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OCTOBER 1995



Idaho's Indian summer is one of those glorious seasons when the tail end of trouting marries with grouse, waterfowl and bigger game. You pick your poison: lithe rods for cutthroats and browns, lively doubles for upland game, bigger bores for waterfowl, or rifled armaments suited for elk, moose, deer or bear.

Big game is an all-consuming affair, and it's hard to mix in fishing or bird hunting unless you bag your buck early or tack on a day or two to either end of your hunt.

But if fishing is your meat and shotgunning your pleasure, then Idaho's Swan Valley on the South Fork of the Snake River may be your mecca come October. It is mine. Canadas trade over close-cropped grain fields, trios of ducks gabble along the river and grouse are thick in the sage-tufted hills. I was eager to go gunning, but life is tough and trout had to come first.

"Brace yourselves," Scott Hocking hollered as the bow of his green and tan McKenzie driftboat caught the lime-colored current and slued us downstream. In the stern, Pike Sullivan, a retired investment banker from Hohokus, New Jersey, pounded the banks with a lead-wire leader and a wooly bugger. My lead-headed Missouri marabou muddler hit every other pocket on this river of dreams.

Scott, who's guided on the Snake since 1976, had launched us into the South Fork at the ramp below Palisades Dam. The zephyr which had caressed us warmly from the southwest earlier was now a steady westerly blow.

"This wind will make it difficult," he shouted above the bawling rapids. "But it should push the hatch into little eddies along the bank. That's where we should find fish."

I'd heard of the South Fork from Chris and Dale Smith who own a cabin on the North (Henry's) Fork of the Snake near Island Park. They'd been wooing me for years to spend a week in October catching rainbows and browns. "If

you're lucky, you'll come in Indian Summer."

Now I could see why. To the north, the snow-capped Snake River Range stood, patinaed grey like old gun metal and bearded with snow, stark against a sky as cloudless and blue as only a booming Canadian high-pressure system can make it.

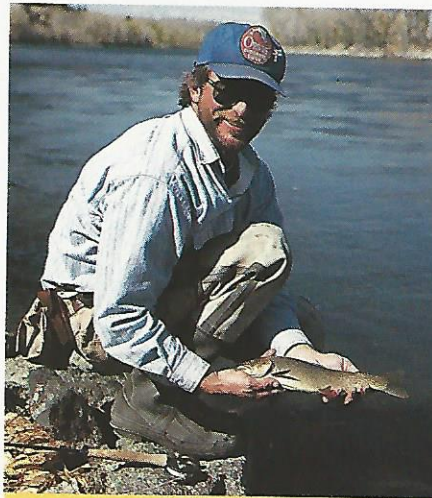
Early frost and snow had chased the yellow and red from autumn's aspens and maples. On riverbank cottonwoods, golden-green leaves, flickering and fluttering in the breeze, cheered up the landscape. Stubble fields, high on the lava palisades, glowed tawny amber against dark stands of conifers on the mountain flanks. The temperature was comfortably in the sixties.

The river, seldom more than a hundred yards wide, raced from under the Palisades Dam, sprinted over choppy shoals, and hit its stride in the long flats coursing along at five miles-an-hour. Facing the bow, Scott shoved on the oars, muscling the craft within a few yards of the cobbled shore. Wind, plague of western fishing, freshened hard out of the northwest, huffing dead upstream and sailing my backcast and weighted streamer between the heads of my boatmates.

That's bad business, and I gave up the fruitless blind-casting to soak up scenery, to watch the country slide by, banking images and sounds and smells, memories to rekindle when commuting next mires me in New York City traffic.

"In unsettled weather, fish react by becoming more aggressive during daylight hours," Scott briefed me. "As they feel the cold and the leaves fall, they want to stock up for the winter, and we'll find a little more intense feeding. Best hours will be between noon and four."

Blue-wing olives had been coming off during midday, and I tied on a #16 olive parachute, treating it liberally with float dope as we scanned the surface for feeding trout. I spotted a rise, then another



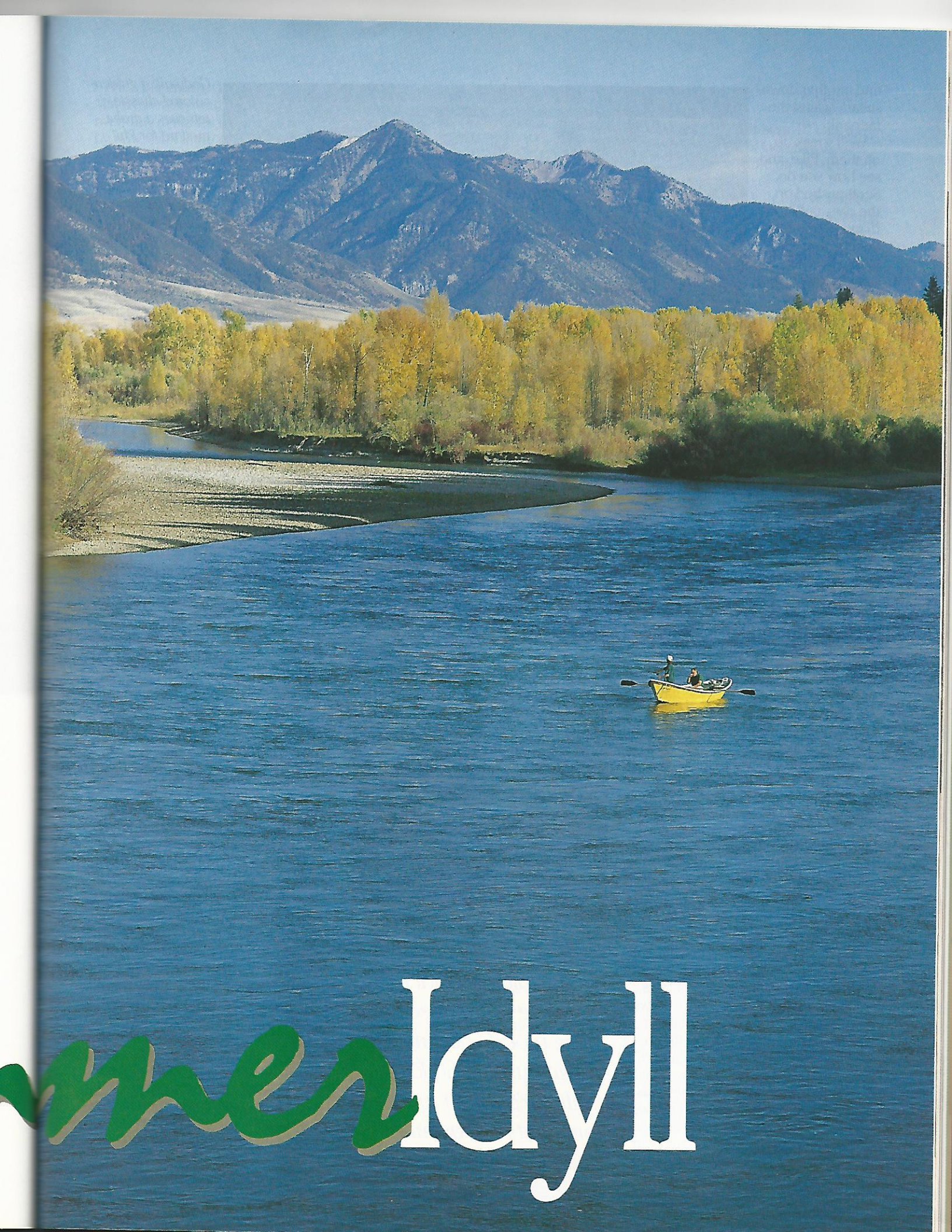
JOHN E. ROSS

Drifting Idaho's South Fork of the Snake River is like floating through a flyfisherman's paradise, with beautiful scenery around every bend and 'hovers' of rainbows, cutthroats and browns in every riffle and eddy.

by John E. Ross

Above: Guide Scott Hocking with a catch-and-release cutthroat. Opposite: Big country, a clean broad river, good fish – that's the ethos of Idaho's South Fork.

Indian Summer



mer Idyll

and another downstream against the far bank.

"We'll sneak up on them, Pike, and see how you do." Scott pushed on the oars, cutting diagonally across the current. "I'll grab a notch in the bank by this next set of trees and we'll walk up on them. If they're in the shallows it's because there's a deeper pool they can escape to."

A dozen or so fish were taking not ten feet off the bank. We drifted past, resisting temptation to cast to the feeders, lest we put them down, but close enough to assure ourselves that these were indeed trout and not despised whitefish.

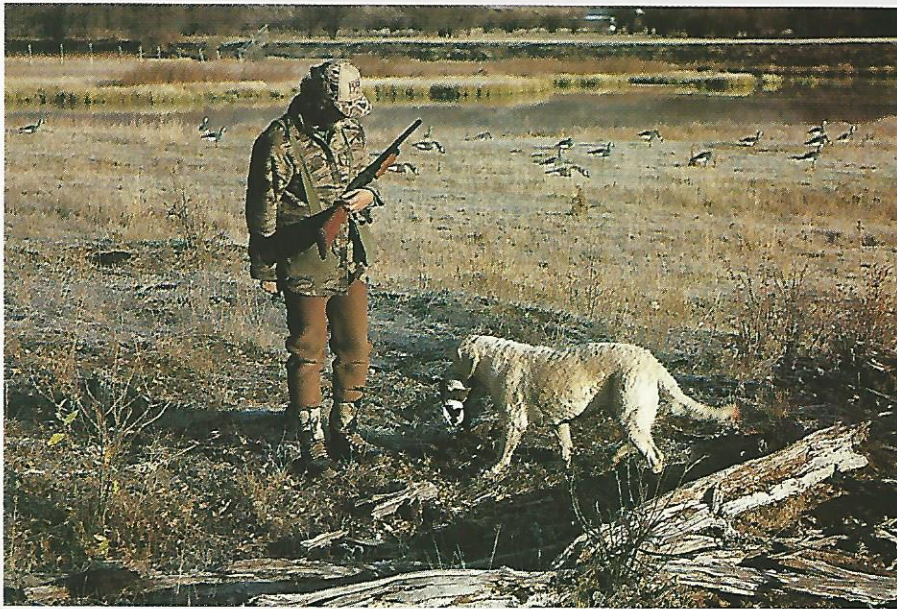
Deftly Scott oared the boat around the fish and came up behind them. The water was clear and shallow, no deeper than twenty inches, but the bottom fell away about twenty feet from the bank. The fish were holding in the shallows, secure, knowing they could bolt to deeper water the instant the shadow of an eagle or osprey darkened their lie.

Scott slipped the thirty-pound anchor overboard, and it held us fast. Gingerly, feet seeking firm footing on the loose granite cobbles, we stepped on to the bank. Pike, who'd changed to a parachute adams, moved up to take the last fish working in the lane of feeders. He didn't want to spook the others. We'd been drifting for an hour and these were the first fish we'd found. Two casts brought to bank a fat cutthroat of about thirteen inches. A moment later, Scott hooked and released one which went about fifteen inches. And that was it. The fish went down.

So this was the game. Float the river, scan the surface, watch for tiny splashes signaling feeding fish, "hovers" of trout, Scott called them. "A hover of trout, a lovely term. If you ever look down and see 'em, they're kind of finning and remaining in one spot."

He grinned and warmed to his lecture: "A *sloth* of bears, a *parliament* of owls, so descriptive. An *exaltation* of larks, quite poetic really. A *murder* of crows; if you've ever seen a bunch of them hopping around, it looks like they're plotting something dark and sinister."

The river made a bend to the right at the head of an island. To the left was a second channel, that, in higher flows, divided the stream. But the water was low, and the river eddied languidly in



Gadwall, a golden-colored chessie, retrieves a drake mallard for Phil Blomquist.

the closed mouth. Trout were feeding along the bank where the eddy returned to the main stream.

Scott pulled the boat over one hundred yards upstream of the eddy. A second hover of trout was working above us and Pike decided to fish them. I'd try

the ones below. Pressing low and close to the brushy shore to minimize my presence, I slipped down past the fish. At our first stop, I'd laid my line over a feeding trout and scared hell out of him. This time, I didn't want that to happen, and I'd added a five-foot section of 5X tippet to my leader.

My guess was that the bigger fish would feed on the outside of the pod to be close to the safety of deeper water. The wind caught my cast and splatted it down on the water, but the supple leader sailed up and over the rising fish. No taker. Another cast. Nothing. Fewer bullseyes on the water. I waited. The fish were as skittish as chickadees at the feeder.

"Let's wait," I told myself. There are less onerous trials than gazing over the blue river, up to the cottonwoods where eagles nest, then over the trees to high lava palisades, so new to me and sharply pointed and painfully raw with exposed runs of talus where dark green fingers of pine and fir struggle to climb.

A trout's sup brought me back, and I worked out a little line, dropping the fly in the lane just above the rising fish. The white tuft of deer's hair of the parachute danced against the inky surface for a moment and then vanished in a swirl. The fish was on, and I managed, for once, not to break him off while setting the hook.

He bulldogged out into the current and I let him take line. That was dumb because the next instant he raced at me, and I stripped line like a fool to keep some semblance of control. Upstream again he went, and then out and down and in, circling with the eddy. My Orvis pack rod bowed well with each run, slowly wearing down the fish.

When the trout had rolled to take the fly, I thought he was a brown. But it was a mature cutthroat, dark like old gold the way some browns get, but sprinkled with tiny black spots.



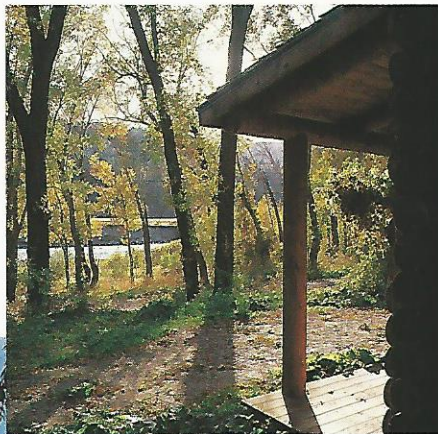
"Is it always this easy?" I asked Phil. He grinned, and explained that most grouse in this neck of the woods had never been flushed. So far this fall, he'd taken twenty-one, but he was running behind last year's tally.

"He's big enough to keep," Scott said, but I didn't want to. Mature trout upwards of sixteen inches often taste like the river they're reared in and make disappointing eating. And by now, even if the photos failed, this fish was firmly mounted in my memory.

You can keep trout from this section of the South Fork, but only two fish either smaller than eight inches or larger than sixteen. For my money, the "slot" limit makes overwhelming good sense. Scott agrees: "You've got fish you can eat, and trophy fish, and you're putting good-sized fish back in the river.

The slot limit is also a good response to increased fishing pressure on the South Fork. "Our trout season's open from April through October in Wyoming and over here from Memorial Day through November," he continued. "It used to be

On summer evenings you can watch the waters of the Snake River drift by, while dining on the deck of the beautifully restored lodge.



that people only fished in July and August and September.

"But now we've got neoprene waders. We've got boats. We've got fast-sinking lines, slow-sinking lines and floating lines. We've really eliminated a lot of the hiding areas that fish used to have. The different layers in the structure can be fished, from top to bottom, whereas fish used to be kinda safe somewhere in there.

"Fishermen are on the water longer. They are more serious. They have more time for recreation and more money for equipment, and they are getting to areas that were previously only fished for a short part of the season. Now they're fished every minute of the season.

"People need to realize that a six-fish limit is kind of archaic. Nobody needs to kill six trout a day. You can't eat six trout. Why would you want to kill six trout? A daily limit needs to be two or three fish." His discourse made sense to me.

We drifted on, past a pair of eagles sunning beside their huge nest high in a cottonwood, past a cow and a yearling moose who swam the river in front of us and clamored up the bank to graze on streamside brush, past twos and threes of mallards that we hoped to decoy in the morning, on

downstream toward the lowering sun in the now blustery, but cloudless sky.

"If they only gave me two weeks to fish here, I'd take the last week in September and first week of October," Scott said when pressed to pick his favorite time on the river. But he was having trouble choosing.

"In the last week in June and first week in July, stoneflies vary from large California three-inchers to the little fluttering golden stones and some little mint green ones, too. Little golden sallies and fluttering stones are pretty exciting.

"I like skidding them across the top, like they were carried by the wind. In the height of that hatch, it's quite the system out here – the birds are circling, the bugs are flying and the fish are jumping."

And then there's November, when snow and sleet will pelt your face. But the big browns, territorial as all hell in spawning, make the fishing flare brightly at the end of the season.

Such thoughts carried us down past the falls; to occasional silver "cutties" that take with abandon and whose immature throat slashes look more like dribbles of hotdog mustard on a kid's

chin, through the braided gravel islands where Chris Smith nailed a brown on a nymph, into the chill under the bluffs, toward the mouth of the canyon, a dusky rose cleft in the deepening mauve hills. At takeout, a vee of Canadas crossed the cheddar moon rising over the Snake River Range.

"Tomorrow," I thought, "tomorrow."

"Well, how'd ya do?" Chip Kearns' smile was as warm as the fire in the lodge's dining room where we'd repaired to chase the evening's chill with appropriate elixir. Chip manages The Lodge at Palisades Creek with deft perfection, a task, unfortunately, that keeps him off the river and away from the fishing that brought him to Idaho in the first place.

Over thick slabs of prime rib, graced with mushrooms and a few broiled shrimp thrown in for good measure, talk around the table was of fishing. But my mind wasn't there. It was on geese and ducks and grouse and I forewent dessert, ambled down the gravel lane to my guest cabin by the river and, with windows wide open despite the freezing cold, slept deeply with the river in my ears.

Coffee revived me in the morning, and before dawn Phil Blomquist, his golden chessie, Gadwall, and I were headed down the valley to a blind he'd set up the day before on a slough between the grainfields and the river.

Phil turns out some 18,000 flies each winter to stock shops in the region. This, and guiding anglers, are his work. But birds are his passion. Like most other folks who are trying to wrest a living out of the Swan Valley, he adheres to that old Yankee chestnut: "Use it up, wear it out, make do, do without." Feathers from his birds end up bringing hooks to many a trout's jaw. He saved down for fifteen years just to stuff a sleeping bag.

All day before we'd seen pick-up after pick-up pulling horse trailers into the national forest lands on either side of the South Fork. Today was opening day of elk season, a period locals call "the five-day war."

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"Oh, there's a few duck hunters, but not many, and nobody hunts grouse," he said as we jostled down a deeply rutted farm road to the trees marking the river's course. He told me he'd seen a hundred geese on the slough the morning before and he figured they'd be back. If not, he reasoned, there'd be mallards to shoot and maybe teal.

Most of the waterfowling in the valley is jump-shooting along stretches of the river stranded from the main stream by fall's low flows. Some birds come into decoys. And that's what he hoped. Phil carried a battered old pump. I'd forgotten to buy a hunting license and had to shoot film, not shot.

We eased through the trees to low brush surrounding the slough, but there was nobody home. A few moments later we were comfortable in Phil's makeshift blind, camo-netting wrapped around boughs of a blowdown. Geese were flying over the stubble fields between us and the mountains, and small flocks would occasionally pass overhead, but all out of range.

Ducks were another story. Between 9 and 10 a.m., singles began coming right over the blind, like they were being vectored in for landing. Three shots, three fat drakes – a limit of mallards. A pintail, canvasback or redhead would fill the day's bag. Phil had shown me ducks, alright. The birds were here, and that's what I'd come to learn.

We hung around, lounging in the mid-October sun, waiting for the Canadas to make their move from the stubble fields to water. But they'd fed under a full moon on the previous night and were somewhere, not on our patch of water, sleeping it off. As solace we munched our way through the lodge's half-pound apple raisin cinnamon buns, each one a high-caloric bomb, a hyperdose of fast energy.

By late morning we'd given up on the geese. Phil suggested that we and the dog might benefit from lunch and siesta before climbing the draws in search of grouse, which is, in fact, his favorite game.

God, grouse hunting should be so easy in the East. We parked the truck in a pull-off on a service road along the river across from The Lodge.

Gadwall lumbered out and stretched

himself. An eleven-year-old Chesapeake is not my idea of an upland bird dog, and I was more than a little skeptical about this end of the venture. Chessies are for waterfowl, but gimme a pointer or a setter or a spaniel for birds.

But this old dog knew its tricks. We hiked up a trail, crossed the nose of a high plateau and dropped down along the edge of a sage-crustured draw. It was hot and dry, not what you'd call ideal conditions for scenting birds. About three hundred yards into the draw, Gadwall's tail began to swat the air from side to side. Phil hustled up the bank, staying a little to the right of the dog.


A ruffed grouse flushed from a pocket of vine-choked aspens and headed straight at me, blocking Phil's shot. Had I not been there, the shot would have been simple. Fifty yards later, a second bird got up and fell to a dose of 7 1/2s.

"Is it always this easy?" I asked Phil. He grinned, said that most grouse in this neck of the woods had never been flushed. He noted that so far this fall he'd taken twenty-one ruffs. He was running behind, though. Last year at this time, his tally was thirty-two birds for thirty-seven shots.

Grouse are plentiful in eastern Idaho. You can bag four blue, ruffed or spruce grouse per day in the season which begins Sept. 1 and closes on the last day of December. If your visit falls between mid-September and mid-October, you can add three sage grouse to your daily bag. Sharptails are in season for the last two weeks in September, and hunting for chukar and gray partridge, limit eight per day, is open from mid-September to mid-December.

We drifted on, past a pair of eagles high in a cottonwood, past a cow and yearling moose who swam the river in front of us, past twos and threes of mallards that we hoped to decoy in the morning, downstream toward the lowering sun in a cloudless sky.

Ever hopeful that geese would return to the slough, we beat it back to the blind and watched mallards drop into the pond in ones and twos. Teal flashed by, but stayed out of gunning range, and the great blue heron who'd favored us with its company in the dawn, returned to spend the evening. A quartet of trumpeter swans swung low over our spread before heading to a small creek cutting through a stubble field. We heard their hoarse calls in the still dusk as we left the river bottom.

That night after another casually elegant dinner, I walked back to the cabin in the moonlight. I could hear geese down the valley. They were laughing, it seemed. So was I. A goose is a goose and the lack thereof on this little trip takes nothing away from Indian Summer trout and ducks and grouse in the glorious Swan Valley. 

If You Want To Go

Less than fifty miles east of the airport at Idaho Falls, the Swan Valley and Irwin are sandwiched between the Targhee and Caribou National Forests. Public land abounds, and opportunities for hunting upland game are endless.

Waterfowling is another matter. Ducks decoy readily into potholes. The best goose hunting is (probably) in the stubble fields on the northeast side of the South Fork and the lodge owns several hundred acres, some of it in wheat, that would be ideal for traditional field hunting.

The best fishing runs from June through November. High water characterizes the first two-thirds of the season, so a boat is a must. Later, when the water drops, wading is possible.

The Lodge operates a fully stocked tackle shop staffed by knowledgeable guides. In addition to fishing the South Fork, pack-trips are available to high ponds in the Snake River Range.

With six cabins along the river, a pond to unlimber tackle and your casting arm, a simple yet charming restaurant with cuisine that might be described as "hearty California," The Lodge at Palisades Creek is a perfect base for fishing or hunting the valley.

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