

A fly fisherman in a red jacket and waders stands on a grassy bank next to a small waterfall in a forested stream. The background is a dense forest of evergreen trees under a clear sky.

FISHING THE YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK

Story and Photos by
Harry Murray

The Yellowstone National Park is one of the most exciting locations in the country to fly fish for trout. There is a broad variety of trout from which to choose. You can fish for browns, rainbows, cutthroats, brook trout and lake trout. You can also fish the size stream you like. From the roaring sections of the lower Yellowstone River to the slow, meandering reaches of the Gibbon River, you can choose the character of the stream you like, and there are also many lakes that offer fine angling. I've been fishing the Yellowstone National Park almost every year for over thirty years, and here are some of my favorite waters and the effective tactics for each of them.

The Madison River from Madison Junction downstream to West Yellowstone contains over 15 miles of fine brown trout water. The lower reaches of this river behind the barns in holes number 1, 2, and 3 are where the late Charlie Brooks taught me his method of fishing very large (size 6) nymphs deeply. This was almost 30 years ago; and the famous Brooks continued to be a very close friend until his death.

The "Brooks Method" is covered in several of his books as well as three of mine, and it is very effective for big trout in all big rivers. The important part of this method is to position yourself 20 feet to the side of the five to ten foot deep pool or run you plan to fish. Your first cast is made up and across stream 30 feet at a 45 degree angle. After your nymph sinks deeply, get tight to it with your line hand and swing your fly rod downstream ahead of it at the same speed the current is pushing the nymph. This enables you to feel the trout's strike instantly so you can set the hook. Successive casts are made up and across stream five feet longer until you have covered all of the water in front of you out to 30 feet, then wade downstream, stopping at 10 foot intervals to repeat this method. This system assures that you have shown your nymph to every trout in front of you. I've had excellent results with a Murray's



The Gallatin River is one of the most beautiful trout streams in the country, and there is an easy access to it in the Park.

Olive Strymph size 6 with the Brooks Method.

In the 10 miles of the Madison River below Madison Junction, you can get some excellent dry fly fishing in the summer by fishing Letort Hopper size 12 along the undercut banks and grassbeds. Also in the fall I've had excellent dry fly fishing here when the beatish hatch is on by fishing a Mr. Rapidan Parachute Dry Fly size 20 to each rising trout.

Be careful wading the upper part of the Madison because the water around the grassbeds can be over your waders. Also watch out for the mud flats along the side of the river. I sank up to my waist in one, and a friend had to pull me out. Brooks once had a friend get stuck in one of these mud flats for six hours.

The Yellowstone River is a must

when fishing the Park. The large cutthroats here have the reputation of being easy to catch, which at times they are. I took my son here on his first trip west when he turned 16, and we caught large cutthroats on about every other cast on Royal Wulffs size 14. However for unexplained reasons, they can at times be moody. I once took a very experienced angler here when the pale morning dun hatch was on, and even though the trout were rising sporadically they were difficult to catch.

Slough Creek is another stream you should fish in the Park. I especially like the second meadow above the upper parking lot. There is a good trail, but set an easy pace to hike this in about two hours. Until late in the summer the fishing is almost too easy. Drifting Letort Hoppers,



This nice brown trout took the author's fly on the Madison River as he fished it through a deep run.

Royal Wulff or Mr. Rapidan (all in size 14) in the runs and along the undercut banks will bring you one nice cutthroat after another. When the stream drops late in the summer, the fishing may get tougher and small midges and beetles will give you more trout. The extreme lower section of Slough Creek holds many large trout, and one can get very exciting action here in late August and early September by crawling along the banks and fishing to feeding trout with a Mr. Rapidan Midge size 18.

The Bechler River in the southwest corner of the Park is a great stream in a remote section. I like to go in on horseback to a beautiful meadow about seven miles in, but you can hike in if you like. A very rewarding experience is to camp here for several nights in order to take advantage of the excellent fishing at dusk and to see the great variety of wildlife.

The Firehole River is one of the most unusual trout streams in the country. You can wade in the cold water to fish for trout rising in the middle of the stream 10 feet from where boiling water flows in from a molten hot geyser. During the summer I've had great fishing for large brown trout by fishing a Shenk's Letort Hopper along the undercut banks in the upper meadows. In the fall this area gets great beatish hatches

on overcast days, and you will see many rising trout. This is flat water so approach these trout cautiously so you don't scare them. Drifting a Mr. Rapidan Parachute Dry Fly size 20 over these risers on a 7X leader will take many of them. The Firehole below the falls is an entirely different river, and wading here is difficult and can be dangerous.

Soda Butte Creek is a beautiful little stream with some surprisingly large cutthroats holding along the deep banks. This stream gets many great hatches throughout the summer, so keep an eye out for rising trout and match the hatch as closely as possible with your flies. If there is no hatch, cover the water with a Letort Hopper or a Royal Wulff.

The Lamar River is a great stream with easy access. I've caught my largest trout in the lower half of this stream at dusk when the hatches are on. However if you want large numbers of trout and easy fishing, hike above the canyon. There are stretches here where you'll catch a trout on almost every cast.

The Gibbon River above Madison Junction is a very interesting stream. The lower section meanders through lush, flat meadows and holds some very large trout, especially in the fall when the brown trout

run upstream from the Madison River to spawn. The upper section has more gradient, and although I don't catch many large trout here, there are many smaller trout and they will take dries readily.

These are a few of my favorite streams, but there is so much good trout water in the Park that you could fish a different area each day all season long and get great action.

This basic tackle will enable you to successfully fish all of the Yellowstone National Park waters. When fishing large nymphs and streamers on the Madison and Yellowstone Rivers, a 9-foot 6-weight rod is ideal. When fishing these same two rivers with small dry flies to match a hatch, a 9-foot 4-weight rod will give you the accuracy and delicacy you need. This last rod is also excellent for most of the fishing on the Firehole, lower Gibbon and Slough Creek because you seldom use large flies on these streams. An 8-foot 4-weight rod will round out your rod selection to use on smaller streams.

Your fly selection does not need to be huge, but it should be broad enough to meet the majority of your needs in both fly design and fly size. Here are 12 flies which my guide the late Ray Hurley said, "equipped one better than 90% of the



The Yellowstone River, just north of the Park, offers great dry fly fishing for large cutthroat trout in the fall.

INFORMATION SOURCES:

Maps & Books: Yellowstone Association
 Phone (307) 344-2293; 877-967-0090
www.yellowstoneassociation.org

Lodging: Phone (307) 344-7311
www.travelyellowstone.com

Backcountry camping: Backcountry
 Office Box 168 Yellowstone National Park
 WY 82190

Vehicle Campgrounds: (307) 344-7311

Fishing Permits: www.nps.gov/yell and
 see "permits."

National Parks Pass:

Purchase at Park entrance stations or
www.nationalparks.org

anglers in the Park": Bitch Creek Nymph size 8, Hare's Ear Nymph size 12 & 14, Red Squirrel Nymph size 16, Prince Nymph size 16, Murray's Black Marauder size 8, Betsy Streamer size 10, Murray's Sculpin size 6, Olive Strymph size 6, Mr. Rapidan Parachute size 14, 16, 18, & 20, Royal

Wulff size 14, Mr. Rapidan Ant size 16 & 18, and Letort Hopper size 12 & 14. Remember: no lead shot or lead weighted flies are permitted.

Harry Murray is a renowned fly fisherman, author, and fly tyer. He resides in Edinburg, Virginia.



ON THE RIVANNA RIVER

Charming stone cottage on 10 acres, tucked away amidst an enchanting forest. With landscaped grounds and large deck overlooking the Rivanna, this cozy home offers a truly tranquil setting. Extremely well built, the home features exposed beam ceilings, a beautiful blue slate fireplace that opens to both the kitchen and family room, hardwood floors, as well as 2 master suites. Also rustic loft guest cottage with intricate decking. \$590,000. Also available with 30 acres for \$900,000.

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