

Fishing for thrills

By Sonia Koetting

While thrills come in all varieties, the tug of a fish on the line is one of the oldest and most universal. Outdoor enthusiasts living in Northern Colorado enjoy easy access to the Big Thompson River, the Cache La Poudre River and the North Platte, as well as many private and public lakes and ponds. Northern Colorado anglers can be seen casting at all times of year, and some seek more exotic thrills at fly fishing hot spots around the globe.

BEST-KEPT SECRETS

Julie Ray owns Bob's Fly Tying Specialties in Loveland. Ray, a Loveland native, has fished the Big Thompson since she was a little girl. She also enjoys fly fishing in Alberta, Canada.

For the best chances of success at a local fishing destination, Ray sends anglers to Sylvan Dale Guest Ranch, just west of Loveland.

Gordon Waldmier, owner of Angler's Roost Flyfishing Company in Fort Collins, agrees Sylvan Dale is one of the best sources for "big fish." Brown trout, rainbow trout and cutthroat are ideal catches in area waters. Waldmier's favorite local fishing site is Diamond Ranch outside of Laramie, Wyo., about a two-hour drive from Fort Collins. His favorite winter fishing hole is Gray Reef Reservoir, outside

Casper.

Waldmier enjoys fishing the Poudre River in spring but gives up on it by June because it is "blown out" (of fish) from the swift runoff.

"The Thompson is tail water (on the downside of a dam), so it's OK (throughout the summer)," he says.

FROM FRYING PAN TO WATER

The majority of anglers practice "catch and release," Waldmier says. "When my wife says she wants fish for dinner, I tell her to go to the supermarket and pick up some red snapper."

In Waldmier's opinion, cleaning the fish takes time away from the thrill of catching more.

"The big ones are more fun to catch but don't taste as good," he says. "Take their picture and put them back."

From that picture and a few measurements, places like Ty's Taxidermy in Loveland can create a facsimile of the fish, right down to its crooked teeth. This gives anglers a mounted trophy while leaving the fish alive.

Ty Armstrom, an angler himself, has created hundreds of such trophies, including ocean fish.

"I use 11 colors to paint a rainbow (trout)," the artist says.

He charges about \$15 an inch to create a fish from nothing more than the photos and measurements taken when it is caught and released.



Courtesy Sharon Skelton

Making the world a better place to fish

Sharon Skelton, pictured at left, says her fly-fishing trip to the Yucatan peninsula in February was the best vacation she and her husband, Shannon, ever had.

Fish are central not only to the Skeltons' travel destinations but also their livelihood. The Fort Collins couple's company, CFI Global Fisheries Management, specializes in creating, rehabilitating, enhancing and managing streams, rivers, lakes and ponds so that fish can thrive.

In addition to projects in Colorado, Wyoming and Utah, the Fort Collins-based company's nine employees travel to Hawaii, Ecuador and Chile.

Many of their clients are Fortune 500 executives or celebrities, including pro golfer Greg Norman and David Pratt, an owner of the St. Louis Cardinals baseball team.

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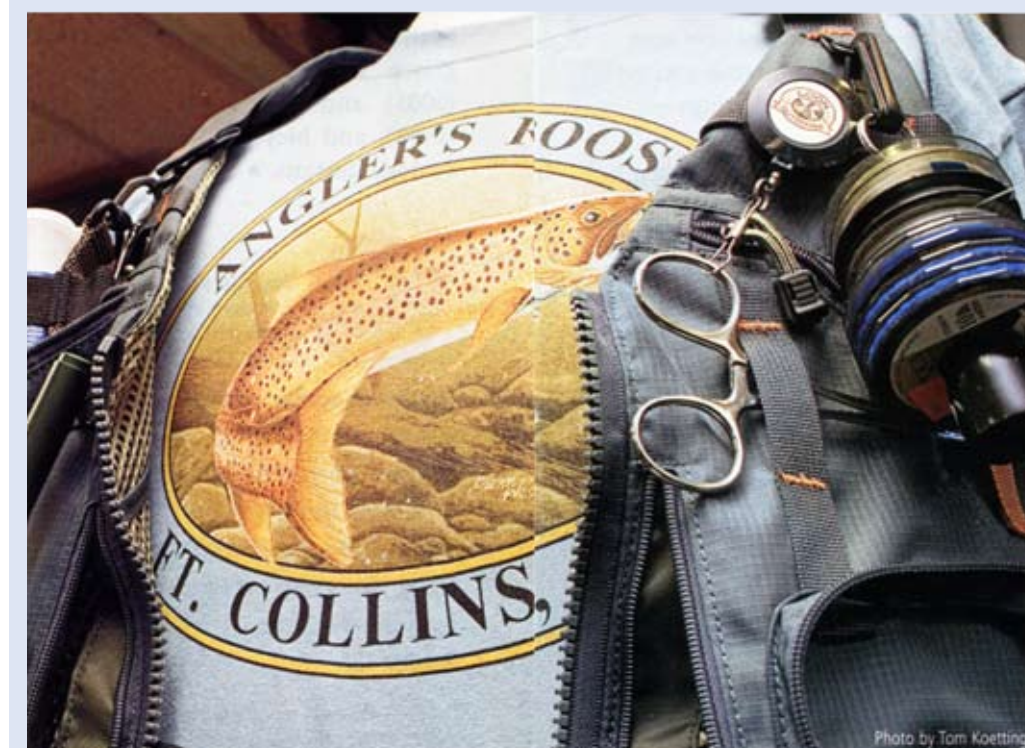


Photo by Tom Koetting

Do I need a guide?

Even accomplished anglers can benefit from hiring a guide. Guides can show ways to improve your casting technique or row the boat while you fish. Perhaps most importantly, guides have access to prime fishing spots.

Corey Engen, a guide with St. Peter's Fly Shop in Old Town Fort Collins, says access is a big draw for resident anglers. He says St. Peter's fishing permits span from the northern Boulder County line to Wyoming public lands. The business has access to North Park near Walden, 35 miles of the Poudre River and 6 mile Gap on the upper North Platte.

The number of public water permits issued is limited, and the opportunity for permits to change hands arises only every few years.

"We get lots of calls from people wanting to buy our permits," Engen says.

A full day on a guided boat tour, with lunch and rowing provided, costs around \$400 through St. Peter's. Two anglers can share the fee, as long as they fit on the boat.

Gordon Waldmier of Angler's Roost Fly Fishing Company in Fort Collins says he has taught fly-fishing technique for rivers as well as for lakes on the same day. The drive to the ponds at Sylvan Dale Ranch is along the Big Thompson River, making it possible to squeeze a lot of fishing time into a half-day tour. Cost of a half-day for one angler through Waldmier's shop is \$180; a whole day costs \$250.

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While catch-and-release anglers might disappoint at dinnertime, the taste of smoked fish from his own backyard smokers is a key motivation for Paul Kugrens. Neighbors in the Quail Hollow subdivision of Fort Collins appreciate gifts of smoked fish from Kugrens, a professor of aquatic biology at Colorado State University.

"I'll tell you a secret: It's the type of wood," Kugrens says. Years back he learned from a smokehouse in Salinas, Calif., that apple wood produces the best flavor. "Alder, hickory and mesquite are too harsh."

Kugrens hasn't tired of fishing Northern Colorado waters in 34 years.

A favorite nearby destination for Kugrens is Honholz Reservoir No. 3, about 15 miles south of the Wyoming border. He claims to have caught 20 fish in less than two hours one August afternoon. Kugrens also frequents Lake John, west of Walden.

ADVENTURE ON THE LINE

The quest for fly fishing adventure often takes Sharon Skelton from her home in Fort Collins to points around the globe.

"She's a nut," says her husband, Shannon, admitting that his wife might have more enthusiasm for the sport than he. In February they left their four young children with Sharon's parents for a week so they could fish Ascension Bay, 120 miles south of Cozumel on the Yucatan peninsula. Sharon was the only woman in a group of about 25 men, but she is not alone in her enthusiasm for the sport. Women are now the fastest-growing segment of sport fishing.

It was the Skelton's fifth trip to the Yucatan. Angler's Roost organizes the trip, one of a variety of guided fly fishing tours featuring upscale accommodations and gourmet meals. Anglers catch tarpin, bonefish and permit in Cozumel's saltwater flats.

"There's nothing more exciting than when you see a school of bonefish with their tails poking above the water. They almost glisten," Sharon



Gordon Waldmier at Sylvan Dale Ranch. Below: Fly fishing on the Poudre River



Photo by Rich Abrahamson

beams. "The challenge is to cast perfectly to not scare them. ... It's such an adrenaline rush."

Sharon is lobbying her husband to fish in the Kamchatka region of Russia and preparing for a three-day backpacking/fly fishing trip in Yellowstone.

Sharon remembers when she first learned to cast a fly rod. She stood practicing in her front yard past 10 p.m., waving the rod again and again at imaginary fish in the dark. "I'm a determined woman," she says.

Determination, practice and good advice are what it takes to find that thrill of a fish fighting on the line. ■

Fort Collins resident Sonia Koetting has been admiring anglers on the Poudre River for 20 years.

Fly fishing's lifelessons

In 1992 "A River Runs Through It" plunged into cinema and fly-fishing circles in a way that changed the sport. The movie was based on a book Norman Maclean wrote as "a love poem" to his family.

After the movie hit the big screen, the affinity felt in the United States toward fly fishing seemed deeper than just casting and reeling.

Maclean wrote that his father, a Presbyterian minister, "was very sure about certain matters pertaining to the universe. To him, all good things — trout as well as eternal salvation — come by grace, and grace comes by art, and art does not come easy."

It doesn't take an interest in fly fishing to appreciate these passages:

- ◆ "In our family, there is no clear line between religion and fly fishing."
- ◆ "One of life's quiet excitements is to stand somewhat apart from yourself and watch yourself softly becoming the author of something beautiful, even if it is on a floating ash."
- ◆ "Poets talk about 'spots of time,' but it is really fishermen who experience eternity compressed into a moment. No one can tell what a spot of time is until suddenly the whole world is a fish, and the fish is gone."

— Chris Kampfe