

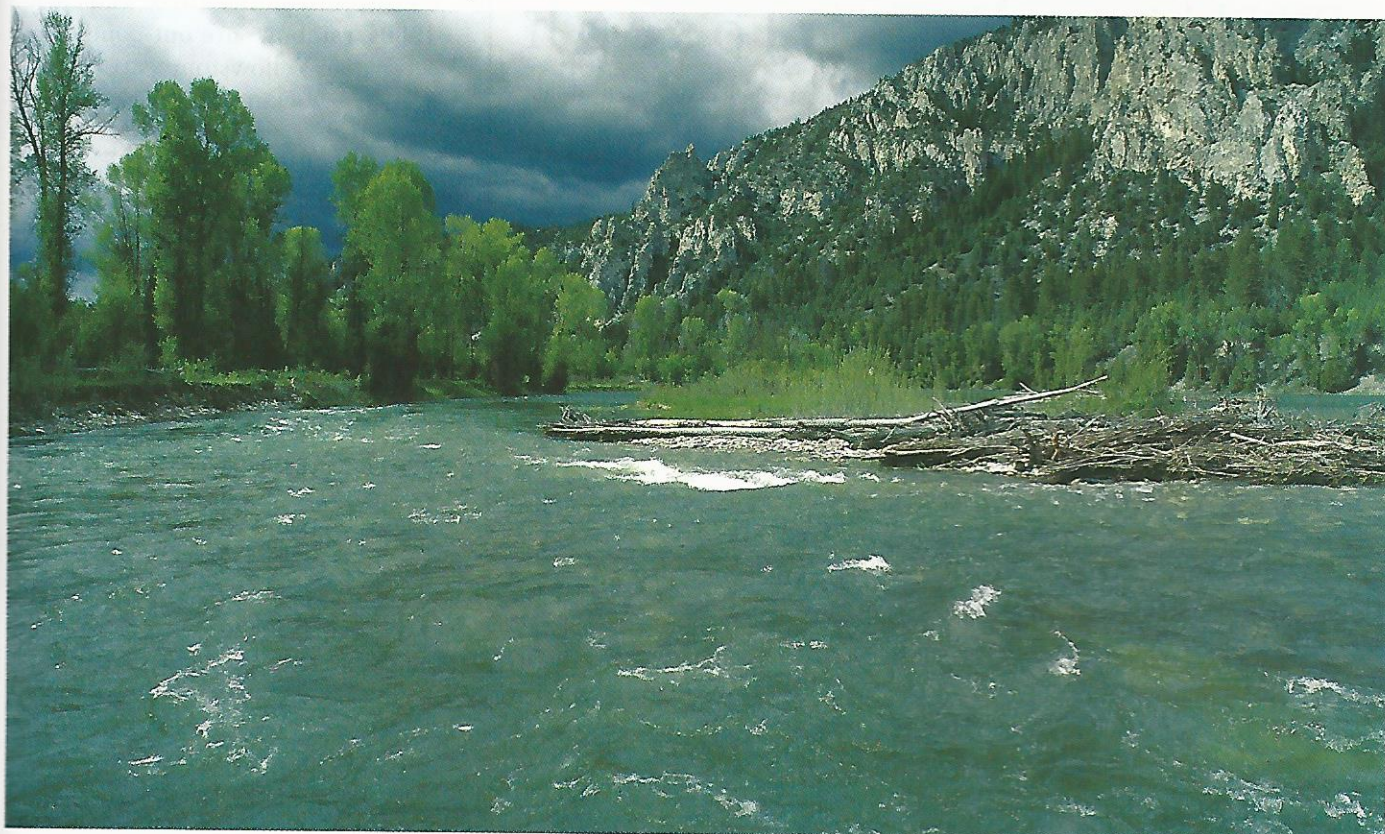
SPORTING CLASSICS

March • April 2005



T r a v e l

By John Ross



JOHN ROSS

Toast one-quarter cup of sliced almonds under the broiler. Do not burn. Take four ounces of softened butter and melt it gently in a saute pan. Add two tablespoons of Worcestershire sauce and two tablespoons of juice from freshly squeezed lemons. Reduce by one-third. Lower heat to slow simmer. Add almonds. Let sauce rest.

Remove head and tail from trout. Fillet retaining skin. Arrange on broiling platter, skin side down. Drizzle a little of the sauce, but no almonds on the flesh. Broil close to flame, but just enough to sear the meat. Lower rack and cook three minutes more. Remove, garnish with almonds. Serve with fresh morel mushrooms picked along the river.

Grinning, Dan Davis, executive chef at South Fork Lodge, slid the trout before me as Shaun Lawson and I sipped a little bourbon. Not three hours earlier, I'd cast one of Harry Murray's weighted black streamphs into the seam between two swollen currents in the Snake River just downstream from our launch at the rookery. The strike was heavy, firm the way a big trout takes a streamer when its mind is on feeding. As Todd, our guide, oared the driftboat out of the current, I played the fish and brought it to net.

A unique management plan promises to restore the South Fork of the Snake into the world-class wild cutthroat river it used to be.

I'd thought it might be a cutthroat. But no, it was a twenty-inch rainbow. "Better kill it," said Shaun. I looked at him for a moment, and then at the writhing three-pound plus green-backed, red-stripped fish. "Guess so," I said, slipping the blade of my pocket knife into the back of the wild trout's head.

I cannot begin to tell you when I last intentionally killed a wild trout. Must have been a dozen years ago. I've been pretty anal about catch and release. So have most fly fishers. That's the biggest problem for Jim Fredericks, biologist with the Idaho Game and Fish department, in

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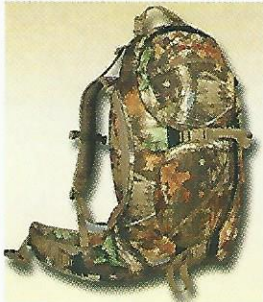
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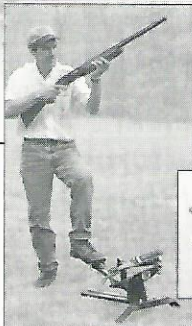
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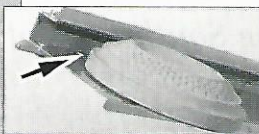


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restoring the South Fork of the Snake into the world-class wild cutthroat river the way it was before we – and I use that term to mean me and all anglers everywhere who demanded lots of big trout – screwed it up.

Introduced into the South Fork off and on since the late 1890s, and stocked more heavily and consistently in the 1970s and early 1980s, rainbows are out-competing the native Yellowstone cutts. Electro-shocking over the past decade shows a dramatic increase of rainbows and a corresponding decline in cutthroat. The reason, said Fredericks, is that low winter releases from Palisades Dam favored rainbows that spawn in the main river channel and inhibited the propagation of cutts which favor tributaries.

In one of the most enlightened bits of fish management policy ever to grace a major watershed, a coalition of government and private organizations, among them Trout Unlimited, hatched a plan to restore the South Fork to prominence as a native cutthroat river. The campaign rests on three legs: management of flows to minimize rainbow spawning success, protect tributaries too maximize propagation of cutts, and enlisting anglers in the campaign to transform the fishery. Anglers are now encouraged to keep all the rainbows they catch and are required to release cutthroats unharmed. And the river was opened to fishing all year.

Angling on the South Fork in March and April can be awesome. Blue-winged olives and midges can be productive on top, but the best action is on streamers and big nymphs. The river is virtually empty of other anglers. During high flows of May and June, streamers continue to be most productive. But in late June and well into July, salmon flies, golden stones and yellow sallies offer dry-fly action. Terrestrials take over from then on, along with caddis, mahogany duns and, again, blue-winged olives as fall weather brings temperatures down.



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Most of us have headed for the South Fork and Henrys Fork in September or October after summer drought has dried the countryside. You owe yourself a visit when the yellow blossoms of arrowhead balsam mix with green clumps of sage, all tinged with the hues of dusk. Yellow-headed blackbirds and male western tanagers with their red heads, cavort in the newly verdant willows. Bald eagles and white pelicans ride the thermals and sandhill cranes strut, staking out nests in river-side marshes.

You'll see them from your Clackacraft and from the table in South Fork Lodge's octagonal dining room, modeled after the granaries which once graced small farms along the river. You'll hear migrating cranes purr like contented cats as you walk beneath the moon to your cabin. You may chuck another log on the fire, pull the easy chair a little closer to the hearth, and read before retiring. But your mind will be drifting down the canyon below Conant, the run you'll fish on the morrow. 

If You Want To Go

Built of cedar and pine with twin silos housing great and dining rooms, South Fork Lodge was commissioned by entrepreneur/conservationist Mark Rockefeller to reflect the river's natural environment and the valley's human heritage. Accommodations are elegant as is the cuisine. Adjacent is South Fork Outfitters, the fly-shop and guide service operated by Shaun Lawson. Shaun's dad, Mike, helped establish the Henry's Fork Foundation. In similar manner, Shaun has adopted the South Fork. Delay your trip until wildflowers bloom and divide your time between these two branches of the Snake. I know of no better spring tonic for traveling anglers.

Contact South Fork Lodge, P.O. Box 22, Swan Valley, ID 83449; phone: 208-483-2112; Web site: www.southforklodge.com. or South Fork Outfitters, P.O. Box 22, Swan Valley, ID 83449; 208-483-7052; www.southforkoutfitters.com.