

UNDISCOVERED JEWEL

Teton River offers serenity, wildlife – and lots of trout

By Ken Levy

Imagine looking out your window and having a moose staring back at you. Megan Hatch doesn't have to imagine it. She's actually observed moose close-up, along with other wildlife, while visiting her parents' home on the banks of the Upper Teton River, near its headwaters in Victor.

"Many evenings we spent sitting on our porch looking at the (Grand) Tetons overlooking the river. We sit out on our deck and watch the ospreys fish, and other birds migrating through. Lately, we've been having a moose coming over," she said.

When not watching the action around the river, Hatch and her brother, Jeff Talbot, are floating it.

"We spend a lot of the time on the water," said Hatch, the development and outreach associate for Friends of the Teton River. "We put in at our house and float down to South Bates Bridge," which is a good two-to-three-hour journey.

And the wildlife shows up every season.

"Every winter, we have about 13 whitetail deer munching away on the willows, and on the chokecherry trees in our yard. The moose definitely seem to like the chokecherry trees in our yard better than the willows. We get them coming up, looking in the windows at us. It's gorgeous, quite spectacular where we are."





That sets the theme for the gentle, serene Upper Teton. As many as 10 moose have been seen along its grassy banks in one day trip, according to Don Streubel, retired Idaho State University professor of biology.

Rounding a graceful bend in the spring creek, you're suddenly looking at the west side of the Grand Tetons. Round another bend, and the Big Hole Mountains smile down. And, except for a few put-ins and launch areas, the river is largely as wild as when it first flowed.

"That's the way I like to recreate on the river, in early morning floats," said Hatch. "I'm always looking at the fish swimming underneath, but I love to see all the animals that depend on the river besides the fish, whether it's birds of prey or larger ungulates that depend on the riparian habitat to sustain them over the winter."

And then there's the diversity of fish, which is one of the biggest draws to the Teton area, according to Lyn Benjamin, executive director of Friends of the Teton River.

Wild, native Yellowstone cutthroat trout thrive here, as do large populations of non-native rainbow and brook trout, and whitefish. This is a fly-fishing haven, yet one of the best-kept secrets in the entire Greater Yellowstone ecosystem.

"Fly-fishing is one of those sublime experiences where it's communal with the outdoors. You're outside, on moving water, and sometimes your feet are actually in the river, and it's a great time for dreaming and introspection," said Derek Hutton, a professional fishing guide for WorldCast Anglers in Victor.

"It takes you to the most extraordinarily beautiful places, and in Idaho and the Teton River specifically, that's the lure of fishing," he said. "You try to open up your senses and notice the currents, and insects, and birds. You try to read the water, see fish, and be a predator or stalker. It's a good riddle. Actually hooking a fish is icing on the cake."

Amy Verbeten, the education and outreach director of the Friends of the Teton River, said the Teton has been very



Photos by Ken Levy

OPPOSITE PAGE: Fisherman Lloyd Cole, who produces a sports radio program in Salt Lake City, tries a few casts from the banks of the Upper Teton River near Driggs.

ABOVE: Reiley Johnson, 4, and her dad, J.T., show off rainbow trout they caught on the Teton River near Packsaddle Bridge.

LEFT: Killdeer are among the most populous waterfowl found along the Teton River.

BELOW: Linda Unland lets the gentle current of the Upper Teton River carry her Necky kayak downstream.



productive over the past couple of years, with word coming in from regular anglers and guides of several 20-inch and larger trout.

"I think the Teton is an undiscovered jewel," she said. "The South Fork of the Snake, Henry's Fork and the Upper Snake outside of Jackson get so much press that people come from all around the world to visit them. They miss the Teton, and I think they're really missing out. This is an amazing river, with amazing fishing for native wild fish, and then the canyon is another whole world."

Verbeten has floated the Upper Teton for about five summers.

"I love this upper river because it's such a nice, mellow float," she said. Several sections, including the journey from Bates Bridge to the Rainey Creek Fish and Game access, run about two hours, as does another run from Rainey Creek to Packsaddle Bridge and from South Bates to the Bates Bridge.

"There are all these really nice chunks of river that you can link together or do separately," she said.

Muffy Mead-Ferro learned to love the Teton River when her father, Pete Mead, took her on her first journey.

"The first time I went down it by myself I got lost," she said. She had a friend and her two youngsters, Joe, 4, and Belle, 6, along for that first float with her.

"They thought I had no idea what I was doing, but it ended well."

Even at their young age, her children – now 10 and 12 – would be in their life jackets and hop off the boat and just float along.

"That's what I love about this river. There aren't any big rocks, and I've never seen any big logjams. You just can't really get in trouble," Mead-Ferro said.

The river features many big swimming holes, she said, in places where the river is 10 feet deep, depending on the time of year.

"It's great for swimming and picnicking; there's no rough water. You could drink a glass of wine down this river and be perfectly fine. It's so relaxing."

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"The last time I came down here," Mead-Ferro said, "I saw a moose cow and two calves, which is unusual. You usually see only one calf."

On that journey, the slow-moving river took the family on a 2.5-hour float. A month earlier, with water levels higher, it took less than an hour to cover the same stretch, from Rainey Creek to Packsaddle Bridge, about three miles driving but about five miles of winding river.

The low water levels of mid-September turn the Teton, and its sister, the South Fork of the Snake River, into one of the best fall fly-fishing sites in the country, according to Hutton.

"It's spectacular," he said. "You can practically walk across the rivers on the backs of trout."

The scenery is also spectacular, especially along the Upper Teton.

"There's not much better than having a view of the Tetons while you're fishing," said fisherman Lloyd Cole.

But Verbeten said her favorite stretch of the river is actually the lower Teton, in a deep canyon.

"There's some serious whitewater in that section," she said.

In one area, you can drive down the canyon to put in near the farm settlement of France, about 25 miles northwest of Driggs.

"It's an all-day float, with some larger rapids," Verbeten said. "It's an amazing stretch of river, and you're down in a canyon that's hundreds of feet deep. The canyon walls are inhabited by peregrine falcons, bald eagles, golden eagles, and there's river otters and

beavers down there, and huge cutthroat trout. It's a magical place. Very few people go there; it's an absolutely incredible spot." 🐾

Ken Levy is a writer and photographer residing in Driggs, Idaho.



Photos by Ken Levy

TOP LEFT: Kayakers and canoers float the Upper Teton River on a natural history tour sponsored by the Friends of the Teton River.

ABOVE: A lone angler tries her luck with fly-casting on the Upper Teton River near the Idaho Dept. of Fish and Game's Rainey Creek access.