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change the season

The Road to Fantastic Fishing

Pack a rod and reel for these scenic trips along the Platte River

By Dina Mishev, "meanest hook in the West" and freelance travel writer



I'm on the "Miracle Mile" – thigh deep in it, in fact – and discovering that it is neither a mile (more like seven) nor, for me at least, a miracle. I'm surveying the sage-covered prairie stretching in all directions and watching an eagle launch loop-de-loops in the cloudless sky above rather than listening to my fly-fishing guide. While the three fishermen around me have all landed what, on other rivers, would be called trophy fish but on the North Platte are merely ordinary, I have hooked nothing but air. But that is an improvement for me. During my inaugural attempt at fly fishing, on a little creek where the fish evidently had Ph.D.s in hook avoidance from Harvard (honors thesis on fake bugs), I did hook the guide (four times), his dog (twice) and, not to appear biased, myself most of all.

On that day, at least at the beginning, my guide was also my friend. By mid-afternoon I had been christened "the meanest hook in the West" and our friendship was on shaky ground. He suggested I try fishing a more forgiving stretch of water – without him. I head for the North Platte, which has four major sections in Wyoming, each very different.

The Miracle Mile

I seem to have picked the wrong section to start on: the Miracle Mile is not that forgiving. Nestled between Seminoe/Kortes Dam and Pathfinder Reservoir, flows are varying – wildly varying. To a novice like me this information means nothing, but to those who know about fishing, it alerts them this stretch of river is all about nymphs and not dry flies. My little bit of experience is with dry flies, but I switch to nymphs, which dangle and dance under the water rather than float on top. And, I start to listen to my guide.

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Walking along the riverbank, occasionally stopping to enjoy the shade of a giant cottonwood and looking for a new channel or slot to wade into (walking and wading being preferable to floating here), I'm trying to pay attention. Really. But that eagle is still circling overhead and I don't think I've ever been able to see so far in so many directions. My mind manages to register "scud population," "stonefly nymphs" and "common naturals" before drifting off again.

Mr. Guide is losing patience. This is one of his favorite stretches of river and he wants me to see why: specifically gargantuan fish. Many fish are in the 14- to 18-inch and five- to 10-pound range. He says he has a friend who took an 18-pound rainbow here. After I snare a sage, there is no longer any doubt he'll have to show me the goods himself. Twenty minutes later I'm petting what might be the largest rainbow I've ever seen. And he says it is on the "smallish" side.

Gray's Reef

Gray's Reef, a mere 45 minutes from Casper is similar to the Miracle Mile in several important features and dissimilar in several important features. First the similarities: Gray's Reef, like the Miracle Mile, is tailwater fishing (meaning it is downstream from a dam). It is also home to the same football-sized rainbows and browns as the Miracle Mile.



Fly Fishing



Now differences: Flows in Gray's Reef are much more constant than in the Miracle Mile (meaning dry-fly anglers of all abilities, but especially beginners, will have more success at Gray's Reef). The Miracle Mile is a great walk-and-wade stretch. Because it crosses much private property – we're in ranch land here – where it is illegal to drop anchor or walk on the streambed, Gray's Reef is best fished by boat. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly when looking to create that *River-Runs-Through-It* feeling, Gray's Reef, despite its proximity to Casper, is less dotted with flicking fly rods than the Miracle Mile. And that means more solitude ... and more fish for you.

Upper River

Nothing but the best here. Winding through the mountains and heavy timber of the Medicine Bow National Forest, the upper section of the North Platte is remote, *won't-see-another-fishermen-for-days* remote. Instead you'll keep company with elk, coyotes, deer, mountain lion, bear, bighorn sheep, moose and eagles. Oh, and more gigantic trout. Like the landscape it cuts through, the river here is wild – steep grades, rapids, large boulders – so it is best to wait until after the runoff is finished (usually June). Truly dedicated fly-fishermen walk in and spend days meandering along the river, fishing and camping en route. Another option is to do the same with a drift boat or canoe.

Saratoga to Seminoe River

I promised a fly-fishing friend I wouldn't write about this section of river. Hopefully he won't find out. Past the tiny town of Saratoga, the riverside scenery changes from ranch bottomland to the high-plains desert (the same high-plains desert you'll see in the Miracle Mile) that distracts me so. But here there are no water flow fluctuations and there are hatches to pay attention to and dry flies to select. So I should have no excuse; yet I do. The wind. It never seems to stop here. I cock the tip of the rod back and I'm fighting an invisible force. The line gets all tangled and the hook disappears into my vest. I want to disappear into a Saratoga bar, but the guide tells me this might be my best chance at catching something. We continue floating along.

A few hours later I am better in tune with the wind. I've even gotten a few fish to rise to a yellow mayfly but I wasn't then able to seal the deal. Finally, with

Wyoming's cultural calendar.

darkness coming in I announce my last cast. And I get something. It'd be a nice ending to the story if it was a fish, but I can't twist the truth that much. I can say it was a trophy log though.

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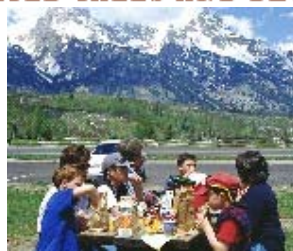
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