For the first time all week we were the best-dressed guys on the river.

